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“FROM BEYOND TIME”: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF TEMPORALITY IN
WILLIAM FAULKNER’S *AS I LAY DYING* AND TONI MORRISON’S *BELLOVED*

Ben Papsun

Advised by Professor Eve Dunbar

A Senior Thesis

Department of English

Vassar College

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Abstract

In this thesis, I present an analysis of formal literary techniques which contribute to a feeling of nonlinear subjectivized time which characterizes much of Modernist as well as postmodern literature and cultural production. I will focus on two major works by two towering figures of “modern” American literature: *As I Lay Dying*, by William Faulkner, and *Beloved*, by Toni Morrison. I will explore the presentation and function of time in these works in theoretical terms, but I will also pay attention to the historical, political, and cultural exigencies of a subjectivized modality of time. Despite belonging to two different literary time periods, Faulkner and Morrison can both be seen as writers whose conceptions of time gesture towards an important modern space of expression beyond standardized time. Nevertheless, there are significant differences between the emotional possibilities each author makes available to their characters. Although Faulkner’s narrative technique goes beyond chronological time, his characters are not liberated by their experience of such time. Toni Morrison, conversely, offers a redemptive, personal time, which suggests the possibility of living at ease with the past. Guiding this exploration in part will be the influential philosophical contributions of Henri Bergson (whose effect on Modernist literature is well-documented), in addition to more contemporary critics of Faulkner and Morrison.

Introduction

Time present and time past
 Are both perhaps present in time future,
 And time future contained in time past.
 If all time is eternally present
 All time is unredeemable.

—T.S. Eliot, “Burnt Norton” (1936)

Time, perfect or syncopated time, is when a
 faucet dribbles from a leaky washer.

—Charles Mingus, liner notes for *The Black
 Saint and the Sinner Lady* (1963)

The Modernist era in literature is known for its radical approach to representation, its relish for experimentation, and its eagerness to uproot convention. Among the many ideas Modernists urged a rethinking of, one of the most crucial was the idea of time: what is our relationship to time? How does time shape experience, and how does experience shape time? How can we reflect our experience of time, with all of its fluctuations and distortions, within the limitations of words printed onto a page? The primary source of this reckoning with time was a growing awareness of the schism between time as we feel it and time as delimited by modern industrial society.¹

Since the advent of widespread industrial time, the human experience has been subject to the discriminations of a universal measuring stick: namely, the clock. Perhaps one of the most unanimous signatures of the modern experience is its own subjugation to a metric

¹ Concerns about the effects of an industrial society on the individual lend themselves naturally to a Marxist critique. The perspective I offer in this essay is not an explicitly Marxist one, but I encourage others to consider and elaborate the Marxist implications of my argument.

vocabulary. To an extent unprecedented in human history, it is difficult to imagine structuring our lives effectively without the application of the categories of “second,” “minute,” “hour,” “day,” and so on. These units are undeniably useful in a system in which standardization and efficiency represent the gold standards of functionality. The fixture of standardized time as a prevailing aspect of modern life has also presented the modern artist, whose medium always exists in time, with the challenge of slipping loose from the restraints of a metric temporality. How can any artist “make it new,” as Ezra Pound urged his fellow artists to do, when every day is predictably ordered and monotonously compartmentalized? What space is left for “new” experience which can subvert the restrictions of organized time?

We see these anxieties afflicting a panoply of Modernist writers.² In Eliot’s “Four Quartets,” the tension between the evanescent present and the eternal past (eternal because it is preserved in memory) is laid bare. Nightfall is signalled when “Time and the bell have buried the day,”³ and so the industrial clock is depicted as working in tandem with time itself to inter the day’s lifeless body. Marcel Proust, 28 years earlier, famously set out in search of lost time, or things past [temps perdu], in the hopes that they can be regained [retrouvé]. Franz Kafka captures the disjunction of the modern experience in a diary entry from January 16, 1922, agonizing that “[t]he clocks are not in unison; the inner one runs crazily on at a devilish or demoniac or in any case inhuman pace, the outer one limps along at its usual speed. What else can happen but that the two worlds split apart, and they do split apart, or at least clash in a fearful manner.”⁴ The ticking of the modern clock, like a tell-tale heart under

² For a more in-depth look at Modernist reactions to a new sense of time, see the “Modern Time” section of Theodore Martin’s article, “Temporality and Literary Theory” in the *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature*.

³ T.S. Eliot, “Burnt Norton,” in *Four Quartets* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1943), 7

⁴ Franz Kafka, *The Basic Kafka* (Simon & Schuster, 1979), 262

the floorboards, is in every artist's ears by the twentieth century, and seems poised to drive them all to madness.⁵

I quote Charles Mingus after Eliot at the outset of this essay to reflect the kind of dialogue I will attempt to stage—that is, a dialogue between the modern and the postmodern. In this essay, I will examine the ways in which two monumental American writers, William Faulkner and Toni Morrison, respond to the aforementioned anxiety of metric time. Looking at Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (1930) as a quintessential Modernist text, I will use the philosophy of Henri Bergson to illuminate the kind of temporal environment Faulkner creates in the novel. I will then compare time as represented in *As I Lay Dying* with time as represented in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), one of the defining novels of the postmodern era. I hope to show through my readings of these two texts that time, as in Mingus's metaphor of the drip from a leaky faucet, is a persistent, unavoidable force, one which overflows the confines of the industrial and the material. Although the modern⁶ world superimposes standardized metrics onto time, new possibilities emerge for the liberation of the self from standardized time during the shift from the modern to the postmodern. I will use Morrison's *Beloved* as a window into those possibilities.

Before I begin, I would like to briefly comment on the texts I have chosen for this study. *As I Lay Dying* and *Beloved* are both massive, massive works—not in terms of length, per se, but in terms of cultural and critical impact. Without a doubt, more secondary literature has been published on each of these novels than any undergraduate could possibly read in

⁵ Edgar Allan Poe's short story, "The Tell-Tale Heart," was published in 1843. Poe is considered a major influence on the Modernists, and one might see in his short story a herald of the approaching Modernist anxiety over standardized time.

⁶ I use the word "modern" here in the most general sense, i.e. not specific to Modernism.

one semester (or in a lifetime, for that matter). As a result, I am sure that much of what I have written has already been written in some form by someone else, in some other place, at some other time. Of course, anyone who chooses to set down their ideas and release them into the world will run the risk of repetition. One idea that I hope to elaborate upon in this essay is the notion that repetition in and of itself can be valuable, and that ideas can still develop in a nonlinear, even circular fashion. The ideals of novelty and progress, which are often motivators for academic work, can sometimes blind us to less obvious forms of maturation. By participating in a discourse, by recapitulating recognizable themes in nonetheless unique ways, we may find value in repetition. I encourage the reader to keep these ideas in mind, as they will reappear throughout this essay. And now, I will begin my thesis with an analysis of time in Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*.

Counting the Strokes: Faulkner, Bergson, and the Time of Modernity

[A] man, a character in a story at any moment of action is not just himself as he is then, he is all that made him, and the long sentence is an attempt to get his past and possibly his future into the instant in which he does something...

—William Faulkner⁷

Well, I believe that our whole psychical experience is something just like this single sentence, continued since the first awakening of consciousness, interspersed with commas, but never broken by full stops.

—Henri Bergson⁸

In a 1952 interview with a French graduate student, William Faulkner cites among the French thinkers who have influenced his writing and thought, “Bergson, obviously.”⁹ Far from a household name today, Henri Bergson, the French philosopher invoked by Faulkner, was one of the most widely read (and controversial) intellectuals of the 1900s—his ideas were so popular that he is believed to have caused the first traffic jam on Broadway when he visited Columbia University in 1913 to deliver a lecture.¹⁰ Although Faulkner’s personal

⁷ Frederick L. Gwynn & Joseph Blotner., eds., *Faulkner in the University: Class Conferences at the University of Virginia, 1957-1958* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1959), 84

⁸ Henri Bergson, *Mind-Energy: Lectures and Essays* (Henry Holt and Company, 1929), 70

⁹ Loïc Bouvard and William Faulkner, trans. Henry Dan Piper, “Conversation with William Faulkner,” *Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 4, Southern Writers (Winter 1959-1960), 364

¹⁰ Tom Quirk, *Bergson and American Culture: The Worlds of Willa Cather and Wallace Stevens* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 1

library, which included over 1,200 books from various countries, contained “virtually no philosophical works—classical or popular [including Bergson’s],”¹¹ Faulkner’s familiarity with Bergson’s ideas suggests there must have been some element of Henri Bergson’s philosophy that Faulkner was drawn to. Scholarly disagreements on the extent to which Faulkner was directly influenced by Bergson aside, there can be little doubt that a study of Faulknerian time would be incomplete without considering the possibility that some artistic debt is owed to, as Leszek Kołakowski called Bergson, “the intellectual spokesman *par excellence*” of the twentieth century.¹²

Indeed, despite their distances in space, language, and professional life, there are several overlaps between Faulkner’s convictions and those of Bergson. Among them, a belief in the immortality of the spirit (in Bergson’s view, a belief justified by developments in psychology,¹³ in Faulkner’s view, a belief justified by faith), a belief in free will, and a belief in the so-called “fluidity of time,” as Faulkner called it in the interview. Of these overlaps, a shared conception of time between the two is the most pertinent to this analysis of Faulkner’s craft. Along with other major Modernist figures like Marcel Proust, James Joyce, and Virginia Woolf, Faulkner further developed the capacity for writing to resemble human experience, and this resemblance is achieved principally through the manipulation of time. The characteristic elements of Modernist literature—attention to psychological states, formal

¹¹ Paul Douglass, *Bergson, Eliot, and American Literature* (University Press of Kentucky, 2015), 119

¹² *Ibid.*, 1

¹³ From a 1913 newspaper article: “You can not prove immortality,” says Professor Bergson, “but you do not have to in order to be justified in believing it... Nobody can prove that something will never come to an end; such an attempt would be absurd,” is another part of his assertion. “But if we can prove that the role of the brain is to fix the attention of the mind on matter and that by far the greater part of mental life is independent of the brain, then we have proved the likelihood of survival...” (“Professor Bergson on Immortality,” *Cambridge Sentinel*, March 29, 1913)

experiments with time and narrative, and hints of a world of deeper consciousness—can be traced at least partially to Bergson, in addition to his influences and those influenced by him. As Suzanne Guerlac notes at the outset of *Thinking In Time: An Introduction to Henri Bergson*, “Time is an age-old question that has become a preeminently modern problem”—a “problem” for twentieth-century thinkers because the condition of modernity is complicated by, and perhaps defined by, its ambiguous relationship to time. Writers and critics such as Walter Benjamin, Paul Valéry, and Paul Virilio have characterized modernity in terms of a “temporal crisis” of one kind or another.¹⁴ Bergson’s philosophy is inextricable from modern and postmodern conceptions of time, and the ways these conceptions have inspired representations of time in literature.

Since the 1988 English translation of Gilles Deleuze’s *Bergsonism* (an effort to revive Bergson from philosophical obscurity), there has been a resurgence of scholarly interest in Bergson and the scope of his influence. Bergson’s philosophy had a well-documented effect on the Modernists, and much has been written in the past few decades on Bergson’s influence, direct and indirect, on writers like T.S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf, Robert Frost, Willa Cather, Gertrude Stein, Wallace Stevens, and William Faulkner, as well as on writer-philosophers T.E. Hulme and William James. Even though Faulkner’s familiarity with Bergson’s work is not firmly established (and may never be), a deep understanding of Faulkner’s place in the Modernist literary tradition and a deep engagement with his work must take Bergson into account, or else forego a potentially elucidating perspective. If Faulkner agreed with some of the philosophical ideas espoused by Bergson, it seems likely

¹⁴ Suzanne Guerlac, *Thinking In Time: An Introduction to Henri Bergson* (Cornell University Press, 2006), 1

that these ideas would also crop up in his fiction. As Jean-Paul Sartre commented in his famed 1939 essay on Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, "A novelistic technique always relates to the novelist's metaphysics."¹⁵

When asked to explain his idea of time, Faulkner responded: "There isn't any time... In fact I agree with Bergson's theory of the fluidity of time. There is only the present moment, in which I include both the past and the future, and that is eternity. In my opinion time can be shaped quite a bit by the artist; after all, man is never time's slave."¹⁶ For Faulkner, time is comprised of an all-containing present, paradoxically immediate and eternal. The only moment is *now*, but since we have always been and always will be in the present, we can never divorce our experience of the present from the past nor the future. Let us now turn to Bergson's philosophy, to consult the admitted source of these views.

In Bergson's 1889 doctoral thesis in philosophy, published in English in 1910 as *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, he attempts to untangle what he sees as a knot at the core of most thinking about time and its relationship to human experience. In Bergson's view, there is a general tendency to apply categories of quantity where only categories of quality can accurately be applied. More specifically, people tend to view time as both homogeneous and measurable, when in fact these qualities are "intrusion[s] of the idea of space into the realm of pure duration."¹⁷ Rather, Bergson argues that time is a succession of interpenetrating qualitative changes—changes in psychic intensity, the domain of experience, rather than extensity, which is the domain of space.

¹⁵ Jean-Paul Sartre, "On *The Sound and the Fury*: Temporality Faulkner." *Critical Essays (Situations 1)* (Seagull, 2010), 105

¹⁶ Bouvard and Faulkner, 362

¹⁷ Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness* (Dover Publications Inc., 2001), vii

Simply put, we cannot evaluate time in the same ways that we evaluate space. Although we might abstractify qualitative changes in intensity by measuring them, as scientists and clocks do, these measurements are nothing more than a counting of simultaneities (i.e. a heterogeneity), and fail to illustrate time as a homogeneous medium. According to Bergson, any attempt to represent a moment in time as a measurement becomes a translation of time into space.

Bergson illustrates this with a clock as an example: if you watch the hands of a clock, “there is never more than a single position of the hand and the pendulum, for nothing is left of the past positions.”¹⁸ We rely on physical states as reference points as a way of becoming acquainted with the passage of time. He provides a lengthy philosophical justification for this viewpoint, drawing on various physical and psychological elements to aid his argument, but what is of particular interest is his description of what he calls “*la pure durée*,” or pure duration: “...pure duration might well be nothing but a succession of qualitative changes, which melt into and permeate one another, without precise outlines, without any tendency to externalize themselves in relation to one another, without any affiliation with number: it would be pure heterogeneity.”¹⁹

This is an example of the kind of passage that may have inspired Faulkner’s claim that there is only the present, which contains both the past and the future. This idea of the “fluidity of time” which Bergson and Faulkner share is “repugnant to the reflective consciousness [the intellect], because the latter delights in clean cut distinctions... and in things with well-defined outlines like those which are perceived in space.”²⁰ Bergson’s idea

¹⁸ Ibid., 108

¹⁹ Ibid., 104

²⁰ Ibid., 9

of *durée* rejects the metric constraints we apply to time, instead embracing the immediacy of experience, which itself defies any neat demarcations.

Faulkner's description of time in his interview encapsulates two important elements of Bergsonian time: firstly, as we have seen, the idea that only the present exists at a given time, and that it contains both the past and the future within it (a multiplicity, in Bergson's terms), and secondly, the idea that "the artist" has the ability to play with time, that despite our filtering of phenomena through the lens of time, we are not subjugated to it ("...man is never time's slave"). The latter idea will return in the following chapter, which addresses literary time in relation to narrativity. Given that literature is a medium unavoidably experienced through time, the possibility that human thought can structure time, rather than the opposite, is a matter of almost existential importance to both the artist and their audience, and of extreme emancipatory potential.

We can see echoes of Bergson in the Modernist tendency to derive art "more from insight than theory," conceiving of writers as "organs of the world's body."²¹ The privileging of qualitative over quantitative, of subjective over objective, and of intuition over intellect,²² is something which Bergson and Faulkner might be said to have had in common. Countering the rising tide of analytical, logic-oriented thought in twentieth-century Europe, Bergson and the Modernists continued to insist on the primacy of experience, which might be captured by art but never understood by rational metrics. In a lecture delivered in Oxford, England in

²¹ Harvey Gross, *The Contrived Corridor: History and Fatality in Modern Literature* (University of Michigan Press, 1971), 19

²² Bear in mind that the words "intellect" and "intuition" here are not being employed in the usual sense. Bergson introduced a distinction between intuition and intellect in his most famous work, 1907's *Creative Evolution* [*L'Évolution Créatrice*], which established these terms as dialectical buzzwords of 1910s philosophy (Douglass 2).

1909, the highly influential psychologist and philosopher William James (and brother of Modernist writer Henry James) credits Bergson with single-handedly destroying his faith in the ability for rationality to represent experience:

I have finally found myself compelled to *give up the logic*, fairly, squarely, and irrevocably. It has an imperishable use in human life, but that use is not to make us theoretically acquainted with the essential nature of reality... Reality, life, experience, concreteness, immediacy, use what word you will, exceeds our logic, overflows and surrounds it... In my opinion [Bergson] has killed intellectualism definitively and without hope of recovery.²³

Faulkner, too, was sensitive to the idea that the realness of reality could not be understood through reason, claiming “I don’t have much confidence in the mind,” and “I don’t know anything about rational or logical processes of thought at all.”²⁴ The abandonment of logic has important implications for an analysis of time, in that it necessitates a Bergsonian approach of feeling time qualitatively rather than quantitatively. When one looks at Faulkner’s writing, one can see the effect of these ideas—to illustrate this, I will use passages from his landmark 1930 novel, *As I Lay Dying*.

As the Bundren family patriarch, Anse Bundren, is outside helping his son, Cash, to build a coffin for his recently deceased wife, Addie, it begins to rain. Faulkner writes: “Pa lifts his face, slack-mouthed, the wet black rim of snuff plastered close along the base of his gums; from behind his slack-faced astonishment he muses as though from beyond time, upon

²³ William James, *A Pluralistic Universe: Hibbert Lectures at Manchester College on the Present Situation in Philosophy* (Longmans, Green, and Co., 1909), 212, 215. The link to James is interesting here in part because James coined the term “stream of consciousness” in 1894—a term which came to be used frequently to characterize Modernist writing—and later came to be spellbound by Bergson’s philosophy, as well as his greatest Anglophone proponent. The rapport between Bergson and James is detailed in the chapter “Bergson’s Life,” in John Alexander Gunn’s *Bergson and His Philosophy* (Methuen, 1920), 4-9.

²⁴ Quotes taken from Douglass, *Bergson, Eliot, and American Literature*, 123, originally appearing in *Faulkner in the University*, a collection of transcribed conferences from Faulkner’s time as Writer-In-Residence at the University of Virginia in 1957 and 1958, and *Faulkner at Nagano*, a transcription of a literature seminar given by Faulkner in Nagano, Japan in 1955.

the ultimate outrage.”²⁵ What could it mean for someone to muse from beyond time? What makes a construction like this especially interesting is that it is not referential; there is no quantitative way of capturing the effect which Faulkner produces in the use of this description. But even if we cannot identify what Pa’s musing actually looks like, and the category of being “beyond time” does not help us to place this event in sequential time, the description of musing at the ultimate outrage “as though from beyond time” somehow still strikes a powerful chord. We are challenged to imagine the sheer power of Pa’s look, a look so powerful that it is able to transcend time.

As a literary idea, a description of a look of astonishment that exists beyond time demands a Bergsonian interpretation in order to constitute anything more than just nonsense or poetic language. Whether the reader is acquainted with Bergson or not, such an idea is based in an understanding of time that, as James put it, “exceeds our logic,” as experience is wont to do. Bergson’s theory of time set the stage for Modernists like Faulkner to illustrate the subjective where the objective fails at representation. This is the same principle by which Proust—whose cousin married Bergson in 1891 (where Proust served as the best man), and who was inspired by Bergson’s theories of time²⁶—can describe the drifting smells of a bakery as “lazy and punctual as a village clock.”²⁷ A clock cannot be both lazy and punctual in any objective sense, but the subjectivization of time does not make these qualities mutually exclusive.

²⁵ William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying* (Vintage International, 1990), 77

²⁶ Guerlac, *Thinking in Time*, 9

²⁷ Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time, Volume I: Swann’s Way*, trans. C.K. Scott Moncrieff (Modern Library Paperback Edition, 2003), 67. In the same 1954 interview in which he cites Bergson as an influence, Faulkner says this of Proust: “...I feel very close to Proust. After I had read *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu* I said ‘This is it!’—and I wished I had written it myself” (Bouvard and Faulkner 364).

This may seem like a naïve interpretation. These contradictory qualities, the skeptical reader might observe, are an inherent feature of metaphor, and well predate any ideas unique to Modernism. In the same way that a clock cannot be both lazy and punctual, Shakespeare's Juliet cannot be both a young Capulet and "the sun," as Donne's sun cannot be both a flaming ball of gas and a "busy old fool." By its very nature, the metaphor is a device which expands the capacity of language beyond frames of logical reference.²⁸ That being said, it deserves appreciation that the temporal metaphors of the Modernists are characteristic of a revolutionary approach to poetic language, one which "[puts] the coin of everyday language to the fire, [seeking] a renewed medium of exchange."²⁹ The poetic language of the Modernists does not only paint a picture of or erect a monument to a subject as many poets did before them; it assumes the experiential, fluid condition *of* the subject. On this score, it is worth noting that the description of Pa's musing "as though beyond time" is a figurative description (a simile), but the comparison it makes leads us from a sensible frame of reference (Pa's musing) to an incomprehensible one (the state of being "beyond time"). It is no wonder then that so many Modernist figureheads fell under the spell of Bergson, a philosopher often criticized for his perceived "irrationalism" or "mysticism." If experience does "overflow" logic, then descriptions of temporal events must follow the time of experience (Bergson's *durée*) rather than the time of the clock.

²⁸ I say this with some caveats. Whether or not a metaphor actually means more than the words it is composed of is a topic of some disagreement among philosophers of language. Max Black argues that "Metaphorical statement is not a substitute for a formal comparison or any other kind of literal statement, but has its own distinctive capacities and achievements" (Max Black, *Models and Metaphors* (Cornell University Press, 1962), 37). Donald Davidson disagrees, arguing that metaphors have no extra-semantic meaning (and so are either true or false) (Donald Davidson, "What Metaphors Mean," *Critical Inquiry* Vol. 5, No. 1, (Autumn, 1978), University of Chicago Press, 31-47). What matters is that both parties seem to agree that we ought to be less concerned with the logical coherence or truth value of a metaphor than we are with the effect its incoherence produces.

²⁹ Douglass, 47

Recall that Faulkner not only said that “There is only the present moment,” but also said that this moment constitutes eternity. At first glance, this seems impossible, and perhaps worryingly ahistorical, but there may be a way of explaining this view through Bergson. For Bergson, the experience of time is “succession without distinction... an interconnexion and organization of elements, each one of which represents the whole, and cannot be distinguished or isolated from it except by abstract thought.”³⁰ If, at any moment, our minds contain ideas of both the past and the future, neither of which can be considered in the absence of a comparison to a different moment in time, then each moment, taken individually, is constitutive of the whole of experienced time. Faulkner’s time is always situated in the present. Even when it dips back in time to a flashback, the continuity of the narrative remains unbroken, as though any experience from the past is just as alive in the present as when it first transpired.³¹ This idea recalls one of Faulkner’s most-quoted lines, from his 1951 novel *Requiem for a Nun*: “The past is never dead. It isn’t even past.”³²

Elsewhere we get a similar idea of the encroachment of the past into the present. While crossing a washed-out bridge on the way to return Addie’s body to her hometown, the family wagon succumbs to the powerful current, tipping over and drowning two mules in the process. When the family goes to recover the wagon, Darl (one of Anse’s sons) remarks on the presence of the past: “We return to the river. The wagon is hauled clear, the wheels chocked (carefully: we all helped; it is as though upon the shabby, familiar, inert shape of the wagon there lingered somehow, latent yet still immediate, that violence which had slain the

³⁰ Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, 101

³¹ J. Hillis Miller provides a very clear analysis of the “the all-at-onceness or always-already that is time for Faulkner” (J. Hillis Miller, “Time in Literature.” *Daedalus*, Vol. 132, No. 2, *On Time* (MIT Press, Spring, 2003)), 96

³² William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1919), 85

mules that drew it not an hour since) above the edge of the flood.”³³ It is noteworthy that Darl’s meditation on the past is restricted to a parenthetical. Darl recognizes that past events (especially violent events) can live a ghostly life in the present, but he only seems willing to voice this admission as an aside within a more conventional framework of time. If we remove the parenthetical from Darl’s quote, we are left with a temporally consistent description: “We return to the river. The wagon is hauled clear, the wheels chocked above the edge of the flood”—a very sensible, if mundane, sentence. But the parenthetical interruption does not allow us this comfort of linearity; it loops us back into the past and reminds us that the past moment of the wagon’s violent crash is no less real in the present than it was when it happened. The description of the violence that killed the mules as “latent yet still immediate” is decidedly Bergsonian in nature, and further bolsters an understanding of Faulkner’s time as multiplicitous, never reaching beyond the present and yet containing all other moments at once.

This sense of interpenetrating time appears to be unique to Darl’s perspective. Of all the (living) narrators of *As I Lay Dying*, Darl seems to be the only one with both an interest in time and the ability to express its effects. With Darl operating as the primary shaper of the narrative, the reader cannot help but to see the whole of the story through his worldview, especially given that Darl narrates the most chapters of any of the book’s narrators, and so provides the most comprehensive outlook for adoption. This outlook is suggested by some motifs which appear in the chapters narrated by Darl. For example, Darl often pauses to observe a number of buzzards, which always appear to be lingering in the air: “Motionless,

³³ Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 157

the tall buzzards hang in soaring circles, the clouds giving them the illusion of retrograde,”³⁴ and later, “High against it they hang in narrowing circles, like the smoke, with an outward semblance of form and purpose, but with no inference of motion, progress or retrograde.”³⁵ Again, we are confronted with literary ideas that call upon us to imagine imagery beyond any objective frame of reference. How can buzzards flying through the air possibly be motionless? The recurrent buzzards are an obvious target for a symbolic analysis of *As I Lay Dying* (symbols of the proximity to or omnipresence of death, etc.), but perhaps more interesting than their symbolic use is the way in which their relationship to motion and time disrupts the idea of a traditionally linear narrative.

In spite of the book’s ostensibly linear conceit of a “harmless family yarn”³⁶ with an identifiable Point A (the Bundren homestead) and a journey to Point B (the cemetery in Jefferson), the narrative seems almost self-effacing in its insistence on the impossibility of real progress. Darryl Hattenhauer observes, in his essay “The Geometric Design of *As I Lay Dying*,” that “Darl depicts the eternity of timelessness, the unchanging lack of change, the eternal repetition, by breaking up spatial arrangements,” as we saw with the buzzards.³⁷ We can recall how Bergson took issue with the human obsession with applying spatial concepts to time—perhaps if spatial arrangements are destabilized, then we will have to grapple with temporal concepts on their own terms. A deconstruction of physical reference points, which act as guideposts for our marking of time, leaves us in a state of temporal confusion, similar

³⁴ Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 95

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 227

³⁶ James A. Snead, *Figures of Division: William Faulkner’s Major Novels* (Methuen, 1986), 46

³⁷ Darryl Hattenhauer, “The Geometric Design of *As I Lay Dying*” (*Colby Quarterly*, Vol. 30, Iss. 2 [1994], Art. 8), 150

to Faulkner's idea that "life is in constant flux, in constant change."³⁸ In other words, in keeping with Bergson, the objective referentiality of time fails us when the referentiality of space fails us. Darl, as the received narrative architect of *As I Lay Dying*, makes us self-conscious of our reliance on "form and purpose," which turns out to be nothing more than an illusion.

Up until now, I have been looking at the ways in which Bergson's philosophy illuminates the textual qualities of time in *As I Lay Dying*. However, it is clear that this formal analysis is insufficient on its own. In *As I Lay Dying*, time is not only illustrated in terms of nonlinearity or spatial configurations; it also comes to us packaged in the aesthetics of a lower-class, rural Southern community, with all of the economic tensions and hints of industrial encroachment that we might expect from the post-Reconstruction South. Bergson's time, despite its philosophical uses, may not be enough on its own for explorations of time which incorporate elements of social, economic, and cultural forces. While Bergson's philosophy lives in the world of ideas, Faulkner's prose lives in a world of real objects, and these objects are subject to the material conditions of 1930s Mississippi.

One way to address this discrepancy is to offer a reading of a more historicized, material interpretation of Faulkner and translate it into Bergsonian terms. One such reading is offered by James A. Snead in his 1986 book *Figures of Division*. Snead interprets *As I Lay Dying* as a "critique of convention," arguing that Faulkner's foregrounding of repetition reveals the failure of speech and of cliché in particular to communicate and connect people.³⁹

³⁸ Faulkner, *Faulkner in the University*, 151.

³⁹ Snead, *Figures of Division*, 46. I would like to issue a disclaimer that this particular effect of repetition is specific to its operation in *As I Lay Dying*; as we will see in Morrison, repetition can yield positive or negative cultural effects depending on the circumstances of its occurrence.

Faulkner himself remarked that, “if there is a villain in that story [*As I Lay Dying*] it’s the convention in which people have to live.”⁴⁰ This convention, according to Snead, appears in the form of linguistic repetitions. Snead writes: “Communication and community seem absent when the meaningless repetitions of common parlance are seen for what they are. Through repetitions, conventional discourse inside and outside the Bundren family weakens the very notions that it, by repetition, tries to reaffirm.”⁴¹ This undermining of meaning by way of repetition can be seen in the catchphrases the characters employ throughout the novel: for example, Anse’s insistence that he won’t “be beholden to no man,” despite his frequent reliance on others for uncompensated assistance, or Cora’s repeated tune, “I am bounding toward my God and my reward,” despite her unchristian rejection of the veracity of Addie’s faith. These phrases, characteristic of traditional Southern sentiment, draw attention to the chasms between signification and truth, revealing why Addie felt that “the high dead words in time seemed to lose even the significance of their dead sound.”⁴² The repetition of these phrases, intended to reinforce their meaning, instead “call[s] into question the referentiality of their message,” or otherwise completely rejects it.⁴³ It also threatens the speakers’ agencies—the more structured and repetitive our language is, the fewer options will be available for expression.

As we have already seen, the disruption of spatial referentiality serves to foreground the experience of time and provoke an awareness of *As I Lay Dying*’s self-conscious nonlinearity. Physical reference points are destabilized, and so we lose our ability to track

⁴⁰ Faulkner, *Faulkner in the University*, 112

⁴¹ Snead, *Figures of Division*, 52

⁴² Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 175

⁴³ Snead, *Figures of Division*, 54

time. The buzzards in the sky are still, and yet in motion, and so neither the observers of the textual events (the narrators and characters) nor the observers *of* the observers (us, the readers) have a reliable way of measuring time. Snead's argument extends this breakdown of referentiality to linguistic reference, seeing stock phrases as undermining the almost economical value words are supposed to have. Along similar lines to the spatial example, we see that semantic reference points are destabilized, and so we lose our ability to track meaning: "Society organizes its members mainly by placing them within figures and repeating the same alignments, hoping to flatten their uniqueness in the process."⁴⁴ I would like to extend Snead's line of thinking even further to expose the degenerative effects of repetition as it is realized social-industrial conventions, and how these effects structure our experience of time.

It seems clear enough that any kind of repetition has the potential to undermine meaning. The more repetition proliferates, the more limited the common person's vocabulary becomes, the fewer colors are available on the artist's palette. Snead himself acknowledges the propensity for culture to fall into repetition in a 1981 essay dedicated to the topic, "Repetition as a Figure of Black Culture": "Culture as a reservoir of inexhaustible novelty is unthinkable. Therefore, repetition, first of all, would inevitably have to creep into the dimension of culture just as into that of language and signification because of the finite supply of elementary units and the need for recognizability."⁴⁵ This idea of repetition as an unavoidable consequent of the development of culture is a double-edged sword: repetition, under the right creative conditions, can be productive and illuminating, or, if it becomes a

⁴⁴ Ibid., 51

⁴⁵ James A. Snead, "Repetition as a Figure of Black Culture," in *Black Literature and Literary Theory*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Methuen, 1984), 60

mechanism for the circulation of capital, it can be stifling and self-deluding.⁴⁶ In *As I Lay Dying*, repetition manifests itself in the latter form, as a servant of Western social-industrial convention.

The material conditions of the industrial economy structure the very lives and routines of Faulkner's characters in repetitious ways. For instance, the first third of the novel is punctuated with the "Chuck. Chuck. Chuck." of Cash's adze as he works away at Addie's coffin (starting before she has even died). Almost like a metronome, the repetitive action of Cash hacking away at the coffin is one of the most unifying elements of the early part of the narrative. Almost every narrator takes notice of Cash's mechanistic chopping; he serves as one of the strongest points of commonality between the different narrators, as we see different characters in different places notice the chopping from their own vantage points. The methodical action is explicitly acknowledged by the characters as a tool for time-measuring: "[Dewey Dell:] And Cash like sawing the long hot sad yellow days up into planks and nailing them to something." Darl describes the sound of the adze as "steady, competent, unhurried, stirring the dying light so that at each stroke her face seems to wake into an expression of listening and of waiting, as though she were counting the strokes."⁴⁷ Cash's commitment to his work limits the imaginative possibilities afforded by the time in which he lives—time, for him, is always being "sawed up," "waking," "waiting," "counting." Time, for Cash, is no longer representative of Bergson's metaphor for experience as a "single sentence... never broken by full stops."⁴⁸

⁴⁶ See *Ibid.*, 60, 66-67.

⁴⁷ Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 26, 50

⁴⁸ Bergson, *Mind-Energy: Lectures and Essays*, 70

It is no coincidence that the unifying element of a fragmented, nearly Cubist narrative is a repetitive, industrial action. The homogeneous experience of the sounds of wood-chopping can be construed as a metaphor for industrial or clock time. As we can recall from Bergson, clock time is the literal “chopping up” of experienced time into isolatable units fit for measurement. A clock takes the “interconnexion and organization of elements, each one of which represents the whole,” and introduces an artificial ordering to them. As Bergson notes, “we could not introduce *order* among terms without first distinguishing them and then comparing the places which they occupy,” and this is precisely what a clock is meant to do.⁴⁹ This is also what Cash’s adze does. In character’s descriptions of Cash’s hacking, it is apparent that his activity of splitting the wood, an activity melding elements of the agrarian and the industrial, is not only dividing wood from wood, but also dividing moment from moment. In both the quotes from Dewey Dell and from Darl, the day itself is subordinated to industrial activity. The “long hot sad yellow days” themselves are sawed up and nailed down, the “dying light” of the day is awoken to count the strokes of the adze.

Although there is no reason to suspect that this motif has any intended connection to Bergson, it goes a long way in illustrating how the introduction of clock time can subordinate the experience of *la pure durée*. There is an implicit tension between the experience of time which Faulkner’s prose creates and its insistence on industrial time-marking. As Paul Douglass writes, “Faulkner creates the uninterrupted sentence that emulates the flux of consciousness, and at the same time never lets us forget the inexorable ticking of the clock.”

⁵⁰ This balancing act is simultaneously an artistic feat and a potentially troubling image of the

⁴⁹ Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, 101, 102

⁵⁰ Douglass, 140

industrial experience. To what extent are we dependent on the standardization of time to make experience intelligible? This question becomes particularly important when we see the intrusion of industrial time into the realm of fictional narrative, a realm which does not appear to be beholden to demands for temporal consistency.⁵¹ We see in Cash the dangers of living in non-subjective time, according to which the logics of measurement reign supreme, and expression is limited to productive industrial output.

One might go so far as to say that industrial time has effectively made Cash into a machine. He is revealed never to have said “I love you” to his mother,⁵² he is fixated on physical detail over emotional depth, and he refuses over and over again to admit that his broken leg causes him any pain whatsoever, with his brother Darl even claiming that his blood has been replaced with sawdust (“Cash broke his leg and now the sawdust is running out. He is bleeding to death is Cash”).⁵³ His archetypal role as the “craftsman” has consumed him, and seems to spill over into the experiences of the other characters as well in their internalizations of industrial time. As the exemplar of the laborer living in spatialized, industrialized time, Cash’s identity is derived entirely from his tools.⁵⁴ His labor consumes whatever his authentic self may be. Repetition (of phrases, of labor) destabilizes referentiality (of speech, of space, of time), and so the Bundrens’ narrative world is robbed of meaning. Although Bergson’s criticism of a spatialized, homogeneous time is only ever expressed in

⁵¹ Paul Ricoeur contends that narrative time has “been freed from the constraints requiring it to be referred back to the time of the universe” (Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 3 (University of Chicago Press, 1988), 128).

⁵² Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 72

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 207

⁵⁴ This idea is the thesis of Tim Poland’s short essay, “Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying*.” Poland observes that Cash loses his ability to speak and essentially disappears from the narrative when he loses his tools in the river, and then returns to full consciousness when they are recovered. In other words, his tools are his identity (Tim Poland, “Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying*,” *The Explicator*; Winter 1991; 49.2; ProQuest, 118-120).

philosophical terms, reading him together with Snead reveals in Bergson an implicit critique of industrial society and the way in which it limits our imaginative and expressive possibilities.

Given this reading of *As I Lay Dying*, it can be difficult to find any traces of Faulkner's conviction quoted earlier that "we are not slaves to time." Although Faulkner gave his interview with Loïc Bouvard in 1952, 22 years between the publication of *As I Lay Dying*, we can already see him working through his ideas about time and progress in the 30s. There is an oppressive, almost hauntingly stagnant character to the narrative, "uninferred of progress," as Darl puts it, which does not give time the liberatory character one might expect based on what Faulkner said in his interview. Of course, it would be unfair to expect all of an artist's output to be consistent with an offhand comment from an interview, but it is nevertheless worth trying to understand what *As I Lay Dying* tells us about the possibility or impossibility of progress. We might find an answer in what we learn from the only character living outside of time: Addie. In her only narrative appearance, speaking from beyond the grave, Addie details the deterioration of her relationship with Anse, recalling the time at which their marriage was effectively over, "in the sense that he was gone and I knew that [...] I would never again see him coming swift and secret to me dressed in sin like a gallant garment." She goes on to say, "But for me it was not over. I mean, in the sense of beginning and ending, because to me there was no beginning nor ending to anything then."⁵⁵ Outside the bounds of life, outside the bounds of time, there can be no beginning or ending.

⁵⁵ Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 175

In many ways, Addie's narrative episode might be seen as a forerunner of the postmodern—her attention to the instability of language, her obvious *presence* by way of *absence*, her proto-Derridean descriptions of words as “gaps in people's lacks,”⁵⁶ are all forerunners of literary-philosophical developments to come in the decades following the book's publication. She exists in a space that is not hindered by Modernist fantasies of representation, where there is no beginning and no end, where there is no separation between meaning and the lack of it. Addie is the symbolic example of one living outside of time, not limited by standardized, linear, industrial expectations.

Although a Bergsonian interpretation of Faulkner's time yields a kind of immediate, ever-changing present, the nonlinear, subjective quality of this time is never made accessible to the characters in *As I Lay Dying*, with the exception of Addie. The setting of Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi is a land haunted by the specters of industrialization and economic anxiety. This is why Faulkner's characters don't seem to ultimately get anywhere (or at least anywhere emotionally redeeming): because they are wedded to the figment of progress in various guises (making the trip to Jefferson, buying bananas, buying new teeth, buying an abortion, finding a new wife), and yet they are tragically unable to see that the time they live in is not progressive time. Darl, as I noted earlier, is in a unique position, as he is aware of the nonprogressive nature of time, but it seems that the only way for him to escape from the illusion of progress is to lose his mind altogether.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Ibid., 174

⁵⁷ One might think of Darl's fate as a kind of “mental death,” and so his final escape into madness is consistent with the idea that death is the only path leading out of time-boundedness.

When asked to defend the goodness of man in light of all of the evil in the world, Faulkner remarked that “the only alternative to progress is death.”⁵⁸ He meant this answer to be a rallying cry—so long as we are alive, we must push ourselves to make progress. However, given the predicament of his characters, this answer becomes more haunting. We find no evidence of progress in the narrative, and so it appears that the only option we are left with, morbidly, is the option to die. Paul Douglass suggests that “Modernist literature entertains the hope that through understanding the necessary laws of the myth-making, or poetic consciousness, we may find a means to ‘make sense’ of the chaos of memory and history.”⁵⁹ We may conclude that *As I Lay Dying* does not ultimately enable us to make sense of memory and history in this way. In the critical reception of time in *As I Lay Dying* since Sartre’s foundational essay, many interpreters of Faulkner have agreed that Faulkner’s time, and thus his characters, are in a state of stasis and defeat.⁶⁰

André Malraux writes that “An intense obsession crushes each of his characters, and in no case do the characters succeed in exorcizing it.”⁶¹ Claude-Edmonde Magny writes that Faulkner’s time is “not the time of common consciousness, oriented toward the future and as it were aspiring toward the future—but the unchanging past, which immures the present moment in its Cyclopean cave, drawing all reality back to itself.”⁶² The reader sympathizes

⁵⁸ Faulkner, *Faulkner In the University*, 5

⁵⁹ Douglass, 33

⁶⁰ James H. Rusk, *The Role of Time in Faulkner’s Fiction: A Synthesis of Critical Opinion*. MA Thesis, North Texas State University, 1973, 13-16. Web. The following examples of criticism are taken from sources referenced by Rusk. See also for an overview of comparisons made by critics between Faulkner’s view of time and Bergson’s.

⁶¹ André Malraux, “A Preface for Faulkner’s *Sanctuary*.” Yale French Studies No. 10, French-American Literary Relationships (1952), 92

⁶² Claude-Edmonde Magny, trans. Elizabeth Stambler, “Faulkner’s Inverse Theology,” CrossCurrents Vol. 4, No. 3 (Spring-Summer 1954), 207

with Darl's longing to "just ravel out into time,"⁶³ to enter a state of timelessness in which the burden of the past can no longer suffocate them. But our brief look into Addie's appearance provides an unsettling response to this longing, that the only way to achieve timelessness is to first escape living. Given this dilemma, we might recognize some truth in Sartre's claim that Faulkner has "decapitated" time, that he has "[taken] away its future: that is to say, the dimension of acts and freedom."⁶⁴

It seems puzzling at first that Faulkner, who consistently champions the human spirit and its ability to overcome adversity in his interviews and speeches, constructs literary worlds that seem so hostile to human experience.⁶⁵ There is a disconnect between what we get out of Faulkner and what Faulkner's philosophy tells us we ought to get, a disconnect which Faulkner himself may not have known how to reconcile. When he was asked in a 1956 *Paris Review* interview whether his characters carry a sense of submission to their fate, Faulkner rather glibly defended the Bundrens against this claim: "The father having lost his wife would naturally need another one, so he got one... The pregnant daughter failed this time to undo her condition, but she was not discouraged... and even if [her abortion attempts] failed right up to the last, it wasn't anything but just another baby."⁶⁶ Even if Faulkner thought this was a viable defense of his characters' tragic trajectories, it is not much of a consolation. Perhaps an optimistic outlook is necessary in order to sustain a belief in progress

⁶³ Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 208

⁶⁴ Sartre, 114

⁶⁵ For a taste of Faulkner's humanism, see his 1950 Nobel Prize acceptance speech: "I believe that man will not merely endure: he will prevail. He is immortal, not because he alone among creatures has an inexhaustible voice, but because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance" (Robert A. Jelliffe, ed., *Faulkner at Nagano* (Tokyo: Kenyusha Ltd., 1966), 205-6).

⁶⁶ Philip Gourevitch, ed. *The Paris Review Interviews, II: Wisdom from the World's Literary Masters* (2007), 55

in spite of the institutions (social, linguistic, economic, temporal, etc.) that seem to nullify progressive motion.

There are unhappy implications baked into progress-centered frameworks, fears that progress is either extremely difficult to attain or utterly unattainable. These are implications which Faulkner is invested in avoiding (how else could he account for his belief in the power of the human spirit?), and which his philosophy of time is supposed to counteract. But there may be equally unhappy implications for Faulkner and his always-present time. “[T]ime is a fluid condition which has no existence except in the momentary avatars of individual people,” Faulkner said in the same *Paris Review* interview. “There is no such thing as *was*—only *is*. If *was* existed, there would be no grief or sorrow.”⁶⁷ Like other quotes we have seen from Faulkner, this thought may entail some troubling ideas. Faulkner reflects that grief and sorrow are concomitants of an enduring past; therefore, our difficulties are the result of our inability to separate the past from the present. This is a shocking inversion of Bergson’s *pure durée*, where it looks like the all-encompassing flux of time does not liberate us after all, but freezes us in place with all of the pains we have accumulated. Bergson, overwhelmingly interpreted as an optimist and a humanist, would not have been satisfied with this interpretation of time, despite all of the commonalities between his and Faulkner’s thought. Fortunately, Faulkner is not the only author we can look to for a temporal redemption which takes us beyond the purview of progress and homogeneity. To see what a more emotionally liberating experience of time might look like, we now turn to Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 57. Faulkner says very much the same thing in a 1957 session at the University of Virginia: “There is no such thing really as *was* because the past is” (Gwynn & Blotner, eds., *Faulkner in the University*, 84).

Interlude

Before I proceed with my analysis of *Beloved*, I feel compelled to offer a preliminary defense of my choice to compare Morrison to Faulkner. Such a defense, treated properly, would occasion an entire book, but I will settle for a very brief overview of the critical territory, which should help to show why I believe such a defense is appropriate. Any venture into the secondary literature on Toni Morrison reveals quickly that the choice to compare Morrison to William Faulkner, or any other “canonical” Western writer (typically of the white male variety), is a contentious one. Although innumerable critics have noted similarities between the writings of Faulkner and Morrison, usually pointing to a textured, “contrapuntal” prose style and a refutation of linear narrative time as areas of commonality (entire books have been written on their similarities), Morrison herself had no interest in such comparisons.

There is no doubt that Morrison was intimately acquainted with Faulkner’s work—Faulkner was one of the subjects of her 1955 Master’s thesis in English at Cornell, “Virginia Woolf’s and William Faulkner’s Treatment of the Alienated.” However, Morrison repeatedly insists in interviews that she did not consider him to be a literary influence of hers. In 1985, Morrison breaks from working on *Beloved* to give an address to the Yoknapatawpha Conference in Mississippi (an annual conference on Faulkner, held in his hometown). “Faulkner had an enormous effect on me, enormous,” says Morrison, “...[but] I’m not sure he had an effect on my work.”⁶⁸

⁶⁸ Doreen Fowler and Anne J. Abadie, eds., *Faulkner and Women: Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha* (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1986), 296

Morrison sees attempts to locate her work within the same literary heritage of Faulkner and other white writers as wrongheaded. “I am not *like* James Joyce; I am not *like* Thomas Hardy; I am not *like* Faulkner. I am not *like* in that sense,” she insists in a 1983 interview with Nellie McKay.⁶⁹ In another interview, Morrison voices her issues with criticism done by critics both black and white for “[justifying] itself by identifying black writers with some already accepted writer.” She is opposed to any comparison with a canonical white writer, because “it never goes into the work on its own terms. It comes from some other place and finds content outside the work and wholly irrelevant to it to support the work.”⁷⁰ The white literary canon, as Morrison sees it, is an institution, like America itself, which does not honor the history and culture of the African-American subject. As Morrison indicates, there was “no systematic mode of criticism”⁷¹ that had yet evolved for the evaluation by black writers, especially black women writers, on their own artistic terms (although, at the time of the interview, a nascent black feminist discourse was emerging).⁷² How then, am I to justify a paper which examines Faulkner and Morrison in conversation with one another, and identifies the philosophy of a white French philosopher as a theoretical bridge between the two?

Again, I cannot give this subject a full treatment here, but I will offer a possible approach to this question. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. a renowned scholar of African-American

⁶⁹ Danille Taylor-Guthrie, ed., *Conversations with Toni Morrison*, 152

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 161

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 152

⁷² Morrison’s works received relatively little critical attention in the mid-70s, but through the critical successes of *Song of Solomon* (1977) and *Tar Baby* (1981), Morrison was elevated to the status of an American literary icon. From the 80s to the 90s, Morrison’s works provided important material for black feminist interpretations (Nancy J. Peterson, ed., *Toni Morrison: Critical and Theoretical Approaches* (Johns Hopkins UP, 1997), 5). In 1993, Morrison was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature.

literature, and editor of an anthology of critical essays on Morrison, once wrote that

Every black American text must confess to a complex ancestry, one high and low (that is, literary and vernacular) but also one white and black. There can be no doubt that white texts inform and influence black texts (and vice versa), so that a thoroughly integrated canon of American literature is not only politically sound, it is intellectually sound as well.⁷³

To understand *Beloved* on its own terms is to understand history as a matrix of complicity, as a necessary backdrop for human experience. If we consider *Beloved* in this way, then it seems Gates is right that the influence of authors like Faulkner, whether it is understood in positive or negative terms, is packaged into the ancestry of Morrison's writing. This does not mean that *Beloved* derives its legitimacy as an artistic project from its relation to Faulkner. It means that a more inclusive analysis, which does not reject influences on the basis of whiteness or blackness, can only result in a more holistic understanding of a text.

Barbara Christian, in an article attacking the "race for theory" that has overtaken the output of academic English departments, notes that "people of color have always theorized—but in forms quite different from the abstract form of Western logic."⁷⁴ Recall that both Faulkner and Bergson, in some way or another, expressed distaste for so-called "logical" approaches to thought.⁷⁵ Indeed, both faced criticism for "failing" to produce wholly coherent and consistent work (a system of thought, for Bergson, a narrative, for

⁷³ Henry Louis Gates, Jr. "Whose Canon Is It, Anyway?" *The New York Times*, Feb 26, 1989. Gates might be said to fall into the "syncretist" camp of critics of African-American literature—those who believe that "African-American writing is more productively viewed as a culturally hybrid form," as opposed to the "separatist" camp, which posits that the application of Western theoretical constructs to black writing is "inevitably complicit with the very structures and histories of racial domination that black writing seeks to interrogate and dismantle" (Carl Plasa, *Toni Morrison: Beloved* (Columbia University Press, 1998), 8-9.

⁷⁴ Barbara Christian, "The Race for Theory," *Cultural Critique*, No. 6, *The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse* (University of Minnesota Press, Spring, 1987), 52

⁷⁵ In a lecture, Bergson opined that "Most philosophies... restrict our experience on the side of feeling and will as at the same time they indefinitely prolong it on the side of thought" (Henri Bergson, *The Creative Mind*, trans. Mabelle L. Andison (Greenwood Press: Westport, 1946), 251).

Faulkner). Perhaps, then, Faulkner, Bergson, and black artists and theoreticians have more in common than expected. At the very least, it would be unproductive to assume that the influential ideas of Faulkner and Bergson have nothing to offer to readings of black authors. Copious essays on *Beloved* by both black and white critics invoking concepts introduced by Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, etc. hopefully illustrate a similar point. With these thoughts in mind, I will now move on to my analysis of *Beloved*.

Beloved and the Narrativization of Memory

In many ways, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, published in 1987 (57 years after *As I Lay Dying*) can be seen as a continuation and expansion of Faulkner's literary project. I have illustrated why I believe that *As I Lay Dying* does not succeed in meeting Faulkner's own professed expectations for the human spirit and its freedom to experience "fluid" time. Faulkner's time is multiplicitous, in the sense of containing multiple states within a single state (pastness and futureness within the present), but none of these states turn out to be viable for the narrative subject, in the sense that they do not offer characters any real possibilities for emotional fulfillment or closure.

This is not the case for Morrison. In her work, characters are enabled to "ravel out into time," as Darl wished he would have been able to do. Although *Beloved* undoubtedly contains far more violence and tragedy than *As I Lay Dying*, time is not presented as fixed or suffocating or "uninferant of progress." Morrison's idea of "progress" is fundamentally different from Faulkner's, largely because Morrison is working within a different literary tradition, and drawing upon elements of the slave narrative and African-American culture—resources Faulkner does not have the same access to.⁷⁶ Morrison is not interested in a teleological, linear progress, "an idea whose time has come and gone." Rather, she is

⁷⁶ Susan Willis expresses this neatly in her essay, "Eruptions of Funk: Historicizing Toni Morrison," when she writes that "the difference between Faulkner and Morrison, conditioned by the intervening years, which have brought black civil rights, countercultural politics, and the feminist perspective, is that, while Morrison invests her "mythic hero" with utopian aspirations, Faulkner does not" (Susan Willis, "Eruptions of Funk: Historicizing Toni Morrison," in *Faulkner and Women: Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha*, eds. Doreen Fowler and Anne J. Abadie (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1986), 319).

interested in what she calls “the future of time,” divested of prescription but nonetheless fertile ground for the development of the spirit.⁷⁷

Beloved is a ghost story and a slave story. It is the story of Sethe, a mother and former slave, and the “ghost” of her daughter, referred to as “Beloved.” We learn that Sethe killed Beloved in a desperate effort to keep her from being forced into a life of slavery, and that the haunting of this memory is so powerful that it becomes a literal haunting. From the basic details of the plot, it is easy to see why one would put this text in conversation with *As I Lay Dying*. Both are set in the post-Civil War South,⁷⁸ both make extensive use of nonchronological narrative, and both follow a wide range of characters who are brought together by the ghostly presence-absence of a dead character. The differences between the two are equally apparent: *As I Lay Dying* follows the journey of a poor white family on their way to bury their dead mother; *Beloved* focuses on the domestic lives of black characters as they reckon with their memories of the past. Although *As I Lay Dying* challenges the very linearity that its plot seems to establish, *Beloved* never accepts the constraints of linearity in the first place. Whereas Faulkner at least assigns his narrative a starting point and an ending point, Morrison is never content to think in terms of a finite or historically contained narrative. She weaves the present together with the past, creating a reading experience which imitates the actual function of memory, perhaps even more like a stream of consciousness than Faulkner’s style.

⁷⁷ Toni Morrison, *The Source of Self-Regard: Selected Essays, Speeches, and Meditations* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2019), 119, 120

⁷⁸ *Beloved* is set in 1873 during Reconstruction; *As I Lay Dying* is presumably set around the time of its publication in 1930.

The inspiration for *Beloved* comes from a newspaper article Morrison came across while working as an editor for Random House in the 1970s. While doing research for an anthology of documents and photographs depicting the lives of black people in America, she came across a newspaper article from 1856, titled “A Visit to the Slave Mother Who Killed Her Child.” The mother in question was Margaret Garner, an escaped slave woman who slit her young daughter’s throat when her family was about to be recaptured.⁷⁹ This is an important historical context for setting the text of *Beloved*, since the novel, broadly speaking, is a fictionalized reworking of many details which come from slave narratives. As Morrison recognizes in her essay, “The Site of Memory,” the print origins of black literature are in the slave narrative, and these narratives, due to their white reading audiences and for the sake of their publication, could not include the more “sordid” or “indecorous” aspects of their experiences. Morrison writes: “In shaping the experience to make it palatable to those who were in a position to alleviate it, they were silent about many things, and they ‘forgot’ many other things.”⁸⁰

The slave narrative, given the social and literary conditions of 19th-century America, could not provide a comprehensive record of the slave’s experience, and those things which went unrecorded to suit the taste of white readers were “forgotten,” at least in the sense that memory demands the recording of experience. This is the memory which Morrison sets out to resuscitate. Morrison wants to summon back the “forgotten” aspects of the black memory,

⁷⁹ Barbara H. Solomon, “Introduction.” *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison’s Beloved* (G.K. Hall & Co., 1998), 30

⁸⁰ Toni Morrison, “The Site of Memory,” in *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*, 2d ed., ed. William Zinsser (Boston; New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1995), 91

to restore to the slave the narratological (and so the *ontological*) “internal life” which was lost in translation from experience to slave narrative.

These notions of memory, history, and the restoration of internal life are essential to Morrison’s literary vision. *Beloved* uses a kind of fluid, Bergsonian time to transcend the slave narrative, to escape the form’s historical limitations without ever forgetting the form’s history. In *Beloved*, Morrison never strays from recognizing that history is filled to the brim with tragedy of unthinkable proportions, with grief that most would sooner forget altogether than come to terms with—we see several characters working through these issues. Importantly, the fact that the work of “coming to terms with” is a part of Morrison’s vocabulary at all is what differentiates her time from Faulkner’s.

Beloved provides its own explicit conceptualization of time, which is revealed in dialogue between Sethe and Denver. Denver witnesses her mother praying, and asks her what she was praying for. After correcting Denver that she doesn’t pray anymore, she “just talks,” Sethe tells her:

I was talking about time. It’s so hard for me to believe in it. Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it’s not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it’s gone, but the place—the picture of it—stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world... I mean, even if I don’t think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. Right in the place where it happened.⁸¹

This idea of “rememory” is central to *Beloved*. Like Faulkner, Morrison believes wholeheartedly in the reality of the past, and in its continuity into the present and the future. If a “memory” is an archived representation of an experience, a “re-memory” is the accessing

⁸¹ Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (Penguin, 1987), 37

of that archive, the re-emergence of a thing once forgotten—not as “a full presence that was once lost, but as an eruption into a present enabled by that present.”⁸² Simply, rememory is the past in the present. Not the mere memory of the past, but an actual revisitation of that past, a past which can be seen for what it is in the *new* present, not just what it was in its own present.⁸³

This revisitation is an emotionally powerful and often conflicting experience for the person doing the “rememoring.” In the case of characters like Sethe and her former slave companion-turned-lover Paul D, memories of their lives as slaves are bound up in both the brutalities they faced and the pleasures they found during the time they shared at the Kentucky plantation, Sweet Home (“Fire and brimstone all right, but hidden in lacy groves”).⁸⁴ The arrival of Beloved at Sethe’s house, not only as a ghost (i.e. a memory), but in the physical form of a woman (i.e. a rememory) catalyzes the release of the many memories of Sweet Home, memories which Sethe had “beat back” through daily domestic work, and which Paul D had shut away in the rusted “tobacco tin” of his heart.⁸⁵ As Beloved grows more powerful, Sethe must work harder and harder to keep the past away, until finally she must reconcile her past with her present. Although it is difficult, we know that this reconciliation is attainable.

⁸² Carl Plasa, *Toni Morrison: Beloved* (Columbia University Press, 1998), 134

⁸³ Jewell Parker Rhodes writes that “Rememory... is a revisionary process of memory, of seeing things for what they were, not for what you thought them to be at the time... of weighing the value of past events in order to build a foundation for living in the past and the present simultaneously” (Jewell Parker Rhodes, “Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*: Ironies of a ‘Sweet Home’ Utopia in a Dystopian Slave Society,” *Utopian Studies* Vol. 1, No. 1 (1990), 77)

⁸⁴ Morrison, *Beloved*, 6

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 73, 113

In one scene, not long after Beloved's arrival, Sethe steps outside to clear her head, and she realizes what it is that she wants from Paul D: "Trust and rememory, yes, the way she believed it could be when he cradled her before the cooking stove... Her story was bearable because it was his as well—to tell, to refine and tell again."⁸⁶ One can hear echoes of Faulkner in this passage. The idea that the harrowing story of Sethe's past can be made bearable by its "tellability" as a story recalls Faulkner's idea that "time can be shaped quite a bit by the artist."⁸⁷ So long as Sethe's narrative is not told for her by an impersonal historical account, the past does not have power over her. At the end of the novel, when Sethe and Paul D are reunited following the exorcism of Beloved, we are told that Paul D "wants to put his story next to hers [Sethe's]."⁸⁸ In choosing how her story is told (i.e. the act of narration), Sethe gains control over time.

Faulkner has no reservations about asserting that "man is never time's slave," that one's ownership over time is an inalienable right. The reason for this is simple: the experience of slavery is utterly foreign to him. Morrison, the granddaughter of Alabamian sharecroppers, writing *Beloved* in the form of what some have called a "neo-slave narrative," is more mindful of the fact that those living in slavery were denied both their own narratives and their own conceptions of time. Slaves like Sethe and Paul D had to work on someone else's time and abide by someone else's narrative. And, as Paul Ricoeur reminds us in *Time and Narrative*, these two ways of perceiving the world (i.e. perceiving *in time* and *as narrative*) are interdependent: "time becomes human time to the extent that it is organized after the manner of a narrative; narrative, in turn, is meaningful to the extent that it portrays

⁸⁶ Ibid., 99

⁸⁷ Bouvard and Faulkner, 362

⁸⁸ Morrison, *Beloved*, 273

the features of temporal experience.”⁸⁹ Not only is Sethe enabled to escape from a narrative which is not her own (the linear narrative of history), she is also empowered to recreate time as something meaningful, rather than something oppressive.⁹⁰

The comfort Sethe takes in sharing the narrativization of her story with someone she trusts (Paul D) also exemplifies Morrison’s formal subversion of the classic slave narrative. A traditional slave narrative would be limited to one speaker, speaking only for themselves, telling a story in chronological order—*Beloved* does not accept these limitations. Morrison challenges the trope’s characteristically autobiographical nature, while also deconstructing “the Western notion of linear time that informs American history and the slave narratives.”⁹¹ Narrative identity is expanded to include loved ones who can share in the narrativization of a story, rather than being confined to the more spectacularized trope of the lone freed slave recounting their tale to a white audience. Linear time is challenged in the very act of remembrance, which necessitates a deviation from a straight temporal trajectory.⁹² By rejecting the narrative and temporal norms of the slave story, Morrison frees her literary expression of the black experience from the traditionally Western expectations which would otherwise bind it. We find stifling, fatalistic anxieties in *As I Lay Dying* because Faulkner, unlike Morrison, has not emancipated his narrative from these boundaries. Whereas the

⁸⁹ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative, vol. 1* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 3

⁹⁰ Bergson would say that Sethe, by resisting the precise but impersonal time of historical narrative and embracing the fluid time of experience, she is recovering her “fundamental self” (Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, 129).

⁹¹ Marilyn Sanders Mobley, “A Different Remembering: Memory, History and Meaning in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*,” quoted in Carl Plasa, *Toni Morrison: Beloved*, 51

⁹² It is important to add here that the looping back in time that rememory instantiates is (if we think back to Snead) an example of useful, creative, non-degenerative repetition. The “pictures” Sethe describes, which she is able to hold in her mind even after she has done or seen what she is picturing, are repetitions. The degenerative effects of repetition in *As I Lay Dying* have been avoided here, because Sethe’s repetitions take place outside the network of social and industrial convention; they exist in a strictly personal and emotional space.

dissolution of narrative identity and the deconstruction of chronological consistency are sources of confusion and disorientation in *As I Lay Dying*, these two qualities are liberating in *Beloved*.

Although the characters of *Beloved* and *As I Lay Dying* have different experiences of time, Bergson's concept of *pure durée*, of "a succession of qualitative changes, which melt into and permeate one another, without precise outlines,"⁹³ is at the heart of both texts. The Faulknerian idea of the past living in the present, of the past that is "not even past," is very much at work in *Beloved*. That being said, this idea has more optimistic connotations in *Beloved* than it has in *As I Lay Dying*. Although the reality of the past in the present can manifest itself as a haunting, as in *Beloved*'s case, it can also express itself in terms of emotional possibilities. As Sethe is working through her own past, she comes to realize that, "if her daughter could come back home from the timeless place—certainly her sons could, and would, come back from wherever they had gone to."⁹⁴ The imagined return of Sethe's sons, who ran away from home as soon as they were old enough, is a kind of emotional closure unique to Morrison's text.

This return may be a literal return or a figurative one. The nature of Morrison's time might even be said to obscure or erase the barrier between the literal and the figurative. Sethe's memories of her sons, which exist in the past, can be reified as rememories, which exist in the present. These rememories are just as real to Sethe as the literal presence of her sons was when they still lived with her. The blurring of the line between the real and the

⁹³ Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, 104

⁹⁴ Morrison, *Beloved*, 182

imagined, between literal presence and figurative presence, is what enables Beloved to appear as a real physical being in the first place.

One of the most pervasive questions raised by *Beloved* is that of the nature of the title character: Is she a ghost? A figment? A real, living, breathing person? There is no wholly satisfying answer to this question, because, as Morrison said in a 1988 interview, “the gap between the living and the dead and the gap between the past and the present does not exist. It’s bridged by us by our assuming responsibility for people no one’s ever assumed responsibility for.”⁹⁵ Through the act of narrativizing trauma (in Sethe’s case, the trauma of slavery and of murdering her own daughter), the categories that separate living/dead and present/past cease to be applicable. Mourning is simultaneously completed, in the sense of an emotional closure, and left incomplete, in the sense that the mourner is aware that that the process of mourning is a continual one (perhaps analogous to what Bergson calls an “indivisible continuity of change”).⁹⁶

These kinds of paradoxes, incoherent at the level of logic, are nevertheless unproblematic at the level of artistic representation and emotional response. As Faulkner’s paradoxical metaphors for time demonstrated earlier, Modernist writers (as well as their successors, like Morrison) take advantage of the emotional resonances that result from the destabilizing of dialectical pairings, e.g. present and past.⁹⁷ One can trace the lineage of this approach back to Bergson and his view of time:

That time implies succession I cannot deny. But that succession is first presented to our consciousness, like the distinction of a “before” and “after” set side by side,

⁹⁵ Danille Taylor-Guthrie, ed., *Conversations with Toni Morrison*, 247

⁹⁶ Bergson, *The Creative Mind*, 176

⁹⁷ Think back also to T.S. Eliot’s “Burnt Norton”: “What might have been and what has been / Point to one end, which is always present” (Eliot, *Four Quartets*, 3), and Sartre’s paradoxical description of Faulkner’s prose as “motionless movement” (Sartre 107).

is what I cannot admit. When we listen to a melody we have the purest impression of succession we could possibly have,—an impression as far removed as possible from that of simultaneity,—and yet it is the very continuity of the melody and the impossibility of breaking it up which make that impression upon us.⁹⁸

For Bergson and for Morrison, the linearity that allows for the identification of a “before” and an “after” is not an intrinsic aspect of experience; these distinctions may be assigned after the fact, but they are not fundamental. Morrison’s narrative, like the melody Bergson describes, comes to us as a “pure impression,” not made digestible because it can be fixed and understood in time, but made enticing and hypnotic by its musical motion.⁹⁹

Importantly, the time of *Beloved* is not *fundamentally* different from the time of *As I Lay Dying*. The difference lies not in how these temporalities operate, but in how their subjects receive them. In an almost uncanny refutation of the mechanization of Cash we saw in Faulkner (“Cash like sawing the long hot sad yellow days up into planks and nailing them to something”),¹⁰⁰ Paul D remarks that “A man ain’t a goddamn ax. Chopping, hacking, busting every goddamn minute of the day. Things get to him. Things he can’t chop down because they’re inside.”¹⁰¹ Whereas Faulkner gives us a character who internalizes the effects of metric time and then externalizes them in an act of industrial labor, Morrison explicitly critiques the industrial model of time. Paul D refuses to accept Cash’s time; he finds a space for expression which goes beyond the expressive tools available to Cash. This is not to say that Faulkner’s depiction is not itself a critique, but it leaves us with no way out of Cash’s industrial time, barring insanity or death.

⁹⁸ Bergson, *The Creative Mind*, 176

⁹⁹ In fact, Morrison frequently describes the influence of music on her writing, even comparing her narratives to melodies—see in particular her interview for “The Art of Fiction” in the Paris Review, Issue 128, Fall 1993 (<https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/1888/toni-morrison-the-art-of-fiction-no-134-toni-morrison>).

¹⁰⁰ Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 26

¹⁰¹ Morrison, *Beloved*, 69

Although it is common practice to discuss Faulkner in terms of Bergson, and Morrison in terms of Faulkner, it is rare that Bergson and Morrison actually come into conversation with one another in critical discourse. I think this represents a missed opportunity, as the two have much to offer to one another in terms of thinking about how time is experienced and providing ways of articulating this experience. Impressively—but perhaps unsurprisingly, given the breadth of her reading—Morrison had some degree of familiarity with Bergson’s work. Quoting from Bergson’s *Creative Evolution* (1907), she writes in one essay that “we see no reason not to accept Henri Bergson’s image of ‘a past which gnaws into the future and which swells as it advances.’”¹⁰² The conception of time which Bergson promotes, as fluid and multiplicitous, is a conception which both Faulkner and Morrison are in agreement with. However, the industrial and linear anxieties which permeate *As I Lay Dying* never allow its characters to be free in time. Morrison, drawing upon her understanding of history, her sensitivity to human tragedy, and her commitment to non-Western perspectives, is able to move beyond these anxieties. The movement from Faulkner to Morrison, then, is an actualization of Bergsonian time.

The fact that Faulkner’s time leaves us with little hope for a redemptive future does not necessarily represent an artistic failure on his end, only a failure to square his writing with his own personal beliefs. *As I Lay Dying* presents a perfectly legitimate depiction of the poor, Southern subject living in the closed system of industrial capitalism. Faulkner can diagnose the problem of a homogenized time, and he can show its symptoms, but he does not offer any remedies for it. His characters are haunted by linearity; they are haunted by time’s

¹⁰² Morrison, *The Source of Self-Regard*, 114

refusal to allow them to make sense of the unavoidable repetitions they face. They look for a way out by moving forwards, but they don't realize, as Sethe does, that the way out is actually *inwards*. The ghost of Addie is never exorcised by the Bundrens. The ghost of Beloved, on the other hand, is. And so *Beloved* ravel us out into a more liberated, more personal, and altogether more contented time.

Coda: Periodicity, the Postmodern, and the Genealogy of Ideas

[N]ot only is history not dead, but... it is about to take its first unfettered breath.

—Toni Morrison¹⁰³

HAMM: What time is it?

CLOV: The same as usual.

—Samuel Beckett, *Endgame*¹⁰⁴

In a 1996 essay entitled “The Future of Time: Literature and Diminished Expectations” (the same essay in which she quotes Bergson), Morrison describes the obsession with the past and the lack of imaginative hope for the future that can be said to characterize the postmodern era. “Our contemporary prophecies look back,” she writes, “behind themselves, post, after, what has gone on before”¹⁰⁵—not unlike Sartre’s description of Faulkner’s characters as facing backwards as a car carries them along.¹⁰⁶ She discusses that many contemporary writers, in defiance of this popular cynicism, “disagree with prevailing notions of futurelessness,”¹⁰⁷ insisting on the possibility of a redemptive future and the beginning of a new history. Interestingly, the futures that these writers imagine have their origins in the past, with Morrison citing examples of literary time travel, re-livings and re-imaginings of history, and ways of framing a novel so that the reader experiences things they already know as though they were brand new to them. “What is infinite, it appears,”

¹⁰³ Morrison, *The Source of Self-Regard*, 114

¹⁰⁴ Samuel Beckett, *Endgame* (New York: Grove Press, 1958), 13

¹⁰⁵ Morrison, *The Source of Self-Regard*, 114

¹⁰⁶ Sartre, 115

¹⁰⁷ Morrison, *The Source of Self-Regard*, 126

Morrison writes, “what is always imaginable, always subject to analysis, adventure, and creation is past time.”¹⁰⁸

Perhaps there is some truth to this idea of the endless viability of the past, a past so open to interpretation that it in fact opens up a new history, or even a new future. Often times, when we look at past events in light of present insight (one might call this process historicizing, or we might call it rememory), we are able to see things in those events that would have been invisible to the people living in that historical moment. Morrison identifies one powerful example of this, not in the same essay, but in an interview with Paul Gilroy. I will quote the passage at length, because it is so crucial:

[Gilroy writing] Morrison sees the intensity of the slave experience as something that marks out blacks as the first truly modern people, handling in the nineteenth century dilemmas and difficulties which became the substance of everyday life in our own time.

[Morrison speaking] ‘...The so-called modernist writers of the nineteenth century registered the impact of industrialization in literature—the great transformation from the old world to the new. Africa was feeling the same things. Can you imagine what it would have been like if they had left that continent untampered with? It’s not simply that human life originated in Africa in anthropological terms, but that modern life begins with slavery... From a woman’s point of view, in terms of confronting the problems of where the world is now, black women had to deal with the “post-modern” problems in the nineteenth century and earlier... Certain kinds of dissolution, the loss of and need to reconstruct certain kinds of stability.’¹⁰⁹

There are some very important ideas at work here. Certainly, black women living in the nineteenth century would not have considered the condition they lived in to be “post-modern.” The loss of authentic identity, property, time, home, and voice which would come to characterize the postmodern condition could not have been known to these women

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 114

¹⁰⁹ Paul Gilroy, *Small Acts: Thoughts on the politics of black cultures* (Serpent’s Tail, 1993), 178

in those terms. The idea of the postmodern only acquires meaning after the development, passage, and subsequent recognition of the so-called modern era. And yet, when we look back into the past, we recognize decidedly contemporary issues in a decidedly non-contemporary time period. What makes this act of radical hindsight possible? Can we interpret the present backwards, and the past forwards?

This practice of what might be called retrograde genealogy might make more sense if we look at another example. In a very short but trenchant essay called “Kafka and His Precursors,” Jorge Louis Borges sets out to identify examples in the history of literature of Kafkaesque stories that may have inspired the writings of Franz Kafka. What Borges finds, to his own surprise, is that the literary “precursors” he identifies, although all of them resemble Kafka in some way, do not at all resemble one another. He realizes that these texts only appear to him as “precursors” because his awareness of Kafka’s style retroactively enables him to find this style in writings that predate Kafka: “In each of these texts we find Kafka’s idiosyncrasy to a greater or lesser degree, but if Kafka had never written a line, we would not perceive this quality; in other words, it would not exist.” So, Borges concludes, “The fact is that every writer *creates* his own precursors. His work modifies our conception of the past, as it will modify the future.”¹¹⁰ In a very literal sense, what we do in the present not only affects the future, but also has the power to change the past. An anachronism like the identification of the postmodern in the nineteenth century is the result of this backwards genealogy, wherein our present knowledge enables us to reimagine the past as a site of infinite interpretive possibilities.

¹¹⁰ Jorge Louis Borges, “Kafka and His Precursors,” in *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings* (New Directions, 1962), 201

The retrospective understanding of history employed by Morrison and Borges ties in with several of this essay's key ideas: the failure of linear modes of thought to accurately capture experience, the inevitability and potential usefulness of repetition, and the tendency for time to unfold without distinction (à la Bergson), erasing its own internal boundaries so that the whole of time is contained in any given moment. If we return to James A. Snead, we can see that he has recognized the same phenomenon as Morrison regarding slavery and the postmodern. He claims that European culture prioritizes growth and progress, trying not to draw attention to its own repeating cycles, and so can always be said to be "*headed there*," towards some *telos*, which is that of progress. African culture, on the other hand, embraces cyclicity, embraces repetition, and is "immediate" in the sense that it is not wedded to the idea of linear progression. In its immediacy, African culture is "*always already there*," or "*already there before*."¹¹¹ Before the Western canon of ideas can recognize (and thus legitimize) the conditions of modernity or postmodernity, the African slave subject has already endured these conditions.

Perhaps the resolution we ultimately find in *Beloved*—a glimmer of hope that we might still be able to live with the past, no matter how paralyzing it may be—is attainable only because slaves, unlike the later Modernists with their anxieties about time, had no choice but to learn how to coexist with modernity, or die trying. And if postmodernism can be thought of as "incredulity towards metanarratives," as Jean-François Lyotard proposed,¹¹² who would have more ample reason or urgency to be incredulous towards the metanarratives of progress, history, and representation than slaves and their descendants?

¹¹¹ Snead, "Repetition as a Figure of Black Culture," 63-4

¹¹² Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiv

This retroactive approach to history seems to be incompatible with a linear, periodicized model of history. Thinking of history in terms of periods is undeniably useful for identification—is it useful to be able to say “the Modernist era” or “the Romantic era” and have some reasonable hope that you have communicated a certain idea successfully to someone else—but dividing history up into periods is very much the same as dividing the day up into minutes. As we have seen with Bergson, this kind of division ultimately ignores what history *really* looks and feels like. In the end, we can say about periodicity the same thing William James says about logic: “It has an imperishable use in human life, but that use is not to make us theoretically acquainted with the essential nature of reality.”¹¹³

History, in the end, cannot do our explaining for us. A story succeeds not in the perfect ordering of its plot events, nor in the inherence of its objective truth. *A story succeeds in the telling.* What inspires us to retell a story we have heard is that we find something in it that is capable of transcending the moment in which it was told; we find that the story has something to offer to future generations. We may even see a meaning in the story that we did not (or could not) see before, but once we are able to see it, we can also see that that meaning was always there, waiting to be discovered. And if we are not overly reliant on schemas of standardization, if we are attentive to the ebb and flow of our own experiences, if we can tune our ears to the echoes of the past—then we may just hear the music of the future.

¹¹³ William James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, 212

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