

The Poltergeist
in
William Faulkner's
Light in August

John P. Anderson

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To Cameron, my inspiration

To Jennifer, for her sympathetic support and psychological expertise.

To Whitey, may he clear his cellar.

Listen to Faulkner Scripture

Say dont didn't
Didn't dont who.
Want dat yaller gal's
Pudden don't hide.

[See interpretation on page 126]

Protocol and Debts

The page numbers to Faulkner's novel are from the Random House hardback version. I sometimes abbreviate the title as LIA and the author as WF. My editorial comments are within [square brackets like this].

I used *Reading Faulkner Light in August* by Hugh Ruppersburg in interpreting portions of the novel. Fadiman's *Faulkner's Light in August A Description and Interpretation of the Revisions* was helpful for overall patterns. For Keat's poem *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, Scott's *The Sculpted Word* was my source.

The concepts of Henri Bergson are important in the discovery of the poltergeist in this novel. The quotes from Bergson's several books call for the use of some abbreviations:

<i>Creative Evolution</i> (Modern Library)	CE
<i>Matter and Memory</i> (George Allen)	MM
<i>Creative Mind</i> (Philosophical Library)	CM
<i>Time and Free Will</i> (Dover)	TFW

Faulkner's comments to students at the University of Virginia are collected in *Faulkner at the University* Gwynn and Blotner editors. It is abbreviated as FU.

THE POLTERGEIST
in
WILLIAM FAULKNER'S
LIGHT IN AUGUST

Introduction

A poltergeist [in German a “noise spirit”] is a form of ghost that makes noises and sets fires, particularly to homes. A young and disturbed girl is usually involved.

This novel contains tracks of a disturbance in Faulkner's creative imagination. That disturbance was caused by the infant death of his first child, a daughter named Alabama. The memory of Alabama is Faulkner's poltergeist. Her memory burned his soul and drowned out the voice of his creative imagination for the better part of a year during his most productive period.

By writing this novel, Faulkner tried to deal with the short circuit in the life current of his first child. In his attempt, he grounded some of his own poltergeist in the cellar of this novel. The poltergeist in the cellar produces a haunting novel centered around a young girl who is very pregnant and searching for the father of her child. She finds him at the site of a home fire.

Death of Alabama Faulkner

William Faulkner's first child named Alabama lived only nine days. Born on January 11, 1931, she died on

January 20th. The infant's mother Estelle Faulkner did not nurse the baby. Indeed, she never even saw the baby much less held her.

Estelle had been married before. In that unhappy marriage as Mrs. Franklin, she bore two children and several miscarriages and always had trouble in delivery. Even though she lived overseas in servanted luxury, she became very unhappy in her first marriage. In her unhappiness, Estelle reportedly used heavy drugs and alcohol regularly. Her use decisions were not free ones.

The first child of Estelle and William Faulkner, Alabama was born two months prematurely and damaged. The birthing process was artificially speeded up, apparently by an intrauterine supply of alcohol and Seconal. Alabama had the symptoms of alcohol infant syndrome.

Alabama was not offered mother's milk, and apparently she could not digest formula milk, which was given to her by an impersonal nurse. Not being able to digest, Alabama must have vomited all the time. Mother's milk is the easiest substance for a premature baby to digest. But mother Estelle was "too ill" to nurse and "too ill" even to see the baby. Too much alcohol apparently precludes the release of milk from the mammary glands.

Born on a Monday, Alabama became weak "at the end of the week" [Saturday, January 16, 1931] and died four days later on January 20. WF recorded the death in the family bible as January 16, the day the slide began.

WF had traveled to Memphis for an incubator, but he arrived back home too late. The light and warmth that might have saved Alabama arrived too late to stop her slide into

darkness. Her death left WF with Estelle and the two children from her first marriage.

Alabama died without ever experiencing the warmth of mother or even an incubator, having only known the white blur of a hired nurse. Her short life was entirely on the instinctive level and full of pain.

Alabama's life unfolded and closed too fast, gestated for just seven months and open for just nine days. She was born too soon and died too soon. What she missed in this speeded-up process is what makes human life worth living, the exercise of free choice in the creation of individuality. Those characters in this novel whose lives are longer but equally predetermined also miss the best life has to offer. They bear the curse of Alabama.

Alabama died at home. The Faulkner home, Rowan Oak, was even before his purchase famous in Mississippi as a haunted house featuring disembodied voices and unexplained piano music. Faulkner picked the name Rowan Oak from Frazer's description in *The Golden Bough* of the Scottish practice of using rowan tree branches to keep witches out and from stealing cow's milk. One of his famous ghost stories for children is about a dead daughter who haunts the house. Faulkner's writing room at Rowan Oak, where presumably he wrote this novel, was known as the 13 Ghosts of Alabama.

The death of Alabama pulled the plug on WF's writing for seven months. He started a few short stories but nothing substantial. By contrast, during the preceding period 1927 through 1930 he had written novels continuously—*Flags in the Dust*, *The Sound and the Fury*,

Sartoris [rewrite of *Flags*], *As I Lay Dying*, and *Sanctuary*—as well as several short stories.

Light in August was the first novel Faulkner started after Alabama's death. Even though it was his seventh novel, it didn't come easily. He rewrote, rearranged and reworked it considerably. Even the main character changed. He didn't start to write another novel until after the birth of their second child more than two years later on June 24, 1933.

As Estelle carried Alabama for seven months, WF carried the fetal makings of this novel for exactly seven months. He started it on Monday, August 17, 1931, having incubated the experience seven months to the day after the beginning of Alabama's slide to death and the date of death in the family bible [January 16]. He wrote that date August 17, 1931 on the first page of his manuscript, to be there as a reminder each time he took it up. That date is in the present time frame in the novel.

The title of this novel became *Light in August*. One meaning of the title is as part of the phrase "heavy in June light in August," a southern country phrase describing a pregnant woman's heavy condition followed by her giving birth and becoming lighter. Faulkner hoped that giving birth to this novel would lighten his load. The more general point of the country expression is that things are bound to change through time, what Faulkner hoped would happen to him.

Given this background, it is no accident that the general subject of this novel is the freedom of the present from the past. Faulkner was trying to free up from the Alabama poltergeist so he could write and get on with life.

This novel opens with a pregnant Lena Grove coming **from Alabama**. She is carrying in her uterus a living connection to the past. **Nine days** after arriving at her Mississippi destination, she gives birth prematurely near the end of her **seventh month**. The premature delivery is due to the irresponsibility of one of the parents, this time the father. His irresponsibility in paternity led to Lena's stress of travelling for four weeks to find him. These exact connections in the novel to WF's own experience can not be accidental.

The novel ends with a restorer of furniture and his wife in their bedroom. They are restoring the sacrament of their marriage after he has been gone on a trip. He recounts the history of his trip, including riding with Lena, her child and her man. The restorer and his wife are restored in their bedroom as Faulkner hoped he would be in his soul.

What Was That All About?

So William Faulkner was disturbed when he wrote this novel. And this novel is disturbed and disturbing at the same time. A typical reaction to a first reading is consternation—what was that all about?

Many readers are haunted by the first scene, a very pregnant Lena Grove walking from Alabama to Mississippi pursuing the father of her child and a nest. While the rest of the book is forgotten, this scene is remembered by many readers for years and years. Likewise, many readers feel an uncanny strangeness lurking beneath the surface of the novel as a whole.

On the other hand, a master craftsman like Stephen King rates LIA as his favorite WF novel. He is particularly in tune with the issue of the moral innocence of Joe Christmas, the orphan turned rapist and murderer.

The poltergeist in the cellar of this novel produces all of these reader results.

The Poltergeist in the Cellar

Unlike *The Sound and the Fury*, the text or the upstairs of this novel is at least accessible. The reader can easily tell what is going on, at least upstairs. The actions of the individual characters make sense in human terms.

What is confusing is the particular combination of actions and characters. Why would Faulkner put these particular plot strands together? The novel seems to be an unstructured jumble without an overall unifying matrix. It is composed of what seems to be too many plot strands with too little interconnection.

But when you feel the poltergeist in the cellar of this novel, it all comes together and it all makes sense. The noise of the plot strands comes together as one deep mysterious sound from the cellar.

The poltergeist is so carefully and artfully blended into the shadows of the novel that you can't see it directly. It can be seen in its true form only deep in the cellar. When it appears upstairs, the poltergeist is in disguise. Upstairs you can feel it or hear it but not see it. This is what makes the novel uncanny and haunting.

If the novel is successful for you, you will experience its life force—you will intuit the poltergeist in the cellar's shadows. Then in that mystery of art, you will merge with it, merge with the spirit of the novel. This experience will leave you not covered by cobwebs but slightly altered in the direction of greater openness. This is because a part of your vain ego will have been blown off. That's right, you feel more art with less ego.

So now let's go down the stairs for a

Quick Look at the Poltergeist!

The inner force field of this novel's poltergeist is the birth and death of Alabama Faulkner. The outer shroud of the poltergeist is cut from the patterns of the philosopher Henri Bergson, particularly as to the relationship of the present to the past. This outer shroud hides the intensely personal inner power source, whose direct exposure would limit the novel. Faulkner uses the Bergson shroud in order to generalize and transcend his own personal experience, to connect with more readers.

Bergson's main concept was the creative life current and its many short circuits, a natural wardrobe for the life and death of Alabama. Bergson's basic idea is that all reality, natural and human, is the product of a rocket-like ascending life current characterized by creativity and change. This life current is opposed by a built-in tendency to fall back or inward into predetermined inertia or repetition, such as characterizes matter. The death current is an inherent tendency of the life current. With apologies for its operatic

quality, I call these opposing but integrated forces the life current and the death current. The poltergeist in this novel carries both forces; it is both alive and dead.

Those in the life current are free in the present while those in the death current are controlled by the past. In order to achieve complete free will and individuality, it is necessary to achieve the right relationship to the past. It has to be a source of options rather than a restriction on choices. This is why the relationship of the present to the past has place of privilege in Faulkner's LIA.

Not surprisingly, the creative artist is a featured commodity in this theory of life as creative freedom. The artist taps deeply and often into the creative life current. At the other end of the spectrum, animals or humans acting only on predetermined and automatic instinct register the death current. They are bound by the counter tendency of inertia and repetition. In these death current cases all reaction is automatic and preprogrammed so that nothing new is produced. Death current victims are prisoners of the past when the automatic responses were created.

In our familiar every day human experience, the life current manifests as free will and individuality and the death current as instinctive and other forms of predetermined behavior, all of which are enemies of individuality. These differences are the foundation for the characterization in LIA. WF builds the characters along the lines of this contrast between those free in the present and prisoners of the past, between allies of freedom and enemies of individuality.

Summary of the Novel

The main theme in LIA is an elaboration of the theme pursued in WF's earlier novel *The Sound and the Fury*—the enemies of human individuality and realization. In LIA Faulkner sought greater depth on this issue through excavation of the more profound theme of the effect of the past on the human present.

This novel's territory is the rift valley between free will and predetermined behavior. The adventure in the territory is the pursuit of individualism. The impersonal and inhuman forces in the territory are hostile to freedom.

The mood of this novel is psychological dislocation, no doubt the mood of the author. The Civil War and its devastating effect on the Old South provide a background of deep disturbance in the cultural psyche. This story registers the effect of post-war carpetbaggers on the Old South in the form of an influx of rootless strangers into Jefferson, Mississippi.

Most of the main characters in this novel are strangers to the land where the action takes place. They have no roots in this soil or heritage. They are not at home there. They live at one time or another in impersonal and rootless shelters—an orphanage, a foster home, a boarding house, a slave cabin and even the back of a truck. The absence of roots and place generates a mood of impersonal transience and dislocation. Like ghosts, these characters are not anchored in time and place to this particular piece of reality.

Since it is hard to begin to talk about this novel without assuming some knowledge of its contents, here is a

summary from *The Oxford Companion to Twentieth-Century Literature in English*:

The central character, Joe Christmas, is the son of Milly Hines and a circus man. Milly's father, Eupheus Hines, murders Milly's lover, believing him to be partly negro, and she dies in childbirth. On Christmas (the origin of Joe's surname) night Hines leaves his hated baby grandson on the steps of an orphanage for white children. At the age of five, Joe is forced to leave the home after witnessing two staff members making love. He then goes to the household of an obsessedly puritanical farmer, McEachern, who beats him. When he is 18, Joe quarrels with McEachern, perhaps killing him. After fifteen years of wandering, he arrives in Jefferson and becomes the lover of a reclusive white woman, Joanna Burden. He also becomes involved with a fellow vagrant, Joe Brown (aka Lucas Burch). Joanna's attempts to convert Joe to religion so enrage him that he cuts her throat and sets fire to her house. Lena Grove arrives in Jefferson in search of Burch by whom she has become pregnant ("Light in August" is a country expression for pregnancy.) She is led to Byron Bunch (due to his name's similarity to Burch) who befriends her. Meanwhile both Burch and Joe Christmas are wanted by the police after the murder of Joanna Burden. Confronted with Lena and the child, Burch flees, while Joe Christmas is caught, and his old grandfather, steadfast in his hatred of him, stirs up a

mob to lynch him. Joe Christmas takes refuge in the house of Hightower, the clergyman, but is shot and castrated by Percy Grimm, a crazed racist. Byron Bunch and Lena stay together and journey on through the Southern countryside.

Now I must say that if I read that as a summary of this novel, I would not read the novel or I would read it for entirely the wrong reasons. Moreover, this summary presents as certainties what in the text are deliberate ambiguities. For example, we will have something to say about who set the fire to the Burden house. But this summary at least helps us begin to talk about the novel. My summary of the novel chapter by chapter begins at page 178.

Names

Here are the names of the main characters:

Lena Grove
Joe Christmas
Reverend Hightower
Joanna Burden
Mr. and Mrs. McEachern
Bobbie Allen
Lucas Burch/Joe Brown
Byron Bunch
Doc and Mrs. Hines
Percy Grimm

You can begin to see meaning in these names: Grove for trees or sanctuary; Christmas for the Christ story; Hightower for the ivory tower that can not be bothered; Burden for a person who takes one on; McEachern for something to do with each, each person; Bunch for togetherness; and Grimm for just that.

This playfully obvious name business is part of Faulkner's charm. WF has a reliable character state that sometimes a name is an indication of what a character will do.

Contrast

Faulkner constructed this novel from multiple contrasts. This architecture stems from the contrast of the underlying life and death currents. By their very nature, contrasts register tension. Through the use of multiple contrasts, Faulkner registered his personal tension in the tension producing architecture of this novel.

The principal contrast is between main characters Lena Grove and Joe Christmas. Lena registers the life current and Christmas the death current. They are exact opposites on the Bergsonian scale of freedom, creativity and individuality. Lena seeks the new while Joe remains mired in the tar pit of his own repetitive instincts. She is personal and he is impersonal. Lena gives birth; Christmas kills.

Lena starts under the control of instinctive sexual behavior but then after giving birth changes to discretionary free will based behavior. She is open to change because her family nurtured her and gave her a basic sense of individual

identity. This change is reflected in her contrasting approaches to sex. With Lucas Burch, her adolescent approach to sex was an instinct driven hot rush. Later with Byron Bunch, her approach to sex is cooler and slower, one based on discretion and free will.

Joe Christmas is an orphan become serial rapist and murderer. Like Alabama, he knew only the nurse, never his mother. Like Alabama during her nine days, he operates only on the predetermined instinctive level. He never knows love and acceptance. Rape is his approach to sex. His early deprivation leaves him under the control of the past. He is not open to new possibilities. He is closed and never matures. In this sense he remains immature, the curse of premature Alabama.

The other characters in the novel are variations on this same theme. WF makes them from various mixes of the life current and the death current. Some of the characters are stuck in ideological versions of the death current. They are prisoners of preconceptions as to reality and consequently are blind as to the uniqueness of individual persons and the possibility of change. At their essence, their preconceptions are anti-humanitarian because impersonal. Their preconceptions can be maintained only by a discriminatory intake. They include the following:

- * for Joanna Burden and the Jefferson community, discrimination based on race;
- * for Christmas' foster father McEachern, discrimination based on religion, Presbyterian predetermined destiny; and

* for Doc Hines, violent misogyny or discrimination based on gender.

The big three—race, religion and gender. Less malicious forms of the death current involve inertia or fear of life:

* for Byron Bunch, the fixed habits of a bachelor that preclude any new choices; and

* for Reverend Hightower, fixation in a vision of the past at the expense of life.

Some of the characters like Christmas and Burch/Brown start in the death current and remain there. Some like Byron Bunch start in weaker forms of the death current and come out totally. Some like Joanna Burden and Hightower start there, start to come out and then fall back in.

In cases of the death current, the past controls the present. The past devours new possibilities in the present. The victim of the past is not able to see the unique or individual in each person or situation because the new is not expected. The present is predetermined, and as a result can only be a rearrangement of parts from the past. So for these characters the past is repeated in one way or another, exactly the same way or with the same parts just rearranged. For Doc Hines, every woman is just like the fallen Eve. For the white members of Jefferson, every Negro is worthless. For the Presbyterians, every person who doesn't work hard and advance materially is destined for Hell.

Like paints for the artist, WF contrasts the characters in the novel in several dimensions stemming from

Bergsonian doctrine. For example, WF uses the following contrasts:

Instinctive Christmas	creative Lena
Impulsive Christmas	dreamer Hightower
Fertile Lena	barren Burden
Responsible Bunch	irresponsible Burch
Inactive Hightower	active Bunch
Patient Lena	impatient Burch

Built on contrast, the tension of this novel is never resolved. The ending gives only limited closure. Lena and Byron are on the move and without a home. The ending is open as to what happens to several of the main characters. This open ending does homage to the free will and creativity associated with the life current.

Ambiguities

The many contrasts in the novel churn in a sea of ambiguity. The ambiguity surrounds important events in the action. For example, the text is ambiguous about the following matters:

- * Is Joanna Burden pregnant and does she have a miscarriage when Christmas beats her?
- * Who sets fire to Joanna's house, Christmas or Burch/Brown?
- * Does Christmas really have Negro blood?
- * Does Christmas kill McEachern?

- * Why does Hines abduct the orphan?
- * How does Mrs. Hightower die, by murder, accident or suicide?

These ambiguities appear to be intentional.

In addition to ambiguities, the novel is also full of inconsistencies. The ages and time lines don't always connect. Joe Christmas' age in the present time frame is confused. Even the year of the present time frame is confused, August of 1931 or 1932. Unlike the ambiguities, I think the inconsistencies are the unintentional products of a disturbed author.

In any event, these ambiguities and inconsistencies give the novel a fuzzy condition often found in memories. Whether intentional or not, this is the work of the poltergeist.

Bergson's Theory of Reality

Henri Bergson (1859—1941), a French philosopher, was one of the most widely read thinkers of the early 20th century. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1927. In other words, even though you may not have heard of him, he was and is not chopped liver.

It is necessary to understand Bergson's concepts in some depth in order to understand this novel. The shroud of the poltergeist has many layers. But never forget that the many layers are there to hide the ghost of Alabama Faulkner. The innermost layer of the shroud closest to the ghost is spun from the inextricable tangle of the death current and the life current.

In the beginning for Bergson was a creative act. Not a big bang or a creator god on high but a creative and free act. The creative power of that original act still exists and can be tapped into. But the tap is not open to all, only to persons who are living free of the past. The original creative act continues to be present all around us, as a self-regenerating force field. I call the force field the life current.

The life current is not all-powerful. It contains its own opposite, its own impurity or ambiguity—the death current. Instead of creative freedom, the death current is characterized by repetition, predetermination and inertia. It produces matter out of the spirit of the life current. Compared to the uplifting creative life current, the death current is a falling away or inward.

The death current is not a separate force but an integral part of the life current. The death current comes out of the life current, like magma out of lava or menses out of the hospitable lining of the uterus. Humans experience both, born into life and also born into death. Alabama experienced both currents right away, in the blood stream of her mother.

In humans the life current carries the person toward individuality by providing the opportunity for endless self-creation through free decisions. It produces spirit and unpredictability. The death current carries the person toward predetermined behavior and thus repetitive limitation. In humans, its products include the instincts and anti-humanitarian ideologies. The life current is personal and the death current impersonal.

The original creative impulse of the life current has played out in our natural world into the sense potential of

plants, the instinct of animals and the mental capacities of mankind. Within mankind, mental capacities exist on several levels: slow flux instinctive powers producing automatic responses; faster flux objective intellect such as science aimed at understanding and thereby controlling matter through tools; and the fastest flux form that Bergson calls intuition. With the fastest flux, intuition can take in a lot in a short amount of time.

Intuition is a poor name at least in English for Bergson's concept of the highest mental capacity. This kind of understanding doesn't come easily. It only comes after the often-considerable preparation necessary to perceive something directly. Let's call it direct access since it works from within. Direct access is integral experience, analysis illumined by intuition. Integral in integral experience means seeing the parts and whole in relation to each other.

Seeing within, direct access by its very nature sees what is unique or absolute [as opposed to relative]. By contrast, the objective scientific method of working from without compares an object with other known objects. This method is impersonal and must be relative because of its approach by comparison. It can never, per Bergson, understand what is unique.

I am going to dwell on these two methods of knowledge, which I call the direct access and the relative, because the all-important opening of the novel features them as gateways to Faulkner's ultimate values.

In normal human experience, direct access is experienced in various degrees. Not everyone gets all the channels. Two of the most common examples of direct

access are the understanding of a mother for her child and of a woman for her long-term mate. She understands them from within as a whole. She understands what makes them unique and different from others. Indeed, the direct access privilege may be gendered. In this novel, women are more likely to have it than men.

While science can with the relative method understand matter separated in space, direct access is the only way to understand human consciousness since it is a continuous process like motion. Unlike scientific investigation of static properties, direct access is process oriented in that it can cover a moving system like consciousness or life. By contrast, the scientific approach treats motion as a series of separate points [remember Zeno]. For this reason direct access is the better tool to use to look within yourself, in your own soul whose operation is characterized by a form of process. That process is movement and change within continuousness.

Bergson views direct access as the combination of automatic instinct, scientific intellect and a new ingredient empathy. Direct access has the speed of instinct, the power of intellect and the penetrating ability of empathy. But unlike instinct that is concerned with self-preservation, direct access has no ulterior motives. This it shares with humility or detachment. Self must be entirely put aside in order to see within someone else. Empathy and sympathy are necessary to turn it on. In this sense it is personal. In this critical respect it differs from the impersonal relative method.

Bergson gives as his best example of direct access the case of aesthetic experience, when after study of an art object