

**Beyond Alterity: Narrative Ethics in Faulkner and Agee**

by

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## Abstract

This thesis uses the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas to examine the narrative structures of two literary works: William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* and James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Both texts feature dense interaction with the notion of the “poor Southern white”; this is of particular interest to me because of the American literary canon's habitual ontological categorization of this figure as lazy and shiftless; even the term “poor white” linguistically traps these people as 1. poor and 2. white. My aim is to explore the ways in which these texts' narrative ethics free the characters ethically damaged by the “poor white” cognitive category and allow them to transcend caricature into humanity.

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### List of Abbreviations

*LUNPFM* Agee, James, and Walker Evans. 1939. *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1960. Print.

*AILD* Faulkner, William. *As I Lay Dying*. 1930. New York: Vintage International, 1990. Print.

*OB* Levinas, Emmanuel. *Otherwise than Being; or, Beyond Essence*. Trans. Alphonso Lingis. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981.

*TI* Levinas, Emmanuel. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Trans. Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 1969.

*Riches is nothing in the face of the Lord, for He can see into the heart.*

- Cora Tull

### **The “Poor White” Problematic**

In Genesis 22, God asks Abraham “Where are you?” In response, Abraham says “*Hineni*,” or “here I am.” To say “here I am” goes beyond the meaning of its words: by saying *hineni*, Abraham makes himself available to God, displaying an openness in response to a call. Abraham does not tell God “here I am” to signify his placement in time and space; rather, *hineni* is a way to witness and respond to the infinite Other. *Hineni* is a response to the act of being commanded. Abraham's only experience of the commander is the act of being commanded, and that command is such that its audience must answer its call. In Emmanuel Levinas's ethics, the human face-to-face encounter is analogous to the encounter between God and Abraham; the Other's presence commands me to respect the infinite alterity within him or her, as Abraham respects God's infinite alterity. For Levinas, to be a human is to say *hineni* in response to the Other's presence and accept the infinite responsibility for the Other that implies: the human is being-for-the-other (*l'être-pour-l'autre*). Levinas's thought is radical in that it is this relation, the infinite obligation and responsibility in which the Other's presence puts me, that lies at the heart of philosophy. Pre-rational ethics, rather than ontology, is the first philosophy, reversing two thousand years of logocentric discourse.

Levinasian ethics is a burgeoning subfield in literature studies.<sup>1</sup> The great strength of

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<sup>1</sup>Some examples of Levinasian readings of literature include Clark Davis, *Hawthorne's Shyness: Ethics, Politics, and the Question of Engagement* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2005), *Levinas and Nineteenth Century Literature*, eds. Don Wehrs and David Haney (Newark, U of Delaware P, 2009) and Jill Robbins, *Altered Reading: Levinas and*

using Levinasian ethics to read literature is the abandonment of the conventionality that a person can be completely known or mapped. Much contemporary literary theory accepts that texts and the humans they represent exist within contexts that are discourse-based and culturally constructed; we are all familiar with the difference-based tropes of race, class, and gender that drive much contemporary literary criticism. Levinasian ethics, in contrast, while it is situated in the post-structuralist intellectual context, looks beyond discourse and power to the irreducible ethical relationship between humans.

To my knowledge, no work has been done in Levinasian readings of Southern literature. This comes as a great surprise to me because Southern literature, by its very name, engages in communication and conflict with the rest of America and the world: it is *Southern* literature, intrinsically Othered, as opposed to *American* literature. My thesis will explore the ways that Southern Modernism, particularly William Faulkner and James Agee, engages with one of the South's most enduring tropes: the shiftless, lazy "poor white."<sup>2</sup> This figure is of particular interest to me because of its status as a cognitive category into which not only socioeconomically disadvantaged whites are corralled, but also, in modern American culture, most white Southerners. Some questions I would like to answer in my thesis include: where are the Southern Modernists situated in the Southern representational spectrum? In what ways do Faulkner's and Agee's texts use epistemological problematics to evince an aesthetics of non-ontological representation? Finally, what responsibilities are placed on the world by these texts and on these texts by the world?

While asking these questions is not a new idea, the manner in which I will explore them

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*Literature* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> By "poor white," I am referring to the Southern "poor white"; all instances of the term throughout the paper are meant with this regional distinction in mind.



will be original; while critics have analyzed the origins of the represented South, they do so through the philosophical-metaphysical lens of ontology as first philosophy, arguing in terms of discourse, sign, and capital.<sup>3</sup> The originality of my examination of the Southern aesthetic lies in my reading's reliance on the idea that ethical obligation exists before rationality and that a text enacts an ethical encounter with its reader in much the same way that the Other enacts an ethical encounter in her observer: to quote Adam Zachary Newton, “[c]utting athwart the mediatory role of reason, narrative situations create an immediacy and force, framing relations of provocation, call, and response that bind narrator and listener, author and character, or reader and text” (13). My thesis, then, contributes to the Southern literary field by examining literature in a manner that traffics in interactive rather than legislative orders; rather than presuming to know what the South “is” or “is not,” I am interested in examining the ways that Faulkner and Agee textually represent the Southern “poor white” to be encountered by the reader. By “ways that Faulkner and Agee textually represent,” I mean the ways that their narrative structures, particularly their epistemologically problematic breaks and cracks in narrative and representation, function as sites of ethical encounter and response.

I would like to to briefly address the reasons why I think this project is necessary. My greatest interest in my work lies in finding the ways in which characters and cultures overlooked by literary criticism might be usefully habituated within academic discourse. In the time I've spent studying Southern literature, I haven't found very much commentary on “poor whites” that diverges from romanticized primitivism or diagnostic paternalism. Though critical discourse has rightly rehabilitated its previously white, Western attitude towards minority writers and female

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<sup>3</sup> I am thinking especially of the work of Michael Kreyling, Scott Romine, Leigh Anne Duck, and Houston Baker, particularly, for Baker, *Turning South Again: Re-Thinking Modernism/Re-Reading Booker T.* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001).

writers, I agree with Michael Kreyling when he writes that critics of Southern literature “have been more rigorously schooled than others in the orthodox faith that our subject is not invented by our discussions of it but rather is revealed in a constant southern identity” (ix). Though I applaud the work of modern scholars in offering new ways to shift the Southern literary paradigm in areas such as African-American writers, cultural memory, and cultural artificiality, little academic work has been done towards reconfiguring that paradigm's picture of the “poor white.” This reconfiguration is what is necessary about my project. I don't think that the lack of work on “poor whites” is due to some reluctance on academia's part to spend scholarly capital on white people; rather, the lack is due to a dearth of critical tools for exploring phenomenological intersubjectivity.

Having explained why my project is necessary, I will explain my choice of methodology. The way I choose to explore intersubjectivity phenomenologically – that is, to explore questions of empathy and the subject's realization that the object is actually another subject – is through Levinas's ethics. Though Martin Buber and Edmund Husserl were both pioneers in intersubjectivity and phenomenology, Levinas's insistence on ethics as first philosophy and his firm stance against totality make him suitable to bring the often inhuman “poor white” into the reader's range of intersubjectivity. I want to show how Faulkner and Agee subtly manipulate their narratives to create “poor whites” whose portrayals forbid totalization. This project is, ultimately, an offering of a the “poor white” that traffics in empathy instead of sympathy or paternalism. As a brief example, let us consider the quote that opens this project: Cora Tull's declaration that “Riches is nothing in the face of the Lord, for He can see into the heart.” The ability to “see into the heart,” Levinas argues, is based in the subject's realization of the object's

subjectivity and status as a fellow human. God does not recognize riches as a marker of worth; rather, he looks into the heart. This operation – seeing past the culturally material into the human – is God's way of “reading” a person. Cora, of course, does not end up looking beyond culture, but Levinas, I argue, allows us to read characters as human without traditional literary criticism's reliance on difference.

Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* and Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* feature dense interaction with the notion of the “poor Southern white”; this is of particular interest to me because of the American literary canon's habitual ontological categorization of this figure as lazy and shiftless; even the term “poor white” linguistically traps these people as 1. poor and 2. white. My aim is to explore the ways in which these texts' narrative ethics free the characters ethically damaged by the “poor white” cognitive category and allow them to transcend caricature into humanity.

My first section constructs the critical apparatus for the thesis in a much more detailed way than it has already been done so in this introduction. I rely on a constellation of philosophical and critical texts that I see complimenting and elucidating Levinas in addition to Levinas's writings to establish my focus. I establish ethics-as-criticism within the post-structuralist, post-modern literary critical field before contextualizing my own critical approach, particularly how I see its engagement with the idea of the “poor white,” within the ethical-critical field.

To discuss the “poor white,” I will first need to give some account of her literary and cultural origins. In this matter, my second section relies on scholarly discussions of the topic such as Sylvia Jenkins Cook's *From Tobacco Road to Route 66: The Southern Poor White in*

*Fiction* to set the literary/cultural/historical stage for my discussion of Faulkner and Agee in both their regional and literary contexts. I will weave analyses of narrative structures *qua* ethical structures throughout my discussion of “poor white” fiction to offer a contrast to the narrative structures of Faulkner and Agee. Of particular interest to me is the “poor white” in the sentimental novel. I am interested in the ways that the sentimental novel visits ethical violence on the “poor white” in the course of its moral mission since a common claim in American anti-slavery sentimental fiction is that the “poor white” owes her existence to slavery.

My final sections briefly place *As I Lay Dying* and *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* in the cultural context explicated in the previous section before exploring what Newton calls the “narrative ethics” of each work. Each text, in its aesthetics of fragmentation and problematic epistemology, echoes what Levinas finds valuable in Proust's work: their “most profound lesson, if poetry can contain lessons, consists in situating reality in a relation with something which for ever remains other, with the Other as absence and mystery” (“The Other in Proust” 165). While I will focus on both texts' narrative structures, my methods for examining them will vary slightly to accommodate for their differences. My interests in *As I Lay Dying* lie in the examining the character Dewey Dell as subject *and* object since the text places her in both positions. Something I think will be a rich vein to mine is the idea of sensibility, or expression of ethical feeling beyond rationality. For instance, though the novel's “poor white” characters typically only speak in sparse, declarative sentences, the reader finds that their thoughts are rich and colorful in their affectedness and complexity. My argument is that though these thoughts being represented by text incline the reader to believe that they are rationally-based cognitive function, the syntactic and orthographic havoc wreaked upon them by the novel's fragmentary poetics renders them

arguably pre-rational and thus, Levinasianally considered, indicative of humanity. Additionally, I will inspect these “fragmentary poetics” themselves as ethically charged calls to the reader to respond to the text and the characters contained in it.

Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* differs from Faulkner's work in not only narrative technique but also in its inclusion of uncaptioned photographs by Walker Evans. My methodology will remain firmly grounded in Levinas's thought, but here I will read Barthes' *Camera Lucida* in a Levinasian light to emphasize its interests in intersubjectivity and epiphany. With this text in consideration, I argue for Evans' photographs, with their blank, quietly aching subjects, functioning as ethical calls to which response cannot be denied. Aside from the book's photography, its narrative structure is arguably even more fragmented than that of *As I Lay Dying*: to be brief, it lists both Christ and Freud in a *dramatis personae* and alternates wildly between mundane reportage and near-rhapsodic linguistic flights that observe their objects even in their refusal to touch them.

From this analysis, I hope to draw a conclusion about the ways in which Southern Modernism, with its tortured relationship with the concept of “the known” and how “the known” relates to words, engages not only with one of Southern literature's most enduring tropes, but also with a revolutionary literary critical technique.

### **Emmanuel Levinas and Literary Criticism**

To begin constructing the means by which I will be analyzing Faulkner and Agee in literary and critical context with previous works featuring “poor whites,” I will briefly explain the ethical philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, a philosophy still largely unheard-of in Anglophone literary criticism.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> For intensive introductions to and explications of Levinas' philosophy, I have found *The Cambridge Companion to*

The key feature of Levinas's philosophy is that it argues for ethics' place as first philosophy, in contradiction to, especially, Martin Heidegger's arguments for ontology as first philosophy. He is especially suspicious of the resemblance of Heideggerian Being, which seeks power as a form of mastery and freedom as the assertion of will, to Nazi philosophy: as Levinas writes, "Being's interest takes dramatic form in egoisms struggling with one another, each against all, in the multiplicity of allergic egoisms which are at war with one another and are thus together. War is the deed or the drama of the essence's interest" (*OB* 4). Heideggerian Being, for Levinas, pits "each against all" in a struggle of ego-against-ego that inescapably culminates in war. Ontology as first philosophy, he writes in *Totality and Infinity*, is ultimately "a philosophy of power" (46). Levinas's response to this dangerously dehumanizing and totalizing philosophy is a metaphysics predicated on ethics as first philosophy. In Levinas's ethics, one's world and one's complacent existence within it becomes shattered by the encounter with the Other who "cannot be comprehended, that is, encompassed"; one encounters the Other's face, which is itself the Other's discernible presence, but cannot grasp it, mentally or otherwise (*TI* 194). Because one cannot grasp the Other's face, it is infinitely Other. One cannot in any way come to know the Other through Western philosophy's traditional approach to subjectivity in which one see herself in the Other and can rationally decide that she is human based on her perception of the self-in-Other. In the face of the Other's infinite alterity, one understands that attempts to categorize her fall radically short in their quixotic quest to define the indefinable; she "resists possession, resists my powers" (197). The radical asymmetry between the subject and the Other means "the radical impossibility of seeing oneself from the outside and of speaking in the same sense of oneself and

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Levinas, ed. Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi, *Ethics as First Philosophy: The Significance of Emmanuel Levinas for Philosophy, Literature, and Religion*, ed. Adriaan T. Peperzak, and Simon Critchley's *the Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas* of great use.

of the others, and consequently the impossibility of totalization” (53). The implications for art and representation are obvious, but Levinas provides a method of traversing the distance between subject and Other: discourse.

The means by which I access the Other, in her infinity, is speech: “*discourse* relates with what remains essentially transcendent” (195). For Levinas, the formal structure of language “consists in presenting the transcendent”; language, being a relation between terms, enacts an ethical relationship that “subtends discourse” and “is not a species of consciousness whose ray emanates from the I; it puts the I in question. This putting in question emanates from the other” (195).<sup>5</sup> Language, then, makes me question myself in the face of infinity and “opens the primordial discourse whose first word is obligation” (201). This discourse “obliges the entering into discourse”: when the Other speaks, one necessarily responds in much the same way that Abraham must reply *hineni* to God when asked, “Where are you?” (201). The responsibility to the Other is irrecusable.

Western philosophy's treatment of freedom as the ultimate good is therefore replaced by one's infinite and unavoidable responsibility to the Other in which the Other's discourse puts my conception of myself into question. One of my main claims is that literature can enact an encounter with us in much the same way that a human Other does. A story moves otherwise and beyond rationality to provoke an asymmetrical metaphysics in relationship with its audience that mimics the subject's asymmetry with the Other. Narrative, then, acts pre-logically in its primordial call that inextricably binds reader and text in responsibility: narrative, for me, is ethical performance. The ethical performances that *As I Lay Dying* and *Let Us Now Praise*

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<sup>5</sup> I should note that the translator of *Totality and Infinity* into English, Alphonso Lingis, writes that “With the author's permission, we are translating '*autrui*' (the personal Other, the you) by 'Other,' and '*autre*' by 'other.’”

*Famous Men*, I argue, enact an ethics of indefinability and of alterity that is infinite, yet, in being read, unavoidable. In embedding ethical content into form, both Faulkner and Agee engage in Modernism's fascination with the relationship between meaning and word.

My analysis of literature stems from this philosophical argument in its interest in art's mission of representation: if representation is analogous to cognitive categorization and therefore totalization, in what ways might art allow for infinity? As Robbins writes, for Levinas, art often effects “a passivity, a disengagement, an evasion of responsibility. Hence for Levinas the task of criticism becomes all-important: it serves to reintegrate the *inhuman* work into the *human* world, to detach it from its irresponsibility” (52). A text that requires the act of criticism or interpretation, then, operates in both the art and human worlds. My answer to the question of infinity in texts proposes viewing epistemological problematics as lacunae in which the reader must construct the textual universe without textual aid; while narrative normally exerts iron control over its characters and their actions, speech, and thoughts, creating a universe even as it reports it, gaps in narrative that create a slippage between what a text says and what a reader understands create a space in which the reader may find the sign of the unrepresentable. An epistemologically problematic text, then, makes the idea of unknowability into an aesthetic element. To begin my analysis, I will address the literary history of the “poor white” and her position in the turn-of-the-century literary racial/ethnic field.

### **The “Poor White” in Context**

The prospect of discussing “the poor white” in literature runs the same risk of thematization that representation does: in identifying a group of people as an object of scholarly inquiry, do I not also categorize them?<sup>6</sup> I would like to make clear that I am studying the

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<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of the challenges involved with arguing against ontology in language that is implicitly ontological,



*phenomenon* of categorization of the “poor white” rather than participating in that categorization itself. This distinction between presuming to study the “poor white” and studying her representation is, I argue, an important distinction between my project and those of the authors I discuss.

The “poor white” is a popular figure in American culture. In Sylvia Jenkins Cook's *From Tobacco Road to Route 66*, she notes that “[t]he southern poor white is one of America's oldest and most enduring folk figures. His image is an elusive one, compounded of popular prejudice . . . but most typically it derives from the alliance of extreme material deprivation with slyness, sloth, absurd folly, and random violence” (ix). W. J. Cash, writing in *The Mind of the South*, describes what he calls the “classical” “poor white” family: “The men might plow a little, hunt a little, fish a little, but mainly passed their time on their backsides in the shade of a tree, communing with their hounds and a jug of what, with a fine feeling for words, had been named 'bust-head’” (25). It is this definition of the “poor white” that I will examine in this paper. In particular, I am concerned with the image of the rural, Southern “poor white” given to folly, violence, and laziness: in other words, given to animalistic behavior that precludes humanity. To usefully contextualize Faulkner and Agee in “poor white” literature, I will examine the standing of the “poor white” in the American sentimental and Naturalist traditions before moving to Southern Modernism.

I will begin with the sentimental novel. Sentimental fiction operates on a system of moral exemplification wherein authorial intention and characters' moral imaginations collude to enact emotional changes in its reader; as Adam Newton explains, it “instruct[s] response by inducing identificatory states of compassion and pity . . . ethics operates in interpolated fashion, bolstering

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see Derrida's essay “Violence and Metaphysics” in *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1980).

the authoritarian character of the novel with deontic and legislative weight” (9). Don Wehrs writes, in reference to the origins of the sentimental novel, that “the novel's generic susceptibility to fostering the internalization of Foucauldian surveillance and to serving as a vehicle of Gramscian hegemony reinforces and is reinforced by the sentimental tradition's naturalization of class and gender condescension” (142). The sentimental novel, then, simultaneously instructs and normalizes its reader's ethical systems. Its operation is fueled by an ethics of exemplarity: by using fictive characters as vehicles of moral education, the sentimental novel often instructs its reader's ethical sensibilities not in the context of lived life, but theoretical, textual knowledge. I am taking care to not confuse a sentimental novel's call to ethical consideration with deontological programming; that's too broad a claim. Rather, my observations of sentimental fiction's treatment of the “poor white” will focus on her forced participation in moral calculations in exemplary texts rather than on the genre as a whole.

To begin, I would like to briefly address the abolitionist sentimental novel's figuration of the “poor white.” It is typical of these novels, however admirable their purpose, to cast the transformation of rural whites to “poor whites” as the inevitable result of slavery. Harriet Beecher Stowe published *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1853 as a guidebook for her novel and an attempt to prove its veracity; concerning “poor whites” in her novel, she writes, “between the free labour of the North and the slave labour of the South, there is nothing for a poor white to do. Without schools or churches, these miserable families grow up heathen on a Christian soil, in idleness, vice, dirt, and discomfort of all sorts” (Stowe 366). The ethical issue at hand is one of disciplinary cross-pollination gone wild: though Stowe might have created her characters as composites of real people, they are still fictive, existing at best as re-creations of her mind's

ideologically mediated perceptions of the “poor whites” she met, read about, or heard of. This prosopopoeia, in Levinasian terms, is a *figuring*; as Jill Robbins writes, for Levinas, “[t]o take on a character (*une figure*) is to risk *becoming* a figure, and to thereby lose what is human, to be turned into a statue, to be turned into stone. To take up a character is said to render one incapable of distinguishing illusion from reality, 'stage' from 'world' (50). In figuring the “poor white,” by categorizing her, then, Stowe turns her into stone, aestheticizing her into a work of art, and rending her humanity in the process. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* instructs and modulates its readers' ethical systems to act not in response to anything resembling humanity; rather, sympathy and ethical action are configured from a position of societal height and are directed towards caricatures. Moreover, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* draws from a racist image-repertoire in its figuration of African American figures, particularly in the cases of Sam and Mammy, and those images, despite the intention of their use, circulate into public consciousness simply by being used. The same process works, I argue, in the case of “poor whites”; in figuring them as the dregs of the slavery machine, Stowe creates and reinforces images of them that are easily cognitively categorizable and resistant to interpretations of them as human.

In William Wells Brown's 1853 novel *Clotel*, the “authoritarian character” *vis-a-vis* “poor whites” resides in the book's moral mission to end slavery. In “Chapter VII. The Poor Whites, South.,” Carlotto, Snyder, and Huckelby, all members of the middle or upper class, discuss poor whites in Sand Hill, Mississippi. Snyder remarks that they are “ignorant as horses,” and Huckelby says that “we who come from more enlightened parts don't know how to put up with 'em down here. I find the people here knows mighty little indeed” (116, 118). The reason for the abjectness of the South's poor whites is, according to Snyder, slavery (117). This judgement is

handed down from characters of superior ethical sensibility to instruct readers in both the societally degressive effects of slavery and the relative depravity of the “poor white.” Meanwhile, the attempt to transcribe Southern dialect – e.g. “Is you gwine to stay here long” and “You are the first of that sort that's bin in these diggins for many a day” – functions, in its semblance to scrupulous reportage, to lend authoritative weight to the novel's representations of its “poor whites.” Here, functioning as integers in a moralistic calculus, the “poor white,” allowed narrative expression only in the minds and mouths of other (socially superior) characters, is confined within the text and is denied full realization. In Levinasian terms, the sentimental novel's “poor white” lacks the ability to engage the reader in a face-to-face encounter due to her confinement within categorization. The representative thread of categorization is longed lived: the presentation of the “poor white” as a product of a vast societal machine extends from Stowe and Brown's sentimental fiction all the way to Erskine Caldwell's Naturalism.

The first edition of Caldwell's *Tobacco Road*, published in 1932 by Scribners, features a cover (Figure 1) that depicts a sunken-cheeked, slump-shouldered man in a battered hat gazing at the viewer from a background consisting of a road running between sickly pine trees and a house with a swaybacked roof; tree stumps dot the ground. This accurately foretells the novel's Naturalist interest in rural degradation: it begins with Lov speaking to his twelve-year-old wife's parents to see if they could convince her to finally sleep with him. His in-laws eventually divest him of the fifty-cent sack of turnips he was carrying back to his wife. The novel is full of such occurrences; in one of its most famous scenes, a comical fistfight between family members over a car ends in their matriarch being run over:

Bessie retreated. Both Ada and Jeeter were fighting her, and she was unable to

strike back. She ran to the automobile and jumped in. Jeeter picked up a stick and hit her with it several times before Ada took it from him and began poking Bessie in the ribs with it . . . Mother Lester, who had watched the fight from the start, ran across the yard to get behind another chinaberry tree where she could see from a better location everything that was happening. She had no more than reached a point midway between two chinaberry trees when the rear end of the automobile struck her, knocking her down and backing over her. (165)

The narrative's scrupulous reportage presents a filmic representation of the event from the position of “ethical insight and epistemological privilege”: we watch the characters move and act from on high without feeling anything beyond spectatorial fascination (Wehrs 142). To do so, I think, verges on the pornographic: unlike Mother Lester, whose proximity to the action she observes results in danger, we observe without fear of reprisal. While sentimental fiction attempts to induce personal identification with the characters, Naturalist fiction presents the characters as pawns in the hands of vast natural or social forces; indeed, the novel ends with an examination of the socioeconomic forces that drive the Lesters and those like them into moral depravity.

While Caldwell is ostensibly well-intentioned towards poor whites in *Tobacco Road*, his use of stereotypical imagery – the novel reads today like a prolonged Larry the Cable Guy joke – leaks out of the text into “the collective hands of a culture's capacity for, and failure of, imagination – its large-scale ethics of representation” (Newton 221). The unquestioned use of the stereotypical poor white figure, despite good intentions, circulates back into reality such that the movie made from the novel is a comedy. We move now from Caldwell's spectatorship to

Faulkner's humanistic multiperspectivity.

### ***As I Lay Dying* and the Ethical Call**

Darl Bundren narrates the first chapter of William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* from the first-person perspective, but in the first paragraph, as he and his brother Jewel walk towards their house from a cotton field, he says that “anyone watching us from the cottonhouse can see Jewel's frayed and broken straw hat a full head above my own” (3). Darl is aware, then, of the potentially infinite spatial perspectives that constitute reality: even though he narrates from his own perspective, he acknowledges the cottonhouse's perspectival validity. The situating of the cottonhouse's perspective in the midst of Darl's points to the novel's similar mishmash of perspective, but the disparate narrators, while they ostensibly narrate the same general event – Addie Bundren's death and her family's journey to Jefferson, Mississippi to bury her – offer diverging accounts. Though André Bleikasten writes that the novel “does not disrupt the basic chronology of events nor does its narrative indulge in digressions,” I must disagree: Darl at times narrates events in the present tense even though he is not present, and characters' sections are occasionally peppered with linguistic and cognitive upsurges that defy easy comprehension (44). The narrative quilt of the novel is not merely Cubistic, which traffics in spatial multiperspectivity, but humanistic, which is inherently cognitively affected: “anyone watching us,” Darl says, can see them, not “anything” (3).

Because simply synthesizing phenomena falls short of *As I Lay Dying*'s narrative's demands, I propose that in *As I Lay Dying*, nontextual, untold, humanistically interpreted narrative spaces constitute an aesthetics of indefinability and allow the “poor white” to infinitely

exceed the thought and ink used to narrate him or her. This portrayal of the “poor white” is observably different from earlier and contemporary portrayals of her in novels such as *Clotel* or *Tobacco Road*, which have narrative structures that I argue are inherently juridical, entrapping their “poor white” characters in totalizing ontological categories. I am not ascribing any sort of intention towards social tolerance or intolerance to any author: indeed, Faulkner said in an interview that “it does sort of amuse me when I hear 'em talking about the sociological picture that I present in something like *As I Lay Dying*”; rather, I am interested in literature's ethical performances, which is, in a Levinasian sense, concussive: they linger as “traumatism of astonishment” (Meriwether and Millgate 220, *II* 73). These concussions swirl out of literature into reality: the use of the “poor white” image-repertoire propels those images from art into consciousness and from consciousness into lived life. I hold that the user of the “poor white” image-repertoire informs the consciousness of both the user and the audience; as Bakhtin writes, “[c]onsciousness finds itself inevitably facing the necessity of *having to choose a language*. With each literary-verbal performance, consciousness must actively orient itself amidst heteroglossia” (295; emphasis original). Thus, the ethical considerations implicit in representing “poor whites” is important because of fiction's power to transpose literary representation, laden with ethical structures, onto cognitive representation.

This paper is prefaced with a quote by Cora Tull about God's disregard for money: just as God is class-blind and sees into the heart, I argue, *As I Lay Dying* demands its reader do the same. For this project, I will focus on the “poor white” character Dewey Dell, as most critical commentary singles her out for her promiscuity (though, for all we know, she might have only had sex once), stupidity, and egoism,<sup>7</sup> all of which are common traits of the “poor white.” Most

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<sup>7</sup> See especially *William Faulkner: The Sound and the Fury and As I Lay Dying*, ed. Nicolas Tredell (Columbia UP,



peculiarly, critics who specifically concern themselves with Faulkner's female characters often overlook Dewey Dell altogether in favor of Addie, or, when they consider her, dismiss her. I agree with Minrose Gwin when she writes in *The Feminine and Faulkner* that women in Faulkner are “that excess which generates narrative production and makes stories flood over their own boundaries,” but she makes no mention of Dewey Dell (43). *Faulkner and Gender*, edited by Donald Kartiganer and Ann Abadie, also has no discussion of Dewey Dell, despite its wealth of thoughtful essays. Deborah Clarke, in *Robbing the Mother*, writes that Dewey Dell expresses herself “not in symbolic discourse but through a prediscursive semiotic non-language,” a stance that I also take, but makes nothing of this realization beyond remarking on Dewey Dell's identity being connected to her body (41). Diane Roberts, in *Faulkner and Southern Womanhood*, agrees; Dewey Dell “is all body as Darl is all language,” and “[h]er consciousness, such as it is, looks inward toward the life growing in her” (202). While these readings are well-informed, I fail to see how they differ from traditionalist views of Dewey Dell. Where I disagree with these critics is that even when they do pay attention to her, they still discuss her as if she is stupid: her consciousness, “such as it is,” writes Roberts, only looks into her body. These readings, I think, ultimately stem from literary criticism's insistence that stream of consciousness represents conscious thought instead of feeling. My goal in choosing Dewey Dell to examine is not only to move towards amending the path of critical attention directed towards her, but also to explore the novel's exploration of the humanity of a woman who is, throughout most of the narrative, barefoot and pregnant, a conventional figure of the “poor white” female.

### **Denuding Dewey Dell into Humanity**

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2000); André Bleikasten, *The Ink of Melancholy: Faulkner's Novels From “The Sound and the Fury” to “Light in August,”* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2000); and Cleanth Brooks, *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha County*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1990).

For Levinas, the road to intersubjectivity is paved with language. He writes: “Saying taken strictly is a 'signifyingness dealt the other,' prior to all objectification; it does not consist in giving signs . . . Saying is communication, to be sure, but as a condition for all communication, as exposure” (*OB* 48). For Levinas, then, Saying stands in opposition to the Said: where the Said traffics in the reduction of “the manifestation of truth conceived as a combination of psychological elements,” the Saying resides as *exposure*, to be defined in this project as “a denuding of denuding . . . an expression of exposure, a hyperbolic passivity that disturbs the still waters” (49). While *Clotel* and *Tobacco Road* are ostensibly well-intentioned, their narrative structures lend themselves to the combination of elements that enacts the totalizing Said; *As I Lay Dying*, I argue, contains in its narrative interstices and cognitive upsurges spaces of Saying where the reader is free to enact herself upon the nude, untexted story: infinity is possible here.

This infinity is possible due to the novel's epistemologically problematic narrative structure: it is impossible to understand it as “a combination of psychological elements” because in doing so, gaps still remain. Darl's preternatural ability to read thoughts and see the future eschews normative modes of understanding to create meaning and models how a reader of the novel must look beyond the hope of stable narrative structure: Dewey Dell narrates: “The land runs out of Darl's eyes; they swim to pin points. They begin at my feet and rise along my body to my face, and then my dress is gone: I sit naked on the seat above the unhurrying mules, above the travail. *Suppose I tell him to turn. He will do what I say. Don't you know he will do what I say?*” (121). For Levinas, the face, nudity, and clothing have a special signification wherein to clothe the face is to shroud it in mystery: he writes, “[h]ere is a person who is what he is; but he does not make us forget, does not absorb, cover over entirely the objects he holds and the way he

holds them, his gestures, limbs, gaze, thought, skin, which escape from under the identity of his substance, which like a torn sack is unable to contain them” (“Reality and Its Shadow” 135). The face here is the object of examination that exceeds all thoughts of that object in me; behind and beyond that face is infinite alterity, but clothing contains and frustrates that freedom. Freedom, Saying, and the good lie in nudity. We see this idea at work in *As I Lay Dying*: as Darl’s eyes make contact with Dewey Dell’s face, she is rendered nude and open to the extent that Darl enters her and she narrates his thoughts. The abandonment of determinacy is possible because “[t]he face is present in its refusal to be contained. In this sense it cannot be comprehended, that is, encompassed” (*TI* 194). This loss of narrative power results in an inability to create herself through text; rather, she abdicates her self-determinative authority in the wake of the ethical encounter with Darl, saying *hineni* to both him and the reader. Like corn from a torn sack, what lies behind the narrative “face” she has thus far worn spills beyond the page as the reader, along with Darl, encounters her without her clothes. Her nudity, considered here as a sort of Saying, signifies without sign, abandoning language for the experiential and the rational for the prelogical.

While the face is the construct through which the ethical encounter can be accomplished, it is also a site of potential violence. Levinas writes: “The face is an absolute resistance to possession, an absolute resistance in which the temptation of murder is inscribed: the temptation of an absolute negation. . . . Violence can only aim at a face” (*TI* 225). When Darl looks in Dewey Dell’s eyes, they enter into extra-linguistic communication that transcends normative modes of cognition and understanding: the face to face encounter is a freeing one. However, later in the novel, when Mosley looks into Dewey Dell’s eyes, no such transcendence takes place;

rather, he sees her “just standing there with her head turned this way and her eyes full on me and kind of blank too, like she was waiting for a sign” (198). Here, though Dewey Dell's eyes are “full on” Mosley, he perceives them as blank, empty, “waiting for a sign.” He sees a lack of signification without realizing that this lack denotes infinite possibility; rather, he egotistically thinks that she is simply waiting for him to give a sign. Mosley's inability to realize Dewey Dell's humanity beyond her exterior leads to an attempt to categorize her economically and racially: he thinks to himself that “she had a quarter or a dollar at the most, and that after she stood around a while she would maybe buy a cheap comb or a bottle of nigger toilet water”: his gaze simultaneously sizes up Dewey Dell's capital value and racializes her through this commoditization. She is poor and therefore a likely purchaser of “nigger toilet water”: he inscribes on her inescapable labels, aiming ethically negating violence at her face.

My main claim in this paper is that narrative structure is a site of ethical activity, but I have argued for ethical liberation and incarceration taking place in the same novel: how can the same novel offer different ethics of representation if these very ethics derive from narrative structure? My answer is that each ethical situation is situated in different *styles* of narration, even though each style of narration is contained within the novel's larger narrative structure. A narrative's ethics, I argue, are created by that narrative's structure, and different narrative configurations yield different systems of ethics. In this novel, each section is cognitively and ethically mediated; a narrator's narrative style reveals his or her ethical systems. Let us first consider the encounter between Dewey Dell and Darl.

Dewey Dell's narration is more a monologue or a self-declamatory space than a site of storytelling or reportage: it begins with “The signboard comes in sight. It is looking out at the

road now, because it can wait. New Hope. 3 mi. it will say. New Hope. 3 mi. New Hope. 3 mi. And then the road will begin, curving away into the trees, empty with waiting, saying New Hope three miles” (120). She demands interaction from her reader in determining what, if anything, she is conveying; her thoughts swirl around the approaching sign and the road near it, now in the present tense as it takes on personification and “look[s] out at the road now, because it can wait,” and now in the future tense when it “the road will begin, curving away into the trees.” She mourns that “[i]t is because in the wild and outraged earth too soon too soon too soon. It's not that I wouldn't and will not it's that it is too soon too soon too soon” (120). Dewey Dell's grief-stricken monologue engages in “creat[ing] an immediacy and force, framing relations of provocation, call, and response that bind narrator and listener, author and character, or reader and text” (Newton 13). Dewey Dell's emotionally affected narration, in its desperate repetitions and syntactic dead ends, opens a zone of intersubjectivity which demands an interactive rather than a legislative order of understanding. The narrative structure of this section, in its nonrepresentational narrative cracks, allows the reader to move beyond the categorizations and thematizing implicit in narrative reportage towards an understanding of Dewey Dell not as a “poor white” and a target for ridicule or bourgeois sympathy, but towards an understanding of her as a person capable of the ethical encounter.

This interactivity extends not only to the reader, but also to Darl. When his and Dewey Dell's eyes meet, they engage in communication that gradually transcends the linguistic and verges into the precognitive: “*He'll do as I say. He always does. I can persuade him to anything. You know I can. Suppose I say Turn here.* That was when I died that time. *Suppose I do. We'll go to New Hope. We wont have to go to town.* I rose and took the knife from the streaming fish still

hissing and I killed Darl” (121). Dewey Dell obviously does not kill Darl, nor can most fish hiss; rather, I argue, we see at the end of this selection a communication that relies on emotional rather than rational symbology. She interacts with a recurring symbol of Addie's death – the knifed fish – to direct violence at Darl. Though this interactivity ends in violence, the narration's allowing the violence to occur demonstrates its scope beyond the rational into what precedes the rational – the emotional, the ethical, *aesthesis*.

Mosley's section begins with his looking at Dewey Dell's face and seeing her “not looking at anything in particular; just standing there with her head turned this way and her eyes full on me and kind of blank too like she was waiting for a sign” (198). Already, we may determine that his is a section of narration, of storytelling, rather than the desperate monologue of Dewey Dell's section: stylistically, his first-person narrative points *out* at the world rather than *in*, setting the stage for encountering and totalizing the Other. Here, the possession of a face attached to a recognizably poor person “already provides the culture of definition with a pretext – humanity reduced to physicality – for defacing or misrecognizing it; being culturally 'marked,' in other words, legitimates a more violent marking of the face” (Newton 183). Mosley, in defining Dewey Dell as poor, as “culturally 'marked,’” enables him to transfer his cultural attitudes towards the poor onto her. The blankness Mosley sees in Dewey Dell's eyes exists in a background of indeterminacy; her face, rather than offering revelation, instead merely mystifies when confronted with a legislative order of comprehension.

While Dewey Dell's section traffics in emotional call and response, Mosley's operates within “the culture of definition”; the face is an object of socioeconomic and racial categorization instead of the key with which one may interact with a human. At one point,

Mosley thinks that he perceives some signification in her eyes: “She stopped and looked at me. It was like she had taken some kind of a lid off her face, her eyes. It was her eyes: kind of dumb and hopeful and sullenly willing to be disappointed all at the same time” (200). Mosley looks *at* her eyes rather than *beyond*: his perception of her is already mediated through his racially tinged socioeconomic assumptions and so seeks to define rather than interact. Even though he thinks that her eyes are suddenly unlidged, he does not look beyond the phenomenological manifestation of her humanity to its ethical manifestation. Here, I think, Mosley is a stand-in for the reader, herself fooled by the culture of categorization into not recognizing the humanity of the “poor white” Other. Just as Mosley mistakes Dewey Dell for a readable text, so do we as readers mistake “poor white” characters for their stock characterizations.

Levinas notes that when we are not participants in an ethical encounter, we exist in a state of enjoyment (*jouissance*), which manifests itself as independence. He writes that enjoyment “is an independent *sui generis*, the independence of happiness”; enjoyment is a feeling of self-sufficiency (*TI* 87). Wehrs writes that enjoyment is the release from need, “the position that allows the sentimental hero to indulge in condescending empathy, a materially generated sense of independence that, by placing us into an aesthetic relation to exteriority, allows us to enjoy the illusion that we are God” (144). Mosley takes the ethically superior position of the sentimental hero; from his relatively privileged place as a town shop clerk, he can narrate Dewey Dell's actions while providing socially instructive commentary: in addition to the dialogue he narrates concerning his refusal to supply Dewey Dell with medicine to induce an abortion, itself didactic by its very presence in the narration, he says to the reader, “But it's a hard life they have; sometimes a man. . . . if there can ever be any excuse for sin, which it cant be. And then, life

wasn't made to be easy on folks: they wouldn't ever have any reason to be good and die" (202-203). He verges on an empathy rooted in his knowledge of women but goes on to rely instead on his idea of Christian doctrine as his ethical guide, substituting the ideological for the experiential. Mosley, encountering Dewey Dell, must reckon with the break of enjoyment that she represents, and he responds by thematizing her into ethnicity and womanhood to avoid that very break; rather than considering her humanity, he exteriorizes her into inescapable, socially affected cognitive categories. So, I think, do we as readers.

### **Ethical Sensibility and Cognition**

How, then, can we break away from reading like Moseley? When Newton claims that "narrative situations create an immediacy and force," he refers to what Levinas calls "sensibility," which "does not belong to the order of thought but to that of sentiment, that is, the affectivity wherein the egoism of the I pulsates. One does not know, one lives sensible qualities" (*TI* 135). Sensibility traffics in affect and the experiential; it, then, exists within the same sphere as Saying: both operate pre-logically, sensibility as affectivity and Saying as the "condition for all communication, as exposure" (*OB* 48). I would like to make a brief distinction between Levinasian sensibility and literary sensibility, perhaps better termed "sentimentality": the former finds its roots in *lived experience* while the latter often functions deontologically. This is not to say that the latter cannot evince the former, but a distinction between the two is necessary for my discussion.

Because Levinasian sensibility is pre-rational, its manifestation is typically emotional or somatic;<sup>8</sup> to give an example, sensibility becomes apparent when we blush even when we don't

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<sup>8</sup> I would be remiss not to note the work being done in neuroscience that resonates powerfully with the connections between the pre-rational, the emotional, and the body found in Levinas's work; in particular, I have found Patrick Colm Hogan, *Cognitive Science, Literature, and the Arts* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003); Marc Hauser, *Moral Minds: How Nature Designed Our Universal Sense of Right and Wrong* (New York: Ecco, 2006); and Antonio Damasio, *Looking for*



mean to. That is, a blush communicates feeling that exists before and beyond rationality and thematization; it is affectivity, “an exposure to the other without this exposure being assumed, an exposure without holding back, exposure of exposedness, expression, saying” (OB 15). We can make useful commentary on *As I Lay Dying*’s presentation of “poor whites” by examining their “expression, saying” anterior to rationality; viz., their thoughts.

To make my point about the anteriority of thought to reason in *As I Lay Dying*, I need to address the obvious: isn't thought rational? While I defer to the work of neuroscientists in determining the wider answer to that question, I argue that thought, at least in *As I Lay Dying*, is demonstrably before *logos*, existing as a precondition for rationality rather than an accompaniment of it. As Cook writes, in *As I Lay Dying*, characters “whose oral language is restricted to terse, formulaic, ungrammatical, and almost wholly practical utterances are permitted in their mental language a range of philosophical speculation and colorful and complex imagery not to be expected from their actions and conversation alone” (44). My explanation for this disparity is the pre-linguistic character of their thoughts; in keeping my focus on Dewey Dell, when she is milking a cow and thinks to herself that the animal's breath is “warm, sweet, stertorous, moaning,” I argue that when she does not actually think to herself that the breath is “stertorous” (63). Rather, her incongruous use of a polysyllabic, Latinate word is such a radical break from her previously demonstrated vocabulary that it signals cognitive activity otherwise and beyond, to use Levinas's phrase, words. *As I Lay Dying*, in this and other sections of cognitive representation that seems to run ahead of the words used to express it, weaves Saying with Said, sensibility with rationality, to create characters capable of ethical encounters with their

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*Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow, and the Feeling Brain* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt, 2003), *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1999) of great interest.

observers.

Let us examine sensibility more closely. Levinas writes that “[s]ensibility is exposedness to the other. It is a having been offered without any holding back and not the generosity of offering oneself, which would be an act, and already presupposes the unlimited undergoing of the sensibility” (75). The most important concepts about sensibility for my discussion are its status as “exposedness to the other” and this exposure's being a total offering: one-for-the-other, devoid of the egotistical. Earlier in this paper, I examined Dewey Dell's narration of her thoughts as Saying, or “hyperbolic passivity that disturbs the still waters” (*OB* 49). While Saying and sensibility both reside as exposure, they have different uses for my discussion: in examining Saying, I seek to distinguish it from Said, to distinguish interactive from juridical narrative forms and to point out the novel's potential for representing infinity. In examining sensibility, I wish to focus my analysis and explore Dewey Dell's cognition not in terms of its potential for infinity but in terms of its immediacy and antecedence to rationality and thus its potential for intersubjectivity.

Dewey Dell, describing her quasi-telepathic connection with Darl, narrates Darl informing her that he had seen her and a local boy, Lame, having sex: “He said he knew without the words like he told me that ma is going to die without words, and I knew he knew because if he had said he knew with the words I would not have believed that he had been there and saw us” (27). The siblings, then, are able to communicate with each other “without words,” yet Darl “said he knew,” so there is some giving of signs. Darl and Dewey Dell's meta-lingual communication partakes of “making oneself a sign” because it dispenses with language as mediator, leaving only “sincerity.” Dewey Dell herself recognizes this sincerity: “I knew he

knew because if he had said he knew with the words I would not have believed that he had been there and saw us” (27). What is important to note here is that if he had used words to tell her he saw her and Lefe having sex, she would not have believed him: she is drawing a distinction between word and communication, displaying, like her mother, a distrust of language.<sup>9</sup> What I find most fascinating about Dewey Dell's distinction between word and communication is the nature of what either would have told her about Darl: “that he had been there and saw us” (27). Levinas, writing about sensibility, draws a similar distinction between the experiential and the theoretical: “[t]he disclosed qua disclosed overflows itself as a symbol of this in that; it is identified in the this as that . . . Thus knowing is always *a priori*”;<sup>10</sup> further, Darl's knowing is “[n]ot saying dissimulating itself and protecting itself in the said, just giving out words in the face of the other, but saying uncovering itself, that is, denuding itself of its skin, sensibility on the surface of the skin, at the edge of the nerves” (*OB* 62, 14). Like Levinas, Dewey Dell prefers “saying uncovering itself” over “giving out words,” the experiential over the theoretical, immediacy over rationality: for her, knowledge that is true and readily accepted is so not because of familial trust but because of its medium, or, rather, non-medium: sensibility. I recognize that this conclusion runs the risk of resembling what so many other have said about the “poor white”: that they prefer gut feelings over education. However, I have argued for a sort of fineness of feeling in Dewey Dell that is not present in many portrayals of the “poor white,” and it is this feeling that gives her the ability to transcend the text and inspire something in the reader that is otherwise than mere pity or paternalism. She inspires recognition. My purpose in arguing for

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<sup>9</sup> Addie's distrust of language, exemplified by statements such as “That was when I learned that words are no good; that words don't ever fit even what they are trying to say at,” has been extensively discussed in most major critical examinations of *As I Lay Dying* and is too well-trod a path to walk again, considering this project's brevity (171).

<sup>10</sup> To compress a much larger point, Levinas is here referring to his argument for sensibility's role as the antecedent of all knowledge; see “Sensibility and Cognition” in *Otherwise than Being*.

Dewey Dell's sensibility is not to simply provide a Levinasian “reading” of her cognition but to make a point of her status as more than a conduit for thoughts and ideas that the narrative assigns her: she is *sensible* and therefore capable of a range of emotion and cognition beyond what the text assigns her. As Simon Critchley explains, “[f]or Levinas, *the subject is subject*, and the form that this subjection assumes is that of sensibility or sentience. Sensibility is the way of my subjection, vulnerability, or passivity towards the other” (63). Dewey Dell is demonstrably possessed of subjectivity. This is a far cry from the promiscuous, stupid girl described by most Faulkner criticism: Faulkner himself, I argue, creates a text in which the “poor white” obtains subjectivity, and this text participates in a larger push towards anti-essentialism along with James Agee's and Walker Evans' 1939 *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*.

### ***Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, Multimodality, and the Impotent Reader**

*Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* concerns itself not with the “poor white” synonymous with “white trash” but with the “poor white” tenant farmer or sharecropper. However, the book engages in a conversation, as I have argued Faulkner's does, with scholarly and artistic works that seek to categorize, research, analyze, narrate and otherwise represent poor Southern whites. My interest in *AILD* and *LUNPFM* stems not merely from their similar subject matter, but the way that each work approaches its subject; while other works touching on the Southern “poor white” tend to approach her in a manner that essentializes and Others her into abstraction and inhumanity, Faulkner, Agee, and Evans work towards reversing that totalizing discourse into a new, pluralistic, anti-essentialist discourse. Despite their generic differences, both works function in the same way: *As I Lay Dying* and *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* both make use of narrative structures laden with anti-essentialist ethics.

*Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is, to be literal, a book with pictures. However, the unlabeled photographs, rather than being interspersed throughout Agee's prose as visual aids to an otherwise complete story, are gathered at the very beginning of the book. Agee explains, “The photographs are not illustrative. They, and the text, are coequal, mutually independent, and fully collaborative. By their fewness, and by the impotence of the reader's eye, this will be misunderstood by most of that minority which does not wholly ignore it” (xv). Agee's valuing of the photographs as “coequal” to the text invites a reading of them according to his view of the difference between his work and a novel's:

“In a novel, a house or person has his meaning, his existence, entirely through the writer. Here, a house or a person has only the most limited of his meaning through me: his true meaning is much huger. . . . Because of his immeasurable weight in actual existence, and because of mine, every word I tell of him has inevitably a kind of immediacy.” (12)

We come, then, to the heart of what I want to discuss about Evans' photographs. The distinction Agee draws between the novel and his work is that the novel's subjects are fictive while his are real; this realness gives his words about his subjects “immediacy” (12). The same distinction exists between Evans' photographs and the cover of *Tobacco Road*: while the former is a product of the “motionless camera,” capturing an instant in reality, the latter's verisimilitude is preemptively sabotaged by its medium and subject (xiv).

Considering Agee's statements on the differences between the representation of real and fictive subjects and the equal valuing of Evans' photographs to his own writing, it follows that the photographs should be read for their “immediacy.” However, he writes earlier that the reader's eye is “impotent” in examining the photographs (xv). What is the goal that the reader's eye cannot achieve? The consequence of the eye's impotence is that the photographs will be “misunderstood”; thus, I argue that the reader's eye is impotent in its quest to understand what it sees: as epistemological issues pepper both Faulkner's and Agee's texts, so are they present in Evans' photographs (xv). In this section, I want to discuss the friction and collapse of understanding and immediacy in Evans' photographs according to Levinas's ethics.

Levinas's philosophy, at first glance, seems averse to analyzing photography. As Nicola Foster notes, for “Levinas, the visual is always illusory, and yet the most central theme in

Levinas, ethics, is encountered through the otherness of the face and its infinite demand on me” (10). However, Levinas's writings on the visual always focus on paintings or the theatre and never on photography. Foster constructs a methodology for Levinasian considerations of photography, but that methodology loops through Barthes to Agamben to Benjamin to Butler without satisfactorily articulating a usable theoretical system. For my project, I would like to construct a brief methodology for analyzing Evans' photographs through a Levinasian lens.

Let me begin with Roland Barthes. In his book *Camera Lucida*, he writes that the experience of looking at a photograph is composed of two elements: the *studium*, which is, to paraphrase, a general interest in what one is looking at, and the *punctum*, Latin for “sting, speck, cut, little hole” (26-7). The *punctum*, for Barthes, “bruises me, is poignant to me,” and, in opposition to the codedness of the *studium*, is uncoded (27, 51). One example Barthes gives of a *punctum* is a photograph of two mentally retarded children in a New Jersey institution. The photograph is extraordinary: the boy is less than half the size of the girl he is standing next to, yet they appear to be near the same age. However, what wounds and overwhelms Barthes is “the little boy's huge Danton collar, the girl's finger bandage” (51). That which wounds and holds in a photograph “does not find its sign, its name” (51, 53). However, *why* does the *punctum* wound and bruise? Levinas provides an answer: for both him and Barthes, that which arrests is both totally unknown and totally open, and it is the openness of the unknown that is so arresting. Both philosophers traffic in the undeniable presence of the unnamed. In offering a Levinasian analysis of Evans' photographs, I will look for the unnamed and the uncoded and explain how those elements contribute to a larger anti-essentialist project.

Opening the book, one is immediately faced with a series of uncaptioned photographs.

Though I will only consider two of these photographs for analysis, I hold that any photograph can be Levinasianally considered. Because the idea of “the face” is a thread running throughout my project, the photographs I will discuss are of people facing the camera; I am interested in how these photographs face the observer and provoke intersubjectivity. Consider Figure 2. This photograph comprises the first page of *LUNPFM*, so it can be considered to be the “face” of the book. Agee's and Evans' intention in placing this photograph first, I think, is obvious: the photograph faces the reader not only because of its position, but also because of its content. Pictured is an old man in a wrinkled blazer standing against a building; his gaze steadily meets the camera's. To make use of Barthes' methodology, to me the *punctum* of this photograph is the man's tie crawling out of his blazer. It is an aching reminder that this man existed before and after the photograph was taken: he woke up that morning and got dressed, but not perfectly. We see that he wears a wedding ring, but why didn't his wife straighten his tie? I am pierced by this photograph, but why? The answer, I think, is that it sets the stage for the phenomenological realization of intersubjectivity. The *punctum* allows the subject of the photograph to escape figuration and the sort of death-in-art that Barthes acknowledges in his discussion of the “Total-Image” and that Levinas explicates in “Reality and Its Shadow.” However, let me take this further: in the moment of my perceiving the *punctum*, I know that the man's humanity reaches infinitely beyond the photograph into reality. This knowledge is beyond the Barthesian epistemology that says the subject of the photograph “has been” as photographed. When we consider the photograph Levinasianally, we realize that not only has the man been as photographed, but he has been before and since the photograph. Moreover, not only has the man been, but the vulnerability manifested in his relaxed stance and dead-on facing of the camera



denotes the sort of sensibility I identified in my discussion of Dewey Dell. To paraphrase Critchley, for Levinas, sensibility is tantamount to sentience (63).

The subject of Figure 3, in contrast to the subject of Figure 2, looks a good deal like how popular conception perceives him to look. A quick glance at Figure 1, the cover of the first edition of *Tobacco Road*, will show that he bears a strong resemblance to the illustration of Jeeter Lester: they share stubble, thin cheeks, and a steady gaze at the viewer. However, apart from medium, there is one important distinction: the man in Figure 3 is not smiling (posed, created) like Jeeter is. He is not frowning, either; rather, he simply regards the camera, eschewing what Barthes calls the “mortiferous layer of the Pose” for “looking me *straight in the eye*” (15, 111; emphasis original). This is not to say that the subject is somehow unaware he is being photographed; rather, I am saying that he faces the camera as he would me. To look at the photograph of this man, I think, is to be met. The photographs possessed of the *punctum* cause Barthes to feel “Pity” as he passes “beyond the unreality of the thing represented,” and this pity makes him go mad (116-7). However, is pity not the simultaneous perception of the other's vulnerability and the revealing of one's own? What is for Barthes madness, I argue, is for Levinas intersubjectivity: ethical sensibility *qua* vulnerability.

### **James Agee and Unimagined Existence**

My largest point in this work is that narrative structures are weighted with ethical force, but in discussing the narrative structure of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, I must address the generic differences between it and *As I Lay Dying*. First and foremost, Agee's work is explicitly and self-consciously not a work of fiction. What it is, exactly, is unclear: Agee complains that the book “is a *book* only by necessity,” and he claims that he and Evans try to address Southern

tenant farmers “not as journalists, sociologists, politicians, entertainers, humanitarians, priests, or artists, but seriously” (xvi, xv). In a sense, Agee consciously avoids genre; taking into consideration that *LUNPFM* is a book only by necessity, we might consider it, to use modern critical parlance, a multimodal, multigeneric work. Regardless of modality and genre, however, I still consider *LUNPFM* a narrative. To quote Agee, the work’s “effort is to recognize the stature of a portion of unimagined existence, and to contrive techniques proper to its recording, communication, analysis, and defense. More essentially, this is an independent inquiry into certain normal predicaments of human divinity” (xiv). Agee seems aware of the challenges implicit in the “proper” recording and analysis of “unimagined existence,” and in his narrative techniques – and I do consider “recording, communication, analysis and defense” to be narration, regardless of the veracity of its subject or the unwillingness of the recorder to consider his work art – that I will analyze.

Angie Maxwell identifies Agee’s claim in his original typescript that “I feel intense guilt towards every man and woman alive; and I suggest you [the reader] need to feel it too” as his attempt to alleviate his class guilt, but I see it as a compact manifesto of *LUNPFM*’s ethics (192). An ethicist claiming that compassion can be aroused by imposing guilt is not new, but the universality of Agee’s proposal is decidedly Levinasian. In the book’s first prose section, Agee refers to his and Evans’ “own intentions, and with all their realization of the seriousness and mystery of the subject, and of the human responsibility they undertook, they so little questioned or doubted their own qualifications for this work” (8). He continues to ask “the question, Who are you who will read these words and study these photographs, and through what cause, by what chance, and for what purpose, and by what right do you qualify to, and what will you do about

it” (9). Mystery, responsibility, readerly action: the self-consciousness of *LUNPFM* places Agee solidly in the role of narrative ethicist. If the book is self-conscious, then he, as its co-creator, is its conscience. Considering the role of the reporter in “Colon,” he writes:

Here at a center is a creature: it would be our business to show how through every instant of every day of every year or his existence alive he is from all sides streamed inward upon, bombarded, pierced, destroyed by that enormous sleeting of all objects forms and ghosts how great how small no matter, which surround and whom his senses take: in as great and perfect and exact particularity as we can name them: . . . but it is beyond my human power to do. . . . for I must say to you, this is not a work of art or of entertainment, nor will I assume the obligations of the artist or entertainer, but is a human effort which must require human co-operation.” (110-1)

Interestingly, Agee here describes the tension and flux between literary realism and modernity; in a realist novel such as *The Red and the Black* or *Madame Bovary*, typological generalizations based on assumed, culturally and historically distinctive common experience attempt the simulation of reality. This approach eventually gives way to Modernist detailed descriptions of a few characters' particular qualities and inner workings: the all-encompassing telescope is exchanged for the myopic microscope, and it is this microscope that Agee uses.

One example of Agee's use of the narrative microscope can be found in the text's many lists; of plants he lists “black walnuts, swamp willow, crabapple, wild plum, holly, laurel, chinaberry, May apple . . .,” and of animals there are “rabbits, red squirrels, gray squirrels, opossums, raccoons, wild razorbacks, wildcats, perhaps rare foxes” (218). Agee's urge to

exhaustively list the contents of his surroundings is reminiscent of his early assertion that “[i]f I could do it, I’d do no writing at all here. It would be photographs; the rest would be fragments of cloth, bits of cotton, lumps of earth, records of speech, pieces of wood and iron, phials of odors, plates of food and excrement” (13). What is striking about Agee’s lists are their exactness: there are red squirrels *and* gray squirrels, not simply “various squirrels” or “squirrels.” The portrait he paints of this particular part of Alabama is as close to a photograph as he can manage; he almost frenziedly includes all aspects of his environment as if he is afraid that in neglecting one element, the rest lose their veracity.

Tellingly, Agee requires “human co-operation” for his project (111). Levinas writes that the work of art “is completed *in spite of* the social or material causes that interrupt it. It does not give itself out as the beginning of a dialogue” (“Reality and Its Shadow” 131). However, *LUNPFM* explicitly sets out not only to begin a dialogue, but to maintain it. The question is, between whom is the dialogue held? We may find the answer in the way Agee’s ethics are embedded in his narrative structures.

### **Agee’s Documentarian Poetics**

The critical conversation about *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is rich, but it has gaps in its consideration of ethics that are necessary to explore, given the ethical mission of Agee’s and Evans’ work. Kaja Silverman writes that Agee looks at Southern poverty through his own “mortal and guilty subjectivity,” but fails to elucidate exactly what ethical connotations this method of examination holds (202). Aaron Chandler, in a Deleuzean reading of *LUNPFM*, argues for masochism being “bound up with its [the work’s] political aims and aesthetic methods,” identifying Agee’s suffering as a contract that entwines him and his reader in close

bondage (197). While I agree with many of Chandler's assertions, particularly that to read Agee is "a literal suffering-with," his conclusion that Agee's work is "an effort at mastery in submission" fails to offer insight into why Agee's masochistic aesthetics are so (203, 211). The question of *why* Agee writes with such pain, considering his criticism others writing on the poor South, particularly Margaret Bourke-White and Erskine Caldwell, is an important one. To what purpose his pain? The question, because of Agee's engagement with social issues, is one of ethical impact, and not simply aesthetics. Jeffrey Folks attempts to examine the ethical implications of Agee's aesthetics, and asserts that his ethics follow the angelic tradition.<sup>11</sup> Folks continues to argue that Agee's ethics place compassion on "the other side of [Agee's] self-contempt and self-doubt" (76). For Folks, Agee only does good as a way to absolve himself of his middle-class status and life of relative privilege. Folks' analysis of Agee's ethical system, with all its reliance on Enlightenment humanism and non-theistic New Testament virtues, concludes that it is "confused and inconsistent" partly because "no purely rational argument can establish convincingly that one *should* love one's enemies" (78). The implication is that an ethics devoid of the supernatural must rely on logic to provide the force needed to enact itself. In contrasting theistic ethics to logical ethics, Folks neglects to consider an ethics that is otherwise than either: Levinas provides an ethical system that relies on neither divinity nor logic to provide its impetus. Folks comments that Agee's ethics are "based on an unrelenting focus on human suffering": the similarities to Levinas's ethics, so concerned with wounding and trauma, are obvious (82). In this section, I would like to take issue with Folks and argue that, rather than being "confused and inconsistent," Agee's ethics consciously invite readerly participation and are

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<sup>11</sup> Folks explains that "Angelism is connected with the emergence of a revolutionary sensibility focused on social reform and the 'Rights of Man,' a central development of modern politics that Hannah Arendt analyzed in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*" (76).

incomplete without it. Agee's text uses an aesthetics (and ethics, consequently) of suffering to provoke readerly recognition of tenant farmers' humanity towards the anti-essentialist reconfiguration of readers' attitude towards the South.<sup>12</sup>

The structure of Agee's ethical system, I argue, lies in Agee's attempt to experientially convey the tenant farmer's experience in such a way as to provoke readers to compassionate response. In attempting to address his subjects "seriously," Agee makes a claim to reportage untainted by occupation or circumstance. I take this to mean he aspires to a mode of reportage superior to that of the journalist or artist. Despite the academic removedness implied by the word "seriously," his narrative is a deeply personal one; it is clear that his idea of serious reportage is one that basks in its particularity to the author. Knowing that anything he reports will be mediated by his personal ideologies and culture, Agee, rather than stifling the individuality of his work for the sake of general understanding, embraces the Bakhtinian notion of a narrative's ability to access "the zone of maximal contact with the present (with contemporary reality) in all its openendedness" (Bakhtin 11). Faced with the self-imposed mission of ethical reportage, Agee abandons the notion of the sentimental, Godlike narrator or (only ostensibly) detached scientist and instead chooses, as the more ethical option, to narrate, as fully as possible, what he experiences. Indeed, he writes to his subjects that he "must mediate, must attempt to record, your warm weird human lives" (99). Significantly, he embraces the *human* element of his own reportage, writing in such a way as to create a narrative that invites the reader to replace Agee's "I" with his or her own "I." Here, Agee's poetics work to place ethical force not within the author or narrator, but within the modes of representation, allowing for a dialogue between the text and

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<sup>12</sup> One might argue that an "aesthetics of suffering" is the same as suffering that is aesthetized and thus totalized, but I would like to emphasize that I mean "aesthetic" as a *purposed, conscious* element rather than a *stylized, generic* one.

the reader that operate otherwise and beyond cultural materialism.

This emphasis on the narration of unique experience is underscored by the distinction Agee draws between theoretical and experiential knowledge:

“ . . . this is a book about 'sharecroppers,' and is written for all those who have a soft place in their hearts for the laughter and tears inherent in poverty viewed at a distance, and especially for those who can afford the retail price; in the hope that the reader will be edified, and may feel kindly disposed toward any well-thought-out liberal efforts to rectify the unpleasant situation down South” (14).

In this passage, Agee identifies a social liberalism both socioeconomically and spatially removed from tenant farmers. This liberalism, however well-meaning, views poverty “at a distance,” and has its locus in other-than-South: it is worried about problems *down* South. Also, Agee sarcastically hopes those who can “afford the retail price” of the book might support efforts to rectify the South's “unpleasant situation” (14). The irony is obvious: Agee throws the voice of Northern liberalism only to mock it. Agee's imagined reader, regardless of his or her intention towards the South, nevertheless only has a theoretical knowledge of it; the project of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is to give knowledge that approaches the experiential.

Levinas also makes a distinction between knowing from a distance and knowing experientially: “In knowing, which is of itself symbolic, is realized the passing from the image, a limitation and a particularity, to the totality. Consequently, being's essence is moved into the whole content of abstraction” (OB 64). Knowing symbolically moves the known into abstraction while knowing sensibly, through “exposure to wounding and to enjoyment, an exposure to wounding in enjoyment,” signifies non-ontological meaning (64). In the passage quoted above,

Agee takes a Levinasian stance on the totality of theoretical knowledge; he writes that *LUNPFM* is “a book about 'sharecroppers’” (14). He puts “sharecroppers” in quotes to show his self-conscious use of the term as a cognitive tag, and in doing so places that cognitive tag in the same sphere as distance, theoretism, and abstraction. Significantly, Levinas refers to the signification afforded by “sensibility qua vulnerability”; it is through vulnerability that Agee's ethics operate.

In contrast to theoretism, Agee's work makes a call to the reader, in all her spatial, temporal, and circumstantial particularity, to immerse herself in the sensible particularity of Agee and Evans' experience in the South and observe through them their subjects' pain. The importance of the particularity of Agee's text and Evans' photographs lies in that particularity's connection to sensibility, and it is *LUNPFM*'s sensibility that I will examine in the following paragraphs. Earlier, I examined Dewey Dell, Levinasianally considered, as a subject whose *sum* stems from her ability to engage in the ethical encounter. Now, I will examine Agee as a narrator who, conscious of the need to report “poor whites” ethically, sensibly records his experience an observer of pain as the call and trigger to his readers' own encounters with the “poor white” Other.

We know Agee attempts to create a text that requires human interaction, but how, exactly, does he accomplish this? In short, the text works in a documentarian fashion, but the narrator's affected presence in it makes it a *sensible* documentary, one that invites the reader, as much as she can, to abandon theoretical knowledge of the “poor white” and ethically encounter Agee's subjects. Sensibility requires passivity and trauma, and the feeling of either by a reader requires a language and narrative structure that partakes of Saying; otherwise, “[t]he first break with the passivity of the sensible is a saying in correlation with a said. This is why all knowing is



symbolic, and ends up in a linguistic formula” (*OB* 62). Further, for sensation to signify, it must be “a passivity more passive still than any passivity that is antithetical to an act, a nudity more naked than all 'academic' nudity, exposed to the point of outpouring, effusion and prayer” (*OB* 72). It is exactly the moments of “outpouring, effusion and prayer” in which Agee's text most powerfully provokes reader and subject to the ethical relation. Here, the openness of the text and the openness of the experiential collude to create a narrative space that allows Agee's imagined bourgeois reader to encounter the “poor white's” humanity.

After having constructed the circumstances that allow for the Levinasian ethical relation, the text must go a step further in enacting it. The process by which ethical signification functions is proximity. In proximity, there is a movement or encounter that actually brings the relation into being. Agee's religiosity of description establishes both the infinite alterity and the irreducible humanity that signals the Levinasian ethical relationship; he writes of a family living near Centerville that “[t]hey were of a kind not safely to be described in an account claiming to be unimaginative or trustworthy, for they had too much and too outlandish beauty not to be legendary” (33). His extraordinary description of them deserves to be quoted at length:

The young man's eyes had the opal lightnings of dark oil and, though he was watching me in a way that relaxed me to cold weakness of ignobility, they fed too strongly inward to draw to a focus: whereas those of the young woman had each the splendor of a monstrosity, and were brass. Her body also was brass or bitter gold, strong to stridency beneath the unbleached clayed cotton dress, and her arms and bare legs were sharp with metal down. The blanched [bleached] hair drew her face tight to her skull as a tied mask; her features were Baltic. The young man's

face was deeply shaded with soft short beard, and luminous with death. He had the scornfully ornate nostrils and lips of an aegean exquisite. The fine wood body was ill strung, and sick even as he sat there to look at, and the bone hands roped with vein; they rose, then sank, and lay palms upward in his groins. There was in their eyes so quiet and ultimate a quality of hatred, and contempt, and anger, toward every creature in existence beyond themselves, and toward the damages they sustained, as shone scarcely short of a state of beatitude; nor did this at any time modify itself.” (33)

There are in this description two major elements that enact proximity between reader and subject: the vocabulary Agee uses to describe the subject and the intersubjective experience provided by Agee's sudden realization of the young man and woman's hatred.

The vocabulary Agee uses paints his subjects as Biblical figures most prominently featured in the Book of Job: the woman as Behemoth and her husband as Leviathan. The woman's body is “brass or bitter gold,” and Behemoth's bones “are as strong pieces of brass; his bones are like bars of iron” (*KJV*, Job 40.18). Her husband's eyes “fed too strongly inward to draw to a focus” and his face is “luminous with death.” Leviathan, in comparison to the man's inward focus, is similarly inscrutable: “Who can open the doors of his face?” (41.14). While the man's face is “luminous with death,” Leviathan's eyes “are like the eyelids of the morning” (41.18). Surely, I think, these descriptions carry a religious and awestruck resonance that is resultant of Agee's exposedness “to the point of outpouring, effusion and prayer,” and, by extension, his readers' exposedness to infinite yet strangely recognizable alterity (*OB* 72). Agee's documentarian ethics, I have argued, abandons any attempt to describe what he sees with

impartiality, given impartiality's distance from humanity. The same intention operates in his decision to eschew descriptive realism; rather, he chooses a language of “outpouring, effusion and prayer” to make his sensations signify, inscribing the particularity of his encounter with words that simultaneously describe and veil the objects of their description (*OB* 62). Describing a woman's body as “brass or bitter gold, strong to stridency beneath the unbleached clayed cotton dress” tells us that the woman's skin is tan and strong, but we also feel that she is beyond simply being tan and strong; her tanness and strength are, as Agee would put it, legendary. If we accept that a legend is something that is or was ostensibly present on this Earth yet operates beyond the boundaries in place around the rest of us, then this woman, a legend, who “existed quite irrelevant to myth,” requires a description that is otherwise than ontological.

The phenomenological realization of intersubjectivity comprises one, as a subject, observing the Other as an object within the phenomenological field and realizing that the Other is herself a subject. Levinas writes in *Totality and Infinity* that the presence of the Other calls into question “my joyous possession of the world” (76). Agee, as he describes the couple, is in possession of the descriptive world. They are as he says they are; he writes of them materially and as objects in his sensory field. He is the God of their presence in his text. He is God, that is, until the end; as if they realize their status as object, the couple fiercely assert their subjectivity with their anger. As Agee perceives this anger, he comes to realize their humanity. In this passage, the “poor whites” under observation react to “the damages they sustained” – perhaps the damage wreaked by observation – by expressing their own humanity. As Agee realizes their humanity, so do his readers: as the couple's anger breaks Agee's *jouissance* in being God of the text, so do they break the readers' assumption that they are Gods in their own worlds.

## The “Poor White” and Anti-Essentialism

Critics and theoreticians who work in subjectivity and alterity should be careful not to discount the concussive effects Levinas's work has had on ethical philosophy; we see in the later Derrida a concern with ethics and politics that reveal his close intellectual relationship with the man he calls “a master,” and Kristeva's work warns against communitarianism, but much literary work persists in political and racial identification (Derrida 17).<sup>13</sup> My readers might call attention to my analysis of an economic class an example of reductionist identification, but my goal has been to examine the literary-philosophical incarceration of people within the group instead of the group as such. I think that the Southern Modernists, especially Faulkner and Agee, participate in the larger anti-essentialist project to move towards remedying the South's national and global image. When Dewey Dell walks into Mosley's shop, he sees a country girl, summing her up in his mind as a likely purchaser of cheap perfume. Mosley's reading of Dewey Dell bears resemblance to the usual reading of *As I Lay Dying* or, really, any text: just as he looks *at* Dewey Dell, criticism often looks *at* the text without considering what might lie beyond it. To return to the quote that begins this paper, Cora Tull's “Riches is nothing in the face of the Lord, because He can see into the heart,” the call to interpretation that the novel makes is a call to the reader to use her Godlike position of power not to infer deontological meaning with the text but to hold discourse with it, because “*discourse* relates with what remains essentially transcendent” (*OB* 195). Just as Cora's God looks beyond riches into the intimacy of the individual, so, I propose, should we as critics and readers.

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<sup>13</sup> I am thinking of *Spectres of Marx*, 1994, and *Politics of Friendship*, 1997.

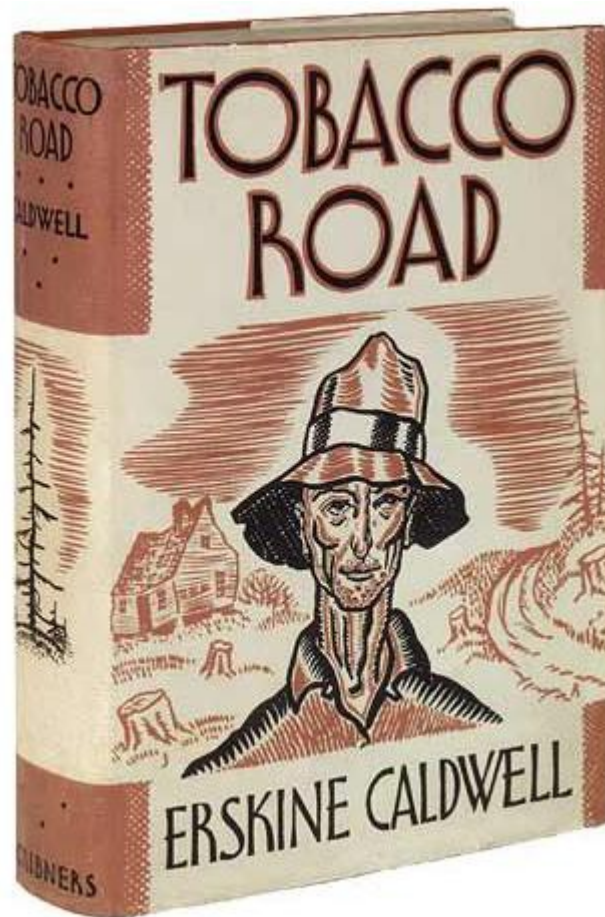
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**Figure 1**



Pictured is the cover of the first edition of *Tobacco Road*, published by Scribner's.

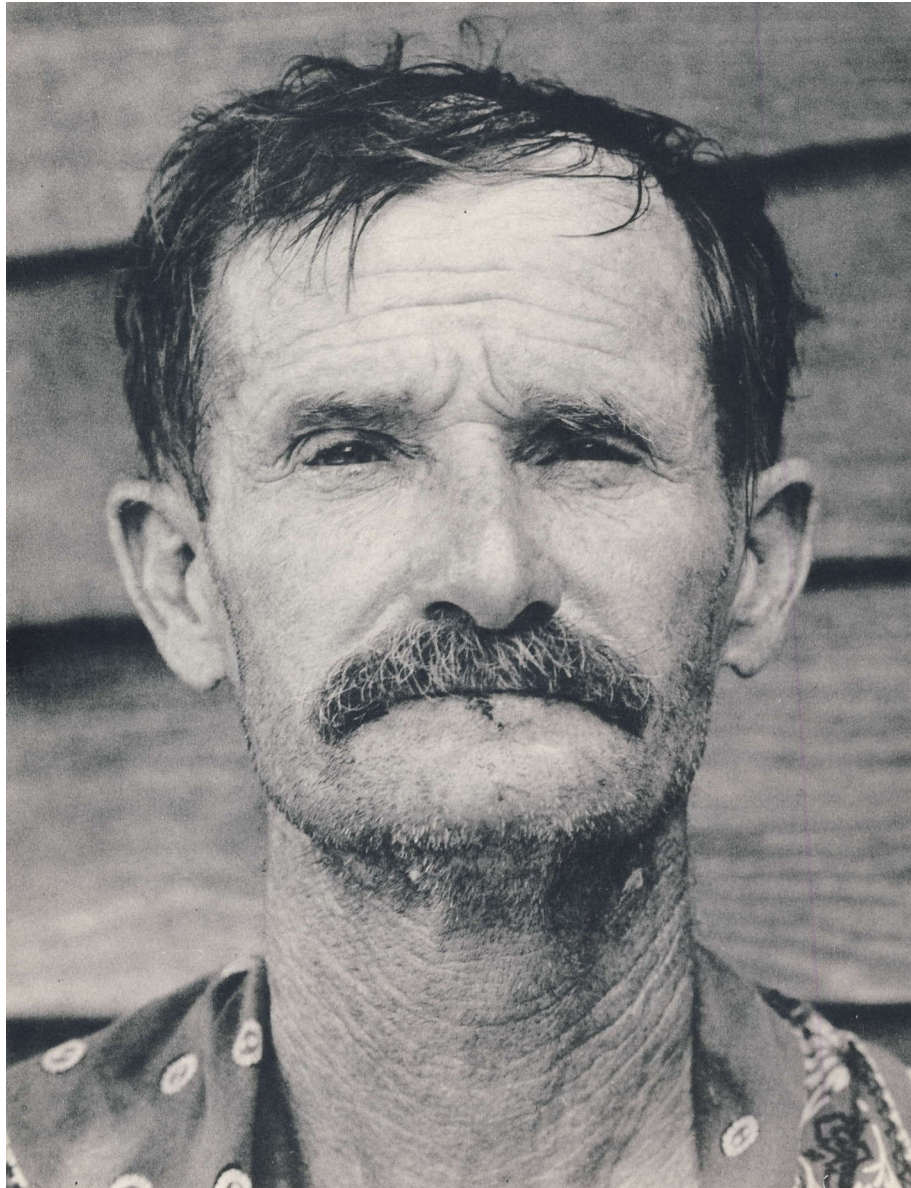


Figure 2



Pictured is a photograph of an Alabama man from *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*.

Figure 3



Pictured is a photograph of an Alabama man from *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*.