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*Go Down Moses*: The Bear

American Literature

Mr. Baker

The Natural Timelessness of Faulkner’s Woods

Physics (from Ancient Greek: φύσις [physis] "nature") is a part of natural philosophy and a natural science that involves the study of matter and its motion through space and time

*en.wikipedia.org*

If you did not know how to play chess, but you were able to watch two people play against one another, you might come up with a few theories about how to play the game. However, your understanding would be vague and nebulous at best. As humans strive to learn about existence, time seems to surface as an enigma we can only theorize about in the inexplicit obscurity of the natural world. Time in physics is defined by its measurement: time is what a clock reads. Anything that is regular and repeated - from the minute oscillations of particles to the earth's tendency to circle the sun - can be used to measure physical time. In a philosophical context, Immanuel Kant (among others) believed that time is neither an event nor a thing, and thus is not itself measurable. Other philosophers disagree with this sentiment, concluding that time is a dimension separate from events, in which events occur in sequence. In the early twentieth century, Albert Einstein changed the way in which time is understood by claiming that space and time are inextricably linked, woven together into a mathematical fabric deemed spacetime. This new concept of fundamental elements of our universe is perhaps a step ahead from the view of absolute time by Classical Mechanics, but humans are likely far from grasping at the underlying essence of time and space. Regardless of how far human understanding will progress, humans will continue to strive to learn about the universe around them by creating methodologies with which to understand the universe. **In Part I of the chapter of William Faulkner’s *Go Down Moses* entitled “The Bear,” the watch, compass, and annual hunting cycle maintained by Isaac illustrate the unnatural human construct of time as a human method to overcome the strange (albeit natural for humans) incomprehensibility of the natural elements of the woods. Moreover, Isaac’s experience in the woods reveals that nature is largely unaffected by this human endeavor to understand nature’s obscurity.**

Faulkner’s eclectic group of hunters is said to convene yearly to hunt Old Ben, but the group’s reason for doing so is largely ambiguous. Isaac states, “they were going not to hunt bear and deer but to keep yearly rendezvous with the bear which they did not even intend to kill” (p. 185). This odd desire to hold an annual hunt without killing is vaguely understood by the members of the group, but the precise explanation for this behavior is never explicitly articulated. Despite expressing no worthy reason for doing so, Isaac accompanies the group’s excursions “each November,” where “he would watch the wagon containing the dogs and the bedding and food and guns and his father and [the rest of the group]... depart on the road to town, to Jefferson” (p. 185). Isaac reports his perpetuating of this cycle for tradition’s sake, promoting interaction with the natural world in a way built on human ideals. Unlike humanity, the natural world (as illustrated with Old Ben) does not seem to propagate this idea of doing things for the sake of tradition; Isaac does not note any time wherein Old Ben makes weekly (or any) ventures to the habitat of humans. Indeed, Old Ben may appear to partake in the annual hunting festivities simply because the sport requires more than one participant; however, the idea that Old Ben perpetuates the yearly hunting tradition in the same capacity as the hunters is sophistic and misguided. Rather, this cyclical tradition represents a pattern of time as defined by humans. The characters in *Go Down Moses* can use the ‘Old Ben System of Time,’ where each yearly cycle marks one base unit iteration of time, just as the second does in the scientific and common human convention. Being of the natural world, Old Ben does not uphold the human tendency of creating idiosyncratic temporal methods of understanding the universe; he is merely a passive participant in the yearly hunt, where the central human characters of “The Bear” are the ritual's active driving force.

Once in the forest, Isaac is taken aback by the mystery and allure of the woods. On one occasion, Isaac notices with surprise “the gutted log where he had first seen the print [of the enormous warped two-toed foot]. It was almost completely crumbled now, healing with unbelievable speed” (p. 190). This section of woods had completely evolved and changed, and it had done so at a speed that Isaac finds difficult to believe (its speed is “unbelievable”). This rapid fruition of natural life appears salient to Isaac, yet he would have been unsurprised if this section of forest had grown at a rate he deemed normal or reasonable. Regardless of how Isaac may measure or mentally predict the actions of nature over a period of time, his observation suggests that nature exists unimpeded by human conventions. There seems to be a clear dissonance between the way in which Isaac understands time and nature’s complete disregard of human comprehension.

When venturing into the woods guided by Sam, Isaac frankly articulates a realization “of his own fragility and impotence against the timeless woods” (p. 190). The woods exist in a stark dichotomy between humanity (and its constructs) and the natural world. Isaac paints himself as an insignificant entity when he describes himself as “only a little different […][than] “brute beasts” (p. 190), and the usage of words such as “fragility” and “impotence” portray Isaac (and humanity) as a weak entity lacking power. The connotation of the words suggests that Isaac is unable to comprehend the complex natural world of the woods from his meager position in the natural hierarchy. Isaac is both unable to affect nature and unable to comprehend it. Faulkner’s word choice paints a scene of humanity grappling with the vast obscurity of nature, knowing nothing *a priori*, striving in vain to decipher this ambiguousness with meager human tools (e.g. the compass and the watch) and conventions. Although the group of human hunters is clearly governed by a sense of time and schedule, the woods is portrayed as a looming, incomprehensible obscurity of timelessness that humans attempt to conquer and understand using, in this case, a ritual directly exemplary of human physical time.

At the very end of the first section of “The Bear,” Isaac leaves alone to navigate the woods to hunt the bear and ends up in a general struggle against nature. Initially, this venture leads him to relinquish his gun in an attempt to raise himself above the derisory level of human invention to the natural level of Old Ben. After nine hours of wandering unsuccessfully using his compass and stopwatch, Isaac decides to relinquish “of his will, because of his need, in humility and peace and without regret... the watch and the compass” (p. 197). The tools that Isaac leaves behind are directly symbolic of methods that humans create to aid in navigating the universe. Isaac’s careful triangulation through the three spatial dimensions with the compass and his methodical navigation through time -- the single temporal dimension -- with the stopwatch result in his utter acquiescence to nature. After nine hours of calculated movement through the woods, Isaac finds that these human methods to tame nature are utterly ineffective, and that perhaps the human way of thinking about the woods is not fully correct. Just after he surrenders his human instruments, he describes himself as “emerging suddenly into a little glade and the wilderness coalesced. It rushed, soundless, and solidified” (p. 198). For many pages leading up to this event, Isaac describes himself as though he is in control of his movements in the context of the woods around him. Isaac epitomized the attempt to control one’s movement through his usage of human technology in nature to do just that: control his movement with the use of human inventions. However, he is unable to do so.

The human attempt to control nature embodied in devices like the stopwatch and compass creates a fragile illusion of control. When Isaac mentally relinquishes the idyllic human paradigm of the woods (in which humans invent ways to interact with nature; e.g. compasses, stopwatches, and temporal/traditional conventions), the woods suddenly coalesce, solidify, and form about him, questioning if the control that Isaac and the hunters demonstrate is palpable. This marked difference in Isaac’s perception is unmistakably correlated to his physical and mental relinquishment of human dogma and precedents; Isaac’s surrender of his desire to grasp at human control of nature is his surrender to the timelessness and obscurity of the woods.

In contrast with his portrayal of Isaac, Faulkner inextricably entwines Old Ben with the natural terrain, and thus the bear does not exhibit the tendency to control nature (of which he is a part). Without stopwatches, compasses, or any other discernable system to conquer nature, Old Ben seems to be excluded from any kind of temporal pattern or rhythm at all (save the rendezvous perpetuated by the hunters). To Isaac’s shock, Old Ben defies the way in which humans conceive of things moving through time and space: “[The bear] did not emerge, appear: it was just there, immobile, fixed in the green and windless noon’s hot dappling, not as big as he dreamed it but as big as he had expected, bigger, dimensionless against the dappled obscurity, looking at him” (p. 198). Instead of transitioning gradually through a series of slowly evolving physical states over time as human convention would normally expect, Old Ben simply exists. To Isaac, Old Ben seems to control his position in space and time in the woods in a way that Isaac cannot, nor can Isaac even comprehend. While Isaac is watching the bear’s appearance in the woods, he says, “then it was gone. It didn’t walk into the woods. It faded, sank back into the wilderness without motion” (p. 198). Isaac’s referral to the animal as an enigmatic “it” exhibits prominently his impersonal, distant, and uncertain regard of Old Ben, whom he implies is indiscernible from the wilderness (into which Old Ben “sank back”). Isaac groups Old Ben with the rest of the woods’ natural obscurity, further showing his human naïveté and unsophistication with natural elements. Isaac shows that Old Ben is not unique in his mysterious and perplexing movement, likening his observation of Old Ben to when he “watched a fish, a huge old bass, sink back into the dark depths of its pool and vanish without even any movement of its fins” (p. 198). As Old Ben confirms his unintelligible nature to Isaac, the fish is said to move in a way that is associated to Old Ben’s movement, furthering the aforementioned dichotomy between the obscurity of nature as a whole and flawed human attempts at understanding it.

William Faulkner was certainly curious about the nature of time. Faulkner’s style causes the reader to disentangle chronological developments from the linear progression through *Go Down Moses*. Instead of offering information in the novel in a chronological sequence -- a methodology typically understood by humans -- the reader is offered dense information in a *natural* manner devoid of many typical grammatical constructs. Faulkner omits commonplace human constructs of storytelling that are designed to make consuming the information refined to a human template; oftentimes, offhand events are given without temporal context, leaving the reader to ascertain the context from subtle hints. Faulkner also emphasizes the importance of familial links from deep in the past, playing with characters long dead as though they existed in the story’s present. This experimentation with the representation of time in Faulkner’s style echoes the content of the story. If time were a stream, one might find Faulkner filling a bucket to water his garden.