

THE BLEEDING OF AMERICA

Menstruation as Symbolic Economy in Pynchon, Faulkner and Morrison

by

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation, “The Bleeding of America: Menstruation as Symbolic Economy in Pynchon, Faulkner and Morrison,” argues that an extensive tropology of menstruation subtly informs the construction of “America” in the nation’s literary tradition. From the Puritan sermons of the seventeenth century to the novels of the twentieth, America is described as a New World Eden, haunted, not only by the Fall, but also by the “Curse of Eve.” I argue that Thomas Pynchon, William Faulkner and Toni Morrison call up this traditional construction and concretely align America’s fall from innocence—the nation’s history of slavery, violence and war—with the figure of the menstruating female. This alignment, however, involves a conceptual shift from “curse” to “cure,” and menstrual blood emerges as both an antidote to violently spilled blood and a symbol of regenerative possibilities. I discuss nine novels in the following order: Pynchon’s V., The Crying of Lot 49, and Gravity’s Rainbow; Faulkner’s The Sound and the Fury, Light in August, and Absalom, Absalom!; Morrison’s The Bluest Eye, Song of Solomon, and Beloved. Each analysis of the texts incorporates theories of the sacred, medical history, anthropological and literary studies of menstruation, and theories of the body.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgments	iii
Abbreviations	v
Introduction	1
 <i>Chapter One</i>	
Thomas Pynchon: Blood, Tears and War	
Traces of Blood and the Matter of a Paraclete's Coming: The Menstrual Economy of <u>V.</u>	17
Menstruation and Melancholy: <u>The Crying of Lot 49</u>	38
The Sieve and the Rainbow Serpent: Bleeding <u>Gravity's Rainbow</u>	61
 <i>Chapter Two</i>	
William Faulkner: There's A Curse on Us	
"Between Two Moons Balanced": Menstruation and Narrative in <u>The Sound and the Fury</u>	92
<u>Light in August</u> : "The Phantom of the Old Spilled Blood"	117
"All the unsistered Eves since the Snake": <u>Absalom, Absalom!</u> and the Promise of Prehistory	135
 <i>Chapter Three</i>	
Toni Morrison: Daughters of Jerusalem	
Pecola's Pharmacy: <u>The Bluest Eye</u>	162
The Gravel-Sprinkled and Flowering Voice of <u>Song of Solomon</u>	184
Getting to Red: <u>Beloved</u> and the Bloody Fragments of a Forgotten Cosmology	202
Conclusion	224
Works Cited	229
Vita	239

ABBREVIATIONS

Chapter One

<u>V</u>	<u>V.</u>
<u>CL</u>	<u>The Crying of Lot 49</u>
<u>GR</u>	<u>Gravity's Rainbow</u>

Chapter Two

<u>SE</u>	<u>The Sound and the Fury</u>
<u>LA</u>	<u>Light in August</u>
<u>AA</u>	<u>Absalom, Absalom!</u>
<u>FU</u>	<u>Faulkner in the University</u>

Chapter Three

<u>BE</u>	<u>The Bluest Eye</u>
<u>SS</u>	<u>Song of Solomon</u>
<u>BD</u>	<u>Beloved</u>
<u>PD</u>	<u>Playing in the Dark</u>

INTRODUCTION

God writes his *severe truths* with the *blood* of his disobedient subjects.
(Eighteenth-century Puritan writer Hannah More)

The ghost of the land moves in the blood, moves the blood.
(William Carlos Williams, In the American Grain)

“The land was ours before we were the land’s,” writes Robert Frost in “The Gift Outright.” A strange and somber poem, it subtly captures a tenacious national myth: that of America as a divinely ordained promise to its Puritan settlers and their descendants. Casting their flight from the Old World in terms of biblical typology, the settlers saw themselves as a chosen people in a land that awaited their arrival. “She was our land more than a hundred years/ Before we were her people,” Frost adds in a gesture toward the visionary Puritan rhetoric that claimed and defined the New World for them. Yet, at the same time that they believed themselves numbered among the elect, the American Puritans also feared that they were simply exiled to a wilderness commanded by Satan. Uncertain that America was offered to them as a “gift outright,” they had to fight for proof and transform themselves into instruments of God’s implicit promise. As Frost claims in parentheses near the end of the poem, “(The deed of gift was many deeds of war).” In this brief poem, written in the midst of World War Two and recited at John F. Kennedy’s presidential inauguration, Frost raises the possibility that a sacred design accompanied American history; he then, and parenthetically, turns against the assumption. If a holy pattern secured the so-called discovery and settlement of America, it undeniably required death as a gift or deed from the “land of living.”¹

William Carlos Williams’ In the American Grain similarly invokes and undermines the mythological construction of America. In this idiosyncratic engagement with the

documents and figures of early American history, Williams appeals to the country's great sense of promise only to announce that it never materialized. "History begins for us," he asserts, "with murder and enslavement" (Williams 39). No compact nor design lay beneath the Puritans' surmised entitlement to the land; the country emerged, rather, on "the jargon of God" (64). As In the American Grain unfolds, America increasingly resembles a disfigured, distorted and maimed body, its wounds the result of the Puritans' fierce movement inland. If not for their "tough littleness," their history "might have begun differently" (65, 39). The Puritan settlers survived, he explains, not because their God saw to it but because they became ruthless. As Williams announces to the European audience implied in the text, "There is a 'puritanism'—of which you hear, of course, but you have never felt it stinking all about you—that has survived to us from the past. It is an atrocious thing, a kind of mermaid with a corpse for a tail" (115). The Puritans left America a legacy of violence and a "frightened grip upon the throat of the world" (68). It is a haunting legacy, compelling Williams' imperative: "we must go back to the beginning; it must all be done over" (215).

Throughout the canon of American literature, wherever a concept of national promise arises, a sense of uncertainty or doom appears to accompany it. Sacvan Bercovitch's The American Jeremiad traces this tangled thread to the Puritan sermons of colonial America. A prominent study of America's national myth, it illustrates that the jeremiads, or political sermons, rhetorically transformed America into the second site of Eden and placed it under the prospect of God's punishing wrath. With this new and precarious covenant, America also became a Christian Israel poised, from the beginning, against the looming precedent of Sodom. According to Bercovitch, the preachers primarily drew upon the words of the Old Testament prophet, Jeremiah, and fused a concept of sacred design with the events of secular history. Like Jeremiah, they reminded their congregations of God's vengeance upon corrupt nations. America, at once Eden and the "Bride of Jeremiah," was both blessed and cursed: if Eden was lost to the wilderness, and if Jerusalem could resemble Sodom, then America too could become "corrupt to the core" (Bercovitch 138).

Believing themselves outcasts and prophets, the preachers proclaimed America's

divine destiny and denounced the “backsliders” who obstructed its manifestation. This obstruction, moreover, not only provoked the possibility of damnation but also entailed the heartless rejection of Christ. As Richard Mather declared in a seventeenth-century sermon, “[Christ’s] heart is turning within him, toward New England. . . . After all our backslidings he is crying after us, ‘I am married unto you, I will heal your backslidings. Open unto me, my Love’” (qtd in Bercovitch 52). Bercovitch’s argument makes it clear that the jeremiads functioned as rituals of social coherence and vision. They devised a “sacred drama of nationhood” into which all Puritan men and women were absorbed. For Bercovitch, contemporary American nationalism retains the belief that “if America failed, then the cosmos itself failed” (190).

Throughout The American Jeremiad Bercovitch illustrates how the sermons constructed America as the site of a cyclical return to a new beginning. The preachers asserted that America constituted a “New World of regeneration” in which the Puritan settlers could begin again, potentially free of England’s infectious corruption and sinfulness (25). England, they said, was as a land “worse than Egyptian darkness, . . . its rulers . . . madly rushing like Pharaoh and his host, through a sea of blood, on their [path of] utter destruction” (124). Using metaphors of the garden and exodus, of errand and tribulation, they envisioned America as the site of spiritual rebirth. They called upon Jesus as “the Great Physician of Israel” to cleanse their souls and to claim their land as his wife (80-84). As Bercovitch writes in the Introduction to The American Puritan Imagination, America was, for the Puritans, a “virgin wakened from her long slothful sleep into the light of grace” (12); any hardships encountered “were the temptations of Satan” (11). Furthermore, each struggle with the forces of corruption enabled America’s settlers to reenact the cyclical movement through temptation and disaster to renewal.

In The American Adam, R.W.B. Lewis, likewise illuminating a discourse of cyclical regeneration in narratives of American nationhood, finds that the myth of America rests on a fantasy of Edenic innocence. He focuses on the canonical literature of the American Renaissance and tracks a unified theme of spiritual rebirth extended through representations of an “individual emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry” (Lewis 5). With Adam as their paradigmatic hero, writers such as Emerson, Thoreau and

Whitman set a pattern for the celebration of a prelapsarian America. They struggled with their Puritan legacy and replaced its doctrine of inherited sinfulness with one of innocence.

Lewis writes:

The American myth saw life and history as just beginning. It described the world as starting up again under fresh initiative, in a divinely granted second chance for the human race, after the first chance had been so disastrously fumbled in the darkening Old World. (5)

Throughout The American Adam, Lewis focuses upon the recurring tropes of rebirth and periodic purification. He argues, for instance, that Thoreau's Walden emphasizes the highly symbolic acts of cleansing, purging, and the "ritual burning of the past" (20). Walden, with its temporal progression from winter to spring, provides a model of "rhythmic death and rebirth" (22). Similarly, Whitman's Leaves of Grass functions as a "Yankee Genesis," the hero of which "radiates a kind of primal innocence in an innocent world" (49). The fiction of the period—Hawthorne's and Melville's, for example—suggests, however, that the American Adam is open to the possibility of temptation and fall. As Lewis writes of his project, "the historian looks not only for the major terms of discourse, but also for major pairs of opposed terms which, by their very opposition, carry discourse forward" (2). The image of Adam in American literature is in fact "crowded with illusion," its envisioned "moral posture . . . vulnerable in the extreme" (1).

Like Lewis' The American Adam, Henry Nash Smith's Virgin Land argues that the writers who forged the American literary tradition borrowed the "master symbol of the garden" from their Puritan predecessors and developed it into a "powerful and vivid image" (Smith 123-124). Smith's study cites jeremiads, travel literature and poetry of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, each revealing the extent to which biblical imagery contributed to the myth of American purity. In the sermons, America became a "garden of spices" and a "country . . . flowing with milk and honey;" in the travel accounts, it transformed into an enchanting and untouched passage to India (129-132). These narratives all contributed to the representation of America as the "Garden of the World;" employing metaphors of "fecundity, growth, increase," they emphasized its unfolding promise of Edenic glory (123). With this myth in hand, the settlers moved westward to the

center of the Garden where, in Smith's words, "the world's great age would begin anew" (11).

Writing two decades after Lewis and Smith, and during the same decade as Bercovitch, Annette Kolodny addresses the metaphors of femininity in the myth of the New World. In The Lay of the Land, she maintains that America was depicted not only as a second Eden but also as a feminine Eden "of exotic nurture" (Kolodny 39). The colonial rhetoric constructed a maternal landscape where the "birthplace of a new culture" could take place (9). In the virgin territory's "fertile womb" the settlers were both reborn and confronted with the possibility of endless temptation:

Implicit in the metaphor of the land-as-woman was both the regressive pull of maternal containment *and* the seductive invitation to sexual assertion: if the Mother demands passivity, and threatens regression, the Virgin apparently invites sexual assertion and awaits impregnation. Hence the conflicting colonial responses of Thomas Morton and John Hammond, the one urging his fellow New Englanders to impregnate the 'faire virgin' in order to . . . make use of her potentially 'fruitfull wombe,' the other horrified at the specter of incestuous violation with which Mary-land had 'been deflowred by her own Inhabitants, stript, shorne and made deformed.' (67)

Listing sixteenth- and seventeenth-century descriptions of America, Kolodny finds that the documents express the desire to master a feminine landscape—a landscape that "was being experienced as at once Mother and Virgin, with all the confusions possible between the two" (22). And, emphasizing that she focuses upon male writers, she argues that an inherently masculine will to master the land coincided with a longing to be nurtured by it. At the core of the writers' rhetoric lay an image of "the primal womb or breast" (6).

Certainly, the jeremiads from which Bercovitch extensively quotes disclose that the preachers did not perceive and configure America as "anthropomorphic"—to borrow Bercovitch's term—but as distinctly feminine.² For instance, while Richard Mather described America as Christ's lover and the receptacle for his "precious seed," Increase Mather spoke of the "birthpangs" of God's promise in the New Jerusalem. Other preachers represented America as "Beautiful as Tirzah, Comely as Jerusalem" or as the wife of the Lamb in The Book of Revelations. John Norton proclaimed that America was an outcast and widow, and William Hubbard envisioned a "fruitful Carmen or fragrant

Sharon.” In each case, the preachers appealed to the marriage bond between America and Christ and asserted that the settlers were the children of this union. They powerfully condemned America’s unholy practices by depicting Christ as a forsaken husband, “longing to reclaim His beloved.” If America continued to turn away from Christ, they claimed, she would eventually resemble the “Scarlet Whore” of Catholic Canada.³

In a brief footnote in The American Jeremiad Bercovitch states, however, that the sexual imagery surrounding America does not concern the aims of his argument. It is a strange assertion, given the extent to which an erotic, feminine and maternal body consistently emerges in the descriptions of the compact between Christ and the puritan settlers; although Bercovitch’s interest does not lie in this imagery, both his examples and terminology invoke and reproduce it. When he argues that the puritan sermons speak in terms of a “barren wilderness” transformed by Christ’s holy seed, and that they extend a concept of rebirth in a “new world of regeneration,” he engages with a language of fertility (25). For Bercovitch, this rhetoric inheres in the sermons’ combination of warning and promise. While this contention is well supported throughout The American Jeremiad, it undeniably relies upon metaphors of sexual desire and childbirth.

In The Language of Puritan Feeling David Leverenz directly approaches that which Bercovitch avoids. He states from the outset: “I hope readers will be surprised to find how vigorously Puritan men turned to female imagery” in their sermons and verse (Leverenz x). Offering numerous examples in which the sermons refer to Christ’s “bosom” and his scriptural “milk,” Leverenz maintains that they often imagined God’s power in maternal terms. The preachers’ language, he says, produced a “curiously motherly” God (4). In addition, they embraced a kind of female receptivity and often described themselves as “breasts of God” through which the “sincere milk of the Word” could flow to the congregations (1). In the words of John Cotton, “The two breasts of the Church are the two testaments; out of which we that are the children of the church, suck the pure milke [sic] of the word of God” (qtd in Leverenz 5). According to Leverenz, the Puritan rhetoric constructed salvation and sin through polarized images of the female body and femininity. While the faithful derived spiritual sustenance from God’s breasts, sinners

found themselves trapped in a “whoredom of the soul” (151). America herself shifted between Jezebel and Jerusalem. Furthermore, purity became possible in the New World through the promise of womb-like regeneration—and corruption resembled menstrual blood. As Thomas Shepherd announced in The Sound Believer, “When the soul sees that all its righteousness is as a menstruous cloth, polluted with sin . . . it begins to cry out, How can I stand or appear before him with such continual pollutions” (155).⁴

In many jeremiads blood functioned as a complex symbol of defilement and purification. On the one hand, it combined with images of excrement and female sexuality to describe sin; on the other, it poured from Christ to heal the reprobate’s sick soul. For example, Cotton Mather exclaimed:

The blood and spirit of the Son of God [washes away] the sinfull uncleannesse of our natures, from our Mothers wombe; . . . we are borne in the goare blood of sinfull defilements, and therefore God hath provided the blood of Christ, to wash and cleanse us from our Mothers womb . . . so that Christ, by his blood and Spirit, cleanses us from the sinfull nature of our flesh. (154)

Blood also gave evidence of God’s wrath upon sinners. In Increase Mather’s thunderous words,

The Clouds begin to gather thick in our Horizon; yea, there is a Cloud of Blood, which begins to drop on us. When once a Cloud begins to drop, you know that a shower is wont to follow. The Cloud of Blood over our heads begins to drop; there was one drop fell the other day, witness the man that was slain upon the Coast; the Lord grant that a Shower of Blood may not follow. (205)

The sermons’ fantasies of rebirth in America incorporated a sense of trepidation about returning to and emerging from a bloody womb. If the landscape was feminine, then it was particularly vulnerable to defilement and could, in Thomas Hooker’s words, “set open a Stream and Floodgate of Corruption” (149).⁵

I set up this overview of some of the major texts of American literary history in order to illuminate the powerful rhetoric of purification, cyclical regeneration and expulsion that materializes in the mythological construction of America. In Leslie Fiedler’s words, “The American writer . . . lives on the last horizon of an endlessly retreating vision of innocence —on the ‘frontier’ . . . where the theory of original goodness and the fact of

original sin come face to face” (27). While the traditional understanding of the American canon rests on this ambivalent vision, it is my contention that the anxiety involved in “coming face to face with original sin” circulates around the mark of this sin: menstrual blood. In this dissertation, I argue that a discourse of menstruation underwrites the myth of America, its vision of promise and sense of doom. The future of the second Jerusalem or Eden remains haunted by the “curse of Eve;” the cyclical ideal of shedding the past and starting over conjures up the imagery or language surrounding menstruation. In the following chapters, I will demonstrate that the Puritan sermons’ enduring conceptualization of America as a New Jerusalem and site of rebirth, at once condemned and endlessly realizable, reemerges in the novels of twentieth-century American authors Thomas Pynchon, William Faulkner and Toni Morrison. As these authors position their work within and against the myth of America, they draw upon the jeremiads’ rhetoric and focus it through complex representations of menstruating females. Their novels reveal the extent to which the foundation of American literature has been bleeding from the start. In Pynchon, Faulkner and Morrison, the jeremiadic preoccupations with a double motif of promise and loss, and with the hope of being marked by God for a second chance in the New World, become inseparable from a language of menstruation and blood.

The biblical language and imagery of the jeremiads retain traces of an older cosmological vision, one in which menstruation functions as a sacred event. I draw this point mainly from the work of Mircea Eliade. In The Myth of the Eternal Return, Eliade illuminates ancient symbolic systems of periodic regeneration and locates their persistence in world-wide philosophies of space and time. His study investigates the “nostalgia for a periodical return to the mythical time of the beginning of things” (ix). In the first chapter, Eliade addresses sacred places and argues that when a territory is claimed (or when a city is built), the fact of possession “does not become real” until the place is envisioned as a site of rebirth (10). Taking the example of Jerusalem, he writes: “A celestial Jerusalem was created by God before the city was built by the hand of man” (8). In other words, the act of founding the city involves a repetition of, or return to, a sacred archetype that precedes it. The movement is from “chaos to cosmos,” and the cosmos rests on a “lunar structure of universal becoming” (87). Although in The Myth of the Eternal Return Eliade does not

directly argue that rituals of menstruation underwrite this lunar cosmology, in The Sacred and the Profane he does. Here, he argues that the Bible abolishes—although not entirely—the link between menstruation and the sacred and replaces a “metaphysics of the moon” with a masculine “Creator God” (Sacred 157, 126). Eliade’s extensive research establishes for my study a connection among menstruation, cyclical time and the sacred—a connection I extend to my analysis of the New Jerusalem’s mythical destiny.

From Lewis’s The American Adam to Bercovitch’s The American Jeremiad, criticism on American literature has reproduced the terms of periodic renewal and cyclical regeneration without addressing their menstrual implications. The particular anxieties about femininity that accompany appeals to Eden, Jerusalem and the Fall have been overlooked, despite the fact that these same anxieties predominate in the Biblical templates of America’s Puritan founders. Bercovitch’s extensive work on the role of Jeremiah’s thunderous words in the Puritans’ typological vision of America, for instance, fails to mention or to investigate the prophet’s personification of Jerusalem as a menstruating harlot whose “filthiness *is* in her skirts” (Lamentations 1:9). “Zion spreadeth forth her hands,” Jeremiah says, “and there is none to comfort her. . . . Jerusalem is as a menstruous woman among them [among Jacob’s adversaries]” (Lamentations 1:17). Furthermore, in The Senses of Walden Stanley Cavell asserts that Ezekiel’s words also echo in the preacher’s sermons on America as Jerusalem; however, although Cavell quotes passages from the Book of Ezekiel which are dense with blood imagery, he does not address the fact that, like Jeremiah, Ezekiel uses menstruation as metaphoric filth to condemn Jerusalem’s fall to the Babylonians. Jerusalem is a “bloody city,” and “all her abominations” disgust God (Ezekiel 22:2): “Son of man, when the house of Israel dwelt in their own land, they defiled it by their own way and by their doings: their way was before me as the uncleanness of a removed woman” (Ezekiel 36:17). For both Jeremiah and Ezekiel, menstruation supplies the metaphor for corrupted nationhood and for bloody defeat by another race. As Helen Smith states in The Female Questor, “The Old Testament replaces the mythic understanding of menstruation . . . as symbolic of an eternal cosmic order with a mythic understanding of menstruation as a curse of mortality” (Smith 197).

When America is described as Jerusalem, in terms of both corruption and promise, menstruation lies just beneath the simile's surface. Nathaniel Hawthorne appears to uncover this conceptual bedrock and to leave it open for future investigations. For instance, the highly symbolic House of the Seven Gables is built on a malediction. The wizard from whom the property is wrested away curses its future owner and his descendants with the words: "God will him blood to drink" (247). In The Scarlet Letter Hester's letter 'A'—the mark of her "red infamy"—shifts between sacred and profane meanings and seems to signify America itself (374). Effecting a transformation of the letter's meaning from that of a "bloody scourge" to "the language of the heart"—a transformation Pynchon later repeats for his menstruating witch in V.—Hawthorne writes: "The angel of the coming revelation must be a woman" (431, 418, 546). In The Scarlet Letter a woman who wears a red mark of undulating significance emerges as a figure of abjection or scapegoat; as such, she also signifies the prospect of redemption to her Puritan world. Following Hawthorne, Pynchon, Faulkner and Morrison bind the female protagonists of their novels to a similar thematic landscape of blood and sacred possibilities. Furthermore, as these authors contend with the violence that engulfs America, the drink of blood Hawthorne's wizard predicts for the nation becomes a metaphor for the country's penchant for war.

This dissertation is deconstructionist in approach; it works from the concept of Eve's curse and deconstructs the opposition between curse and cure. I demonstrate that the process of menstruation and its product, menstrual blood, give rise to a range of multivalent symbols which unsettle the demarcation between opposing terms. For instance, the figure of the menstruating female in the texts I examine menaces the paradigmatic frame of the American fraternal ideal with its clear borders between inside and outside, white blood and black blood, purity and contamination. As Leslie Fiedler establishes in Love and Death in the American Novel, the nation's literary tradition (of white male authors) tends to depict an earthly paradise for men only.⁶ The male-male bond of, for example, Huck and Jim, is innocence itself; it occurs in an edenic wilderness free from the disruptive presence of Eve. The quest for a utopia of male companionship on the

frontiers of America is, in Fiedler's analysis, inextricable from the construction of woman as a force of corruption and temptation. Fiedler's thesis thus evokes the possibility of seeing the fraternal escape from women as an extension of the Puritan escape from old world degradation. In each case, moreover, the Exodus configuration involves discourses of sin, rebirth and purification. The American fraternity's quest inheres in the very force it tries to escape—the womblike ability to self-regenerate, to purify itself. Read against the American grain, the characterization of America as the sacred site of a second chance assumes a pharmacopoeic structure in the novels I investigate: the sacred and the profane cannot be held apart, the boundary that marks this fraternal Eden is fluid and permeable. Furthermore, the scapegoat that secures this boundary—the menstruating female—occurs as a kind of narrative drug, as a *pharmakon*, whose curse or threat to the fraternal utopia is also the cure of what can be seen as an enclosed, dystopic or entropic social order.⁷

While my theoretical methodology involves biblical typology and works from a Derridean perspective, it also incorporates psychoanalysis, medical history and theories of the sacred, particularly those elucidated by Julia Kristeva, René Girard, Jean-Joseph Goux and Mircea Eliade. Much of my research also draws upon the compelling body of scholarship that exists on menstruation in a wide range of fields—and that has contributed to my understanding of a menstrual economy of symbols or tropes functioning in literary texts. Anthropological, historical and philosophical investigations continue to explore menstruation's distinction as a world-wide and ancient taboo deeply associated with defilement and contagion. The powerful suppression of symbols and rites surrounding menstruation and menstrual blood, and the replacement of this conceptual framework with that of the phallus, indicates the enormous role menstruation once played in a cosmological and sacred understanding of the universe. From archaeological discoveries to translations of ancient tales and myths, menstruation has emerged with complex social, cultural and religious meanings. With remarkable consistency, the various records demonstrate that the emergence of patriarchal monotheisms in the West coincides not only with the banishment of female deities but also with the repudiation of all that menstruation and menstrual blood signified to the ancient world. This extensive symbolic system did not disappear; it went

underground, so to speak, and it continues to inform our narratives and myths.

Concentrating on twentieth-century American literature, I trace a symbolic economy of menstruation in the fiction of two canonical male writers and one African-American female writer. It is the cataclysmic treatment of menstruation, its emergence in a mystified, symbolic form in the novels by men that provides the focus for my analysis of the American-Jerusalem paradigm. Toni Morrison's novels, however, provide a shift in focus while at the same time similarly employing an ominous language of menstruation. Deeply influenced by Faulkner, Morrison in a way picks up where he leaves off, animating the voices of African-Americans, of a people for whom Faulkner does not claim to speak. And, like both Thomas Pynchon and William Faulkner, she employs a language of menstruation to confront the myth of the promised land as well as the evils of war and ideological systems of violence. For each of these authors, menstruation functions as a transformative way of writing about the blood spilled in the Civil War and in the two World Wars.

Opening with a chapter titled "Blood, Tears and War," I contend that Thomas Pynchon's novels—V., The Crying of Lot 49, and Gravity's Rainbow—set the scene for my investigation of the relationship between menstrual blood and blood spilled to violence. I begin with an analysis of V. and its quest motif, a motif which transpires in both The Crying of Lot 49, through Oedipa's search for the elusive Tristero, and in Gravity's Rainbow, through the System's pursuit of Slothrop and the key to his phallic divination of the Rocket. In V. the quest for the V.-figure at once aligns femininity with Truth and exposes the gendered foundations of interpretation. It also uncovers the realities of masculine brutality, including rape and empire. I discuss the ways in which menstruation forges the link among women divided by violent masculine governments. The narrator quips about Kotex dispensers and sanitary napkins, and raises the momentous question: "what gift of communication could ever come from a woman?" (472). It seems that menstruation is a gift of communication offered to a world at war; the blood spilled by 20th-century hostilities potentially signifies renewal, synchrony, and the refusal to reproduce systems of violence. Ultimately, V. becomes a figure associated with the Virgin land and its promise of regeneration.

In my analysis of The Crying of Lot 49, I engage with Giorgio Agamben's theory of melancholy in Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture, along with Mircea Eliade's elucidation of a lunar cosmology, to formulate a theory of menstruation as an experience of melancholic wisdom. I demonstrate that Pynchon's female questor, Oedipa, is a figure of melancholy whose menstruating body gives evidence of another, possibly sacred, realm of communication. I close my analysis of The Crying of Lot 49 with a discussion of Jean-Joseph Goux's Oedipus, Philosopher, in which Goux proposes that Sophocles' sphinx embodies a sacred mystery. Oedipa's name, I argue, gestures not toward Oedipus but toward the sphinx.

My interpretation of Gravity's Rainbow rests on the image of a sieve. I claim that the sieve in Gravity's Rainbow constitutes a matrix through which menstrual blood leaks to double the blood spilled in World War II; together, the sieve and menstruation suggest the promise of hope and renewal within the deadly realm of the Rocket. I also trace the recurrence of the color red and the multiple allusions to snakes and rainbows, demonstrating that each inheres in the mythical iconography of menstruation. I argue that the Rocket and its devastating parabolic arch are perversions of the ancient symbol of the rainbow serpent. Referring to Chris Knight's research in Blood Relations: Menstruation and the Origins of Culture, I show that menstruation offers a vast symbolic code of survival—and that Gravity's Rainbow seeks this code as a necessary alternative to the patriarchal "culture of Death" behind the war's destruction (GR 747). Furthermore, I argue that the text, like its jeremiad predecessors, envisions America as the site of this code within a devastated and corrupted world.

Chapter Two, "There's a Curse on Us," takes a chronological step backward to analyze three novels by William Faulkner: The Sound and the Fury, Light in August, and Absalom, Absalom!. I discuss Faulkner after Pynchon to effect a sense of returning to America; while Pynchon's V. and Gravity's Rainbow are set in both America and Europe, Faulkner's novels remain firmly centered in the Southern United States. The scale narrows from America's involvement in global devastation to America's collapse into Civil War. Starting with The Sound and the Fury, I argue that Faulkner shapes the figure of the

menstruating daughter into a source of pharmacopoeic hope for the post-bellum South; the curse and cure accompanying the characterization of Caddy Compson and of her daughter, Miss Quentin, underwrite the possible collapse of the South's aristocratic foundations. In my discussion of The Sound and the Fury, I include a detailed reading of Derrida's Dissemination and propose that Derrida's terminology gives rise to the possibility of seeing menstrual blood as a powerful *pharmakon*.

In the second section of this chapter, I investigate the fanatical Puritanism represented in Light in August with reference to Derrida's temporal concept of justice in Specters of Marx. I also draw upon Julia Kristeva's Powers of Horror and Dorothy Dinnerstein's The Mermaid and the Minotaur to elucidate the novel's position against the ideologies of blood purity and white supremacy that accompany Puritan dogma. I show that, like Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow, Light in August is a novel filled with allusions to menstruation and war, and that it links menstruation to an ideology based on interconnection and responsibility.

In the final section of my chapter on Faulkner, I argue that Absalom, Absalom! weaves its characters' memories of Thomas Sutpen into concepts derived from Darwin's The Descent of Man. Through Judith Sutpen and Rosa Coldfield, the text also communicates a language of blood that contrasts the divisive, Darwinian ideology surrounding Sutpen and the Civil War

Moving forward from Faulkner to Toni Morrison, Chapter Three, titled "Daughters of Jerusalem," encompasses The Bluest Eye, Song of Solomon, and Beloved. I approach Morrison's first novel, The Bluest Eye, as a black jeremiad that condemns its African-American community for adopting white America's values and codes. I also contend that, like Faulkner, Morrison situates a menstruating daughter at the center of the novel's thematic landscape of hope. For Morrison, this daughter is a figure of flux and transition, a kind of Body without Organs that flows with blood.

Song of Solomon, I argue, takes up the subject of justice and locates it in the figure of Pilate. The text also embeds her in the language of the biblical Song of Solomon, which retains symbols of menstruation from pre-biblical forms of worship. Morrison's Song of Solomon, borrowing and extending the Song's language of flowers and menstruation,

communicates a feminine relationship to the earth. I compare Morrison's delineation of this relationship to Jean-Joseph Goux's investigation of feminine matter in Symbolic Economies: After Marx and Freud and to Claudette Sartillot's study of botanical metamorphosis in Herbarium Verbarium: The Discourse of Flowers.

I conclude with Beloved, returning to the concept of menstruation as a regenerative power and mark of disobedience. I demonstrate that this novel incorporates the cosmological vision of Isis, Osiris and Seth; it is a bloody cosmology, and it provides a prototype of rebellion and rebirth. Situating Beloved's murder within this cosmological vision, Morrison's text merges history and myth. In so doing, it attempts to move beyond the paralyzing effects of historical injustice. Beloved implies that the American "City on the Hill" is built on the blood of America's black slaves and resurrects the voices submerged in this blood.

¹ Frost, Robert. "The Gift Outright." Heritage of American Literature: Civil War to the Present. Ed. James Miller Jr. Orlando: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovitch. 1991.

² Bercovitch employs this term in The American Puritan Imagination (13).

³ Each of these quotations is taken from the jeremiads cited in The American Jeremiad, pp. 54, 60, 71, 80, 52 and 115.

⁴ In extensive endnotes (page 307) Leverenz provides the titles and dates of each sermon cited here.

⁵ See Leverenz (305-306) for the titles and dates of these jeremiads.

⁶ Eve Sedgwick takes up the concept of male friendship and develops a theory of male "homosocial desire" in Between Men. For Sedgwick, women serve as conduits for the bonds between men and the patriarchal power that emerges out of these triangulated social formations. In this dissertation, I tend to focus instead upon female bonds (through menstrual synchrony) and investigate the ways in which menstruating females in American literature escape the process of exchange that solidifies male compacts.

⁷ The word "pharmacopoeic" (from the Greek, meaning "drug-maker's art") derives from Derrida's reading of Plato's Phaedrus. An "occult drug," according to Derrida, the *pharmakon* is the element in which opposites play or reverse themselves. Moving from Derrida's claim in Dissemination that "liquid is the element of the *pharmakon*" (152), I demonstrate that menstrual blood, a liquid conspicuously absent in Derrida's catalogue, is actually one of the *pharmakon*'s most appropriate elements.

**CHAPTER ONE: THOMAS PYNCHON
BLOOD, TEARS AND WAR**

I. Traces of Blood and the Matter of a Paraclete's Coming: The Menstrual Economy of V.

Oh man,
I want some young blood,
Drink it, gargle it, use it for a moufwash.
Hey, young blood, what's happening tonight. . . .
(V. 300)

Damn men and their politics.
(V. 90)

The Harper Perennial edition of Pynchon's V. features on its cover a woman in a cardinal's gown, her turned face hidden by windswept black hair. She holds the gown up over her knees, revealing her legs almost to the full extent of her thighs. The crimson fabric of her garment gathers and creases in suggestive folds across the top and down the sides of her legs. The folds of the red gown form a dark, oval recess out of which her legs emerge: her lower body becomes a magnified version of her vagina. A shadowy v-shape separates the top of her thighs. The woman is neither black nor white, but somewhere in between—a composite representation, perhaps, of all the women from different cultures in the novel. In the left-hand corner of the cover is the book's title: V. Together with this enigmatic letter or initial, the painting that adorns the book's cover inaugurates the quest for who or what V. is. At the end of the second chapter, when Stencil reads out the haunting portion of his dead father's journal, this mystery takes center stage: "There is more behind and inside V. than any of us had suspected. Not who, but what: what is she. God grant that I may never be called upon to write the answer, either here or in any official report" (V. 53). The search is on; like Oedipa's Tristero in The Crying of Lot 49 and Slothrop's Rocket in Gravity's Rainbow, Stencil's V. both beckons and evades the questor, imparting the possibility of a realm of meaning that is simultaneously sacred and dangerous, or sacred

because dangerous.¹

From the very beginning, then, Pynchon's text characteristically involves the kind of enigma which, in Teresa de Lauretis's words, coexists with "the desire that will generate a narrative" (111). And this desire, as de Lauretis's book Alice Doesn't repeatedly stresses, is masculine. The question or quest that drives narrative involves the elusive object of woman, the sacred and monstrous enigma of femininity. Returning to classical myths, de Lauretis investigates the paradigmatic structure of narrative and finds that a "centuries-long patriarchal culture [is] still at work with a vengeance in contemporary epistemologies and social technologies" (125). We thus have Freud's story of ego formation in which woman functions as both the male subject's obstacle and his reward in the process of individuation, and we have Propp's Morphology of the Folktale which finds that patriarchal folk tales position the female figure as a conduit for a male's ascension to power. According to de Lauretis, the structure of myths--the legends of Oedipus and Perseus, for instance--established the mythical subject as male and the object/obstacle of his quest as "morphologically female" (119):

The received interpretations of the Oedipus story, Freud's among others, leave no doubt. The desire is Oedipus's, and though its object may be woman (or Truth or knowledge or power), its term of reference and address is man: man as social being and mythical subject, founder of the social order, and source of mimetic violence; hence the institution of the incest prohibition, its maintenance in Sophocles' Oedipus as in Hamlet's revenge of his father, its costs and benefits, again, for man. (112)

In the Oedipal narrative's delineation of sexual difference, masculine and feminine line up under the terms active and passive. The hero's movement is a penetration into another realm; *he* is culture's "active principle," while "she (it) is an element of plot-space, a topos, a resistance, matrix and matter" (119).²

Pynchon's V. appears to embrace just this assumption or governing principle. Herbert Stencil's quest for the meaning of the woman in his father's text is mythical and epic in its scope; he journeys all over the world, locating and gathering the stories told by several men who have encountered V. in various guises. V. is the occasion of their

narratives, the matter of the riddle which Stencil tries to solve. As Alice Jardine claims, in her section on V. in Gynesis, V. occurs as “that which must be explored through an erotic merging at the interior of language, through a radical dismemberment of the textual body, a female body” (246). Consequently, the several plot-lines of V. interconnect through the scattered appearances of the eponymous, enigmatic and feminine figure, and Stencil’s quest becomes the reader’s: every single v-word, from a rat named Veronica to the word “versus,” becomes a clue to the novel’s meaning. The mysterious woman and the fragments of some kind of truth are inseparable: according to the logic of the quest, the questor—and by implication the reader—is masculine.

Jacques Derrida’s Spurs: Nietzsche’s Styles, to turn briefly toward a text which investigates the alignment of femininity with truth, concurs with the premise that “it is the man who believes in the truth of woman, in woman-truth” (63). Here, of course, “the man” represents the male-dominated tradition of philosophical thought which situates the masculine subject as the agent of metaphysical investigation. Opening his own philosophical investigation of “Nietzsche’s Styles” in Spurs, Derrida states: “it is woman who will be my subject” (37). From this unexpectedly clear assertion, he weaves his way through Nietzsche’s alignment of truth’s possibility with femininity. Not easily won, truth resembles, in Nietzsche’s metaphorical execution, a chaste woman:

Supposing truth to be a woman—what? is the suspicion not well-founded that all philosophers, when they have been dogmatists, have had little understanding of women . . . that the gruesome earnestness, the clumsy importunity with which they have been in the habit of approaching truth have been inept and improper terms for winning a wench? . . . Certainly she has not let herself be won—and today every kind of dogmatism stands sad and discouraged. (qtd in Derrida, Spurs 55)

Derrida then plays with the terms of this supposition and attempts to find a space for woman beyond or within the masculine infrastructure of Nietzsche’s rhetoric. A feminine position on such dogmatic and phallogentric quests for meaning would be, for Derrida, one of “distance” and disbelief:

And she is woman precisely because she herself does not believe in truth itself, because she does not believe in what she is, in what she is believed to be, in what she thus is not. In its maneuvers distance strips the lady of her identity and unseats the philosopher-knight.

That is, if he has not already been twice-spurred by the woman.
(53)

Whatever femininity is, it will not be located in masculine epistemological models. In an introductory note to the selection from *Spurs* in *A Derrida Reader*, Peggy Kamuf aligns this characterization of truth as a withholding and dissimulating woman with other terms in Derrida's writings, such as the *pharmakon* and the hymen, which "do not name an essence but an undecidable process of inscription" (354). Ultimately, for Derrida, woman's distance from phallogentrism—her alignment with the indeterminacy, the non-rigidity, of writing—is an "affirmative power," one which offers something other than "truth and his phallus" (*Spurs* 67, 97). Not reducible to simply anti-phallogentrism or even "anti-castration," the meaning which woman locates is a kind of dissimulation of meaning, embracing the play of undecidability rather than thirsting after the law of truth.

Pynchon's novel invokes or reproduces the masculine epistemological quest, but, like Derrida's manipulation of Nietzsche's terms, it also fractures and parodies this quest. "As spread thighs are to the libertine," Chapter Three begins, "flights of migratory birds to the ornithologist, the working part of his tool bit to the production machinist, so was the letter V to young Stencil" (V 61). If we read it from bottom to top, from low to high, the letter spreads open, refusing consolidation as it expands in two directions. It is in essence a parodic antithesis of what Stencil desires—one answer, a direct correspondence—and becomes linked in turn to the instability, to the ventilation or exposure, of masculinity itself. From "Suck Hour," the scene in which the sailors attach themselves to beer taps "in the shape of large breasts" (12-13), to the various incidents of rape, the parody of masculinity ranges along a cutting edge. When the narrator constructs a quest motif from the old joke of the boy whose ass falls off when he finally removes a screw from his navel, he sheds proleptic light on the novel's hero himself. In his self-definition, as "He Who Looks for V." (226), Stencil threatens to fall apart at the resolution of the enigma; the reader is offered no easy identification with a hero who not only refers to himself in the third person, in a "Forcible dislocation of personality" (62), but who tries "not to think . . . about any end to the search" (55). His subjectivity, his sense of being coherent or consistent, is obviously preserved and menaced by the mystery of a woman behind a letter.

V. is Stencil's umbilical screw, and her characterization in the text is filtered through the lens of his attachment to her.

In juxtaposition with Stencil's desperation for V. is the aimlessness of Benny Profane. For Profane, the riddle of femininity is just a nuisance. He dreams of an "all-electronic woman" who would give him nothing to worry about: "Maybe her name would be Violet," muses Profane. "Module concept: fingers' weight, heart's temperature, mouth's size out of tolerance? Remove and replace, was all" (385). Profane is typically anti-heroic; even his descent into the underworld of the New York sewage system finds him fighting monsters (alligators) who *want* to be killed. Of course, his wandering nature is deeply attractive to women, but, as he remarks to himself, "women remind me of inanimate objects" (288). He refuses, furthermore, to go "prowling for coño" with the guys who get him the job in the sewers (138). His apathy relegates the feminine to a more extreme version of passivity: the realm of the inanimate. Locked in a kind of masculine adolescence, Profane is a perpetual "schlemihl" who yo-yos through life, bumming off the generosity of women (9).

Hinged upon the adventures of Stencil and Profane are interlaced tales of masculine absurdity and of women attempting to negotiate a world run by men. From farcical episodes such as Suck Hour (as well as, for instance, the scene in which several naval officers bomb each other with water-filled condoms) the novel then moves into more violent male games or prerogatives: mutilation of women, rape, two world wars, and empire-building imperialism. The quest that ultimately defines masculinity is, in Pynchon's text, aligned with domination and absurdity, not apotheosis. If V. is a novel about interpretation, about the search for some kind of truth, it is also about the way in which interpretation both relies upon gendered foundations and extends into ideological practice. Profane himself, thinking his way "into an erection," interprets history through the lens of sex. He speculates that "if he'd been the type who evolves theories of history for his own amusement, he might have said all political events: wars, governments and uprisings, have the desire to get laid as their roots" (214). And he realizes, if vaguely, that the battle ground is metaphorically and often literally the female body.

The text then unmask the act of interpretation from a masculine point of view and

flushes out Profane's hypothesis. In a self-reflective moment, for example, it introduces a character who requires violent metaphors about women to disclose his experiences. Hugh Godolphin, an explorer and servant of empire, only understands the type of undertaking that involves mastery and penetration. Describing his perception of Vheissu to Victoria Wren (a V. figure in the novel), he states:

‘I wondered about the soul of that place. If it had a soul. Because their [the Vheissu people’s] music, poetry, laws and ceremonies come no closer. They are skin too. Like the skin of a tattooed savage. I often put it that way to myself—like a woman. I hope I don’t offend.’ (170)

He is a figure of misreading, of a sadistic need to know or to impose and possess meaning. For Godolphin, the search for meaning resembles the desire to tear open the skin of a tattooed woman, to “leave the veins and ligaments raw and quivering and open at last to your eyes and your touch” (171). Godolphin is involved in a senseless circle of filling in what he perceives as blank spaces (on a map, for instance) and then flaying them open—and Pynchon reserves for him the horror of meaninglessness. From Godolphin’s perspective, the world, which he pictures as passive and feminine, is a void and a “dream of annihilation” (206). According to Eva Karpinski, *V.* “indicts these representations”; exposing the “Western world’s entanglement in . . . white, Eurocentric, patriarchal and extremely rationalist constructs,” the text stages the danger of metaphors such as Godolphin’s and calls their construction into question (Karpinski 37).³

However, Pynchon’s novel also presents glimmers of alternatives to this conception of the world. The chapter which contains Godolphin’s confession also invokes an entirely different perspective on the appropriation of a passive, “feminine” object. Chapter Seven, “She Hangs on the Western Wall,” circulates around a terminated quest: the unsuccessful theft of Botticelli’s *Birth of Venus* by a group of male admirers. Plotting the details of the heist, one conspirator remarks to another, “And I love her too. We are comrades in love” (*V.* 165). But when the moment comes to plunge the knife into the canvas, the conspirators are “struck suddenly impotent” (209). In a scene replete with metaphors of sexual intercourse, Mantissa, Venus’s main “suitor,” is horrified by the light reflected from the knife’s blade. The blade’s vicious movement through the painting’s

surface recalls to Mantissa Godolphin's image of the "gorgeous surface" (209), and he turns toward Venus with the question, "'What of her God, her voice, her dreams?'" (210). In a decision to leave the painting where it is, Mantissa repudiates the desire to tear something open and possess it. The chapter as a whole, then, recapitulates the motif of the search for V. and unsettles it. It asks a different kind of question, a type of question which releases the questioner from a position of aggression. With the words, "'You have come all this way . . . and now you will leave her?'" (210), the chapter gestures toward a kind of love without possession, interpretation without mastery.

The exploration of the fictional Vheissu and the thwarted plan to steal the Botticelli are subsequently paired with the historical colonization of South Africa and rape of African women. Mondaugen's story of his research in South Africa and his encounters with V.-figures serves to shift the meaning of V. from some metaphysical feminine Truth to the realities of masculine brutality. Two V.-words particularly equivocate the feminine identity of the text's "problem": Von Trotha's "'*Vernichtungs Befehl*,' whereby the German forces were ordered to exterminate systematically every Herero man, woman and child [between 1904 and 1912]" (245), and "*Väterliche Züchtigung*," "fatherly chastisement," as Pynchon translates for us (267). As Stencil's quest takes him through the horror of Mondaugen's recollections about a "Kingdom of Death" (273), he finds female manifestations of V. (Hedwig Vogelsang and Vera Meroving) only on the periphery of masculine, imperialist acts of entitlement.

The quest motif is thus arguably part of the text's self-conscious position on the construction of woman-as-truth. In other words, V. is primarily about the ways in which the so-called enigma of femininity is a masculine discourse, and one which constitutes a culture of violence. According to Alice Jardine,

V. is a novel *about* interpretation, *about* the possibilities and impossibilities of 'making sense,' of 'making plots.' And it is *a* woman who is at the source of these (im)possibilities. V. is about how a woman is narrative's problem, about how a woman is the object of the subject-in-narrative's quest. (247)

V. is also about how a woman is the scapegoat of patriarchal legacies, how femininity becomes a projection of masculine desire and fear. Each tale which Stencil hears about V.

becomes “Stencilized,” as Pynchon’s narrator informs us (V 228), and Stencil is not always a sympathetic listener. Alternately condemning and fearing V. throughout the novel, Stencil ultimately believes that he hates her. The narrator consistently provides a different source of focalization, remarking at one point that Stencil “could have as vile a mind as any of the Crew” (411), and that only for Stencil is V. a “beast of venery” (412).

A kind of scapegoating also occurs in the criticism of the text. Attempting to understand the function of, or reason for, V.’s role in the novel, critical interpretations often align her with Pynchon’s scenes of degeneration and violence. Although the parody is not necessarily self-evident, it does emerge when one undertakes a shift in focus away from Stencil’s obsession. Contrary to what Dwight Eddins argues in The Gnostic Pynchon, V. is not a straightforward adaptation of Henry Adams’s conceptualization of the Virgin/Dynamo. Eddins’s point that Pynchon draws upon “a powerfully realized version of the [feminine] archetype” is well made, but the notion that V. is “a malevolent goddess figure” modelled after Adams’s Dynamo is not entirely convincing (Eddins 51). Eddins writes:

The Virgin of Chartres and Venus—“Venus genetrix,” as Lucretius calls her, “life-giving Venus”—have degenerated into a terrifying goddess who promotes suffering. . . . The dynamo, it seems, has its own ruling antispirit, its decreating deity, a figure that can be best projected as a negative of the redeeming Virgin—in short, as Pynchon’s V. (53)

Even Deborah Madsen’s Postmodernist Allegories of Thomas Pynchon, at one stage in the argument, claims that V. ushers in the twin horrors of death and the inanimate. While Madsen’s analysis of the text tends to negotiate the possibility that V. must be somehow perceived according to “four-dimensional” time and space, she claims that a “V metaphysic” governs “selective perception” and decadence (34). And like both Eddins and Madsen, Catharine Stimpson, in “Pre-Apocalyptic Atavism: Thomas Pynchon’s Early Fiction,” discusses V. in terms of an obstruction to what she surprisingly terms the “healthy male sexuality” in the text (80).

Eva Karpinski, however, finds that V. is a personification of malignancy only when (mistakenly) viewed from a Godolphin/Stencil perspective. In her article “From V. to Vineland” she states:

Conventional critical readings of V. as the embodiment of decadence, the symbol of the growing degeneracy of the human toward the inanimate, the death-drive, or some other ominous destructive force fall prey to the same illusion that drives the Stencils and the Godolphins of Pynchon's world. The figure of V. foregrounds the enactment of strategies of power and containment that characterized the master's discourse, strategies inherent in the very act of representation. (35)

We can locate in the narrative voice, moreover, a note of sympathy resonating in the construction of V. It is not clear, the narrator states, whether V. "suspect[s] her fetishism . . . to be part of any conspiracy levelled against the animate world" (V 411); she is unwitting. "What would have been her reaction, had she known?" he asks (411). V. is "racked by [love]" and seduced by the image of a mechanical woman. She even reflects Godolphin's image of the tattooed "savage," remarking, "'But if a girl could have, oh, a lovely rainbow or wardrobe of different-hued, different-sized and -shaped feet . . .'" (488, Pynchon's ellipsis).⁴ Taking on the role of the fetish, she exposes the transformation of masculine metaphors about femininity into destructive literality. In Stencil's narrative, this transformation is horrifying, but what the narrative voice appears to impart is the notion that, to borrow Dorothy Dinnerstein's words, "women [must] stop serving as scapegoats . . . for human resentment of the human condition" (Dinnerstein 234).

As scapegoat and fetish, V. bears the burden of evil as it is delineated in Pynchon's text. She occurs at the thematic nexus between sexuality and death, embodying the masculine fear of the body's fragility and of what cannot be known. Her incorporation of metallic matter (her gold feet, her silver teeth, for instance) reflects the extension of this fear toward corporeality and decay. Hanjo Berressem's *Pynchon's Poetics* offers a reading similar to my own of V.'s literal incarnation as an "inanimate object of desire" (72). In phallogocentric discourses, or "phallogocratic structures," Berressem states, "woman crosses the border from being a cultural object, but still human and animate, to being an inanimate fetish object" (65). What V. and her lover, Melanie L'Heuremaudit reveal is an internalization of the male desire to turn the female "chaos of flesh" (Pynchon's words) into an automaton or doll. For Berressem, the fetishization of V. and Melanie is an extension of the novel's investigation of colonial aggression; the female body is a "privileged site" for

redefinition and mutation (64-74). When V., with her cigarette, burns the word “fetiche” into Melanie’s skirt, she tells it like it is and undercuts the male hallucination. In her reclusive world of mirrors, into which she brings Melanie, she blurs the “subject/object binarism” on which fetishism rests and permits Melanie’s desire to return to and reflect Melanie herself (70).

The chapter “In which Esther gets a nose job” anticipates the thematic treatment of the fetishization of V. and Melanie. Delineating a horrifying scene of mutilation, chapter four casts the event in terms of male control over women’s bodies. Esther’s face is violently penetrated and transfigured.⁵ On the one hand, she is constructed as a willing recipient of the procedure, but, on the other, Pynchon makes it quite clear that her so-called choice is governed by idealized renditions of the feminine form. It seems to the narrator, for instance, that his world is populated by women with bandaged noses. The entire scene is underwritten, moreover, by a love between women (in particular, by Rachel’s compassion for Esther), which Esther fails to recognize. It is then contrasted with Dr. Schoenmaker’s later admission that he loves Esther, as he says, ““not as you are. But as I see you”” (V 294). For Schoenmaker, women are a “chaos of flesh” which masks an ideal image and which he can release, provided that they succumb to his quest: ““Esther, I want to give. I want to do things for you. If I can bring out the beautiful girl inside you, the idea of Esther, as I have done already with your face . . .”” (294, Pynchon’s ellipsis). A ticking clock in the background of their dialogue alludes to the forthcoming pregnancy, to the vitality of Esther’s body, from which Schoenmaker ultimately flees.

The rape of Sarah in the South African camps takes the horror of masculine domination even further. Handcuffed to a German soldier’s bed, Sarah’s participation in some kind of female passivity is unthinkable. It is not a “sadistic affair,” as Eddins describes it (71); it is the pivotal scene of brutality in the novel and it makes analeptic reference to Fina’s attack by the New York City gang, the Playboys. Sarah’s initial attempts at resistance are completely overcome, not only by the institution of colonization but also by the material manifestations of its force: barbed wire, weaponry and manacles. Any possibility of choice is completely erased, as is the possibility that, like Melanie’s,

Sarah's suicide is accidental. But Sarah's suicide jams the colonial machinery, if only in a limited way. It is an act of refusal to be violated further or to bequeath her body, her labour, to the camp's enterprise.⁶

Exploring the narrative and ideological calibration of femininity with passivity, the text thus exposes it. From abortion, abstinence, disguise and suicide to lesbian and heterosexual love, V. ultimately discloses or leaks, by means of the actions of its female characters, information on its own maneuvers against the enclosure of passivity. These maneuvers tend to mystify the male characters, and coincide, moreover, with V.'s power to encourage abortion, to spread love, and to support revolutions: "the woman was clearly a troublemaker" (V. 472). Furthermore, V.'s influence extends through the threatening leverage of undecidability. As Stencil père muses, "Riot was her element, as surely as this dark room, almost creeping with amassed objects. The street and the hothouse; in V. were resolved, by some magic, the two extremes. She frightened him" (487). V. repudiates or deconstructs identity and truth—"disguise is one of her attributes"; "a sinister uncertainty surrounded the priest" (Pynchon 462, 340)—and she places the act of questioning in the hands of women. As one of the girls whom Maijstral encounters in the shelled streets of Malta asks, "How can there be faith without questions? The [bad] priest said it's right for us to ask questions" (328). In other words, V. inheres in a kind of endless reverberation of questions without answers. She undermines entrenched orders, defining only death as "the exhaustion of all possible permutations and combinations" (298).

While the patriarchal legacies in V. attempt to write and perpetuate themselves across the idealized, passive female body, V.'s is not necessarily a maternal or matriarchal power, as both Alice Jardine and Catharine Stimpson argue.⁷ Although Maijstral's memoirs (his legacy to his daughter) consistently circulate around an obsession with the maternal feminine, matriarchy cannot be patriarchy's alternative in the text; it is only an inverse reflection of Maijstral's anxiety about a world at war. "All our babies," he writes in his journal, "have had only one father, the war; one mother, Malta her women" (325). This anxiety is displaced onto V., whom he believes to be in some way occasioned by the war and whom he watches die, or become dismembered, under a fallen beam. The beam,

though, only momentarily pins her down; she metaphorically slips out from under it, and her scattered remains reemerge in the hands of future women. As manifestations of V., these women appear throughout the novel as prostitutes, virgins, mothers, lesbians, nuns.

What cuts across each representation of female sexuality is menstruation; it is the link among women scattered throughout a world divided by violent masculine governments. The proliferating allusions to menstruation and menstrual blood which surround the cryptic characterization of V. have been entirely overlooked in the criticism of the text. Menstruation remains unheeded or unspoken. Yet, as psychoanalyst Claude Daly in his 1935 essay on menstruation and literature explains, once the repression of menstruation in conscious thought is overcome, "it will be discovered everywhere in literature, art, mythology, etc., by those who are willing and able to see it" (qtd in Lupton 10). When we consider Pynchon's attention to vision, and to what flickers at its edges, menstruation occurs as a possible, if unconscious, signifier in the text. Like V. herself, menstrual blood materializes in veiled, ambivalent forms, provoking male dread and fascination. As an aspect of V., it equivocates her alignment with either maternity or death. She embraces each. Menstruation is both a positive and negative power, the blood simultaneously an announcement of fertility and its negation. In V., menstrual blood appears to inform the various images of stains and strange pools of blood which haunt four of the characters: Profane, Hannah the barmaid, Mondaugen, and Maijstral. It also emerges in oblique references—characteristic of menstrual symbolism in myth and in literature—to ticking clocks, to the prospect of "mirror time," to the moon and to another, as yet unheeded, order of communication. Menstrual blood is that which renders permeable the bar between the active and passive opposition, staining the pages of masculine legacies in the text.

The text does not long for fecund heterosexual relationships as an antidote to the violence of the twentieth century, nor does it place in V. the impediment to this vision of restored vitality. Rather, V. opposes masculine domination through the figure of the menstruating female, whose bleeding body is both curse and cure of patriarchal consolidation. This pharmacopoeic image, this simultaneity of healing and harming, accounts for the ambiguous responses to V., I would argue, both in the novel and in its

critical reception. The criticism tends to claim that Pynchon's novel searches for a goddess of the twentieth century, and that the search culminates in an image of a goddess half revealed, half concealed by the century's fetishization of inanimate things. Perhaps, however, in its menstrual economy of images, the text gestures toward a different cultural organization of male and female, represented in part by goddess iconography. The blood spilled by twentieth-century hostilities, the blood which appears to usher in V.'s manifestations, potentially signifies its opposing terms: renewal, synchrony, even a refusal to reproduce the systems of violence. As Pynchon himself insists, the title of the book is not V but V. [V-period], hinting perhaps at the significance beyond the abbreviation, at the fluid context of the letter.⁸

Chris Knight's Blood Relations: Menstruation and the Origin of Culture presents an illuminating context for a reading of Pynchon's V. Claiming at the outset that "revolution is at the heart of what we are," and that the earliest women synchronized their activities and cycles in order to establish collective responsibilities with men (4), Knight's exhaustive anthropological study offers resources for a reinterpretation of Pynchon's placement of V. at the scene of riot and rebellion. As Knight elaborates in his introduction,

Blood had been constructed, during the course of the human revolution, to signal inviolability or 'taboo.' In my narrative there was nothing complicatedly 'symbolic' about this. Women just went on sex strike at the biologically appropriate period—during the time of month when menstruation normally occurred. Any man noticed to be blood-covered might then have been suspected of 'strike-breaking.' Like a rapist or murderer, he would have had 'blood on his hands.' Assuming that men wanted to avoid suspicion, this consideration would have motivated the shunning of menstrual stains. (Knight 38)

Returning again and again to this point, Knight emphasizes that menstrual taboos emerged as women's way of signalling "no" to aggressive men. In Knight's revolutionary five-hundred page thesis, it is this negative assertion that marked women's gender solidarity and that initiated an extensive system of bargaining and cultural organization with men. It becomes for Knight a vision of cooperation, a way of averting, even, contemporary humanity's "power to destroy . . . itself" (1). "Human culture," he states, "has not always been capitalist; neither has it always been dominated by persons with light-coloured skins.

In these pages it will be argued further that culture was not invented by—and has not always been dominated by—men” (3). Culture may in fact have emerged out of women’s capacity to synchronize their menstrual cycles and to involve men in strategies of group survival.

Viewing V. from this perspective, the novel’s nostalgia is not so much for a goddess of sexual love but for a way back to, or a vision of, a kind of resistance to systems of domination. When V., for instance, appears in South Africa in the midst of a tribal revolt against the colonial powers, her presence there appears to connect her with an imperative, strategic conflict. Three times, moreover, her presence is foretold by a stain on the courtyard ground of the colonial house:

Back here Mondaugen could also see down into a kind of inner courtyard. Sunlight, filtered through a great sandstorm far away in the desert, bounced off an open bay window and down, too bright, as if amplified, into the courtyard to illuminate a patch or pool of deep red. Twin tendrils of it extended to a nearby doorway. Mondaugen shivered and stared. The reflected sunlight vanished up a wall and into the sky. He looked up, saw the window opposite complete its swing open and a woman of indeterminate age in a negligee of peacock blues and greens squint into the sun. (235-236)

Later, when Mondaugen spills his wine, he recalls the “two streaks of blood (when had he begun to call it blood?) in the courtyard” (276). The streaks or stains of “blood” are linked both to V. and to the scenes of violence within and without the compound. Although they are as mysterious to the reader as they are to Mondaugen, the blood stains intimate that slaves are being killed on both sides of the fortification. They signify a repudiation of the barricade between inside and outside that the colonizers try to erect. To put it another way, the blood signals a refusal of this barricade in sympathy with the rebelling Africans.⁹

This reading of menstrual blood as a negative power, as a refusing “no,” is the central assertion of Knight’s argument. Knight maintains that menstrual synchrony created solidarity and bargaining power among early females:

Where their cycles were randomized, females could be dealt with one by one and thereby managed and controlled. Synchrony, by contrast, would have been a manifestation of inter-female solidarity; its achievement would have granted females a special kind of power, enabling them to escape being privatized by dominant males either monogamously or in harems. (222)

When V. makes a final manifestation as Mara, both her association with other women and

her disruptive presence in a totalitarian state are significant in terms of Knight's argument. V., here resembling a sorceress, exclaims to the Imperial court in Malta:

‘I have done it all . . . taught your wives to love their own bodies, showed them the luxury of a woman's love; restored potency to your eunuchs so that they may enjoy one another as well as the three hundred perfumed, female beasts of your harem.’ (V 463)

This creation of what Knight would call a “powerful inter-female coalition” (220) looks back to Rachel's love for Esther, to Rachel's exclamation to Schoenmaker that she knows Esther's period “has been right on time” (V, 50), and to her ironic remark to Profane on behalf of her gender: “‘We can all be conned because we've got one of these,’ touching her crotch, ‘and when it talks we listen’” (384). This notion of a “female coalition” also surfaces in the novel, accompanied by a direct reference to menstruation, when the narrator quips that Mafia's novels “ran a thousand pages each and like sanitary napkins had gathered in an immense and faithful sisterhood of consumers” (125).

Even Hanne, a character who makes a brief appearance, is introduced against the backdrop of this menstrual economy. Muttering the words, “‘damn men and their politics’” (90), Hanne is suddenly struck by her inability to wash an eerie stain off a plate:

She rinsed and stacked the last plate. No. A stain. Back went the plate into the dishwasher. Hanne scrubbed, then examined the plate again, tilting it toward the light. The stain was still there. Hardly visible. Roughly triangular, it extended from an apex near the center to a base an inch or so from the edge. A sort of brown color, outlines indistinct against the faded white of the plate's surface. . . . The stain flickered . . . now crescent, now trapezoid. (90)

The stain then seems to fasten to her eyes, affecting her vision and swimming “over the crowd, like a tongue on Pentecost” (92). It seems to indicate her peculiar affinity with another realm of meaning or communication within a male-dominated world. Pynchon never explains the stain; it flickers in and out of sight. As the authors of The Curse claim, menstrual blood appears in literature “invariably in disguise” (Delaney et al. 186). The “unmentionable” is a submerged symbolic possibility:

A number of poetic symbols may at times signify menstruation: sickness, mud, volcanoes, the arrival of a visitor, bathing, dumping garbage, falling from a high place, odors, leakages, stains, clocks, swamps, rags, tidal rhythms, and the colors red, pink, and purple. (187)

To this list of colors, we could add Pynchon's "sort of brown color . . . against the faded white." The stain on the plate appears when Hanne questions the way "men and their politics" devastate or (and the word is implied in the text) "fuck up" the world: "Didn't they use the same word for what a man does to a woman and what a successful politician does to his unlucky opponent?" (V 90) "See[ing] something" which the men around her do not, Hanne is initiated by this menstrual image into V.'s political vision: the fluid space between "Right and Left," in which the "dreamscape of the future" escapes the violence of the past and present (468). Associated with the Pentecost, the stain implies that Hanne has access to something sacred, to something that ushers in communion with others.

When Stencil père asks, "what gift of communication could ever come from a woman?" the text appears to provide the reader with an answer in menstruation. Hanne's vision of the stain links directly with Sidney Stencil's train of thought:

The matter of a Paraclete's coming, the comforter, the dove; the tongues of flame, the gift of tongues: Pentecost. Third Person of the Trinity. None of it was implausible to Stencil. The Father had come and gone. In political terms, the Father was the Prince; the single leader, the dynamic figure whose virtue used to be a determinant of history. This had degenerated to the Son, genius of the liberal love-feast which had produced 1848 and lately the overthrow of the Czars. What next? What Apocalypse?

Especially on Malta, a matriarchal island. Would the Paraclete be also a mother? Comforter, true. But what gift of communication could ever come from a woman. . . . (472, Pynchon's ellipsis)

Roony seems to be asking the same question when he smuggles "a tape recorder, disguised as a Kotex dispenser, into the ladies' room at Penn Station" (124). Between the Christian imagery in Stencil's reverie and the commonplace image of a Kotex dispenser, the conceptualization of menstruation draws sacred and profane together. Menstrual blood is both a stain, a smear, and a sign of some kind of communion or comfort. It reemerges, for instance, as this integrated symbol in the sewer-parish where Profane hunts alligators. Near the place where an old priest "sat preaching to a congregation of rats with saints' names, all to the intention of peace," Profane notices a strange stain (120). At the nexus of sacred and profane, an image of menstrual blood briefly flashes into view: "He [Profane] swung the beam over the old inscriptions, saw a dark stain shaped like a crucifix and broke

out in goosebumps” (121). Profane’s reaction is one of mystification, even terror, before the sacred. Here, in the sewer, is a possible clue to the meaning of V.¹⁰ The stain is clearly over-coded, and like menstrual blood, it is associated with the blood of the crucified Christ.¹¹

V. is a threshold figure, bridging sacred and profane, presence and absence, past and present. She displaces either/or oppositions, marking the limits of order and contaminating it. As Mara, her element is the sea; as one version of all the other female characters, it is menstrual blood. The two fluids are connected in cosmogonic myths. As Mircea Eliade illustrates in The Sacred and the Profane, “In whatever religious complex we find them, the waters invariably retain their function; they disintegrate, abolish forms, ‘wash away sins’; they are at once purifying and regenerating” (131). As Chris Knight shows, human culture itself began along shores, where females synchronized their periods with the lunar/tidal rhythms. The flow of water and the flow of blood are inextricably linked in cosmologies around the world; they are the fluids which make existence possible. Each is linked in turn to periodical destruction and regeneration; flooding water and flowing blood subsume the oppositions of death and life. A cosmological vision arising out of menstrual symbolism, out of “blood-drenched cosmogonies,” in Eliade’s words (51), does not therefore separate form from formlessness, life from death, cosmos from chaos.

In Pynchon’s chaotic world—“ten million dead and twice that wounded,” as Sidney Stencil muses about the first world war (V 458-459)—V. materializes as the messenger of some kind of cosmological order. Intimating the prospect that the world may not destroy itself, the text aligns blood from wounds with menstrual blood, with the possibility that there can be bleeding without dying or that a new cycle will emerge from the shedding of an old one. Maijstral thinks he performs V.’s last rites when, kneeling over her dismembered and injured body, he uses “her own blood, dipping it from the navel as from a chalice” to perform the sacrament of Extreme Unction (344). But V.’s chalice-like bleeding navel provides an image of resurrection. Like Kali, after whom is named a city repeatedly mentioned in Maijstral’s memoirs, she establishes a cyclical connection between life and death.¹² As Kali, the “blood-drinking” menstrual goddess in whom “cosmic

vengeance materializes" (Smith 74), she enters the scene, with her own blood on her lips, when Maijstral thinks the world is coming to an end.

Poised against the bleeding V. is the inanimate machinery and weaponry that smash the buildings where she is apparently killed. While machinery eventually grinds to a halt, and grinds other things to dust, the human body—particularly the female body—exhibits the flux and flow of a larger, cosmic order. For instance, V.'s greatest love, Melanie L'Heuremaudit, also juxtaposed with machinery, stalls the advancements of mechanization by means of her own symbolic actions. During the mechanized dance in chapter fourteen, in which she is lifted above the stage by a troupe of dancing robots, she allows herself to be impaled in her crotch by a long pole. Having refused or forgotten to wear the steel chastity belt, she gushes blood down her legs. The blood here is another ambiguous crucifixion/menstrual image: a sort of not-death, a reminder of the life beneath the layers of mechanization enveloping Melanie, a sacrifice. Melanie's blood signals her defiance of the system which tries to deform her body or to encapsulate it within its machinery. The hideous dance (a perversion, perhaps, of ancient menstrual dances) never makes it past opening night.¹³ As Katherine Sutherland writes, female blood is imagined as "potentially destructive but also absolutely constructive of culture itself. . . . Although it circulates in a closed and patriarchal system, it threatens always to transgress the boundaries of that closed system, thus destroying the system" (29-31). Melanie's bleeding vagina, positioned at center stage, marks a return of the repressed; Melanie is unbound, and she unveils what is usually hidden from sight, leaving the spectators with an image that haunts them "for many years" (V 414).

Contesting Lévi-Strauss's now famous theory, Chris Knight maintains that women were not originally passive objects of exchange between men. Menstrual blood, furthermore, was not always concealed nor banished; archaeology has uncovered countless depictions of menstruating women:¹⁴

There is no need to multiply examples of menstrual taboos or of their recurrent magical and cosmological dimensions. It is clear that a menstruating woman may be forbidden—but she is forbidden not because of her powerlessness or degradation, but, on the contrary, precisely because of the peculiar intensity of her assumed magical

powers at this time. (385)

In the ancient “blood-centered symbolic systems” women’s cycles were “powerful clocks,” in time with the changing moon. The species endured, Knight claims, because females initiated solidarity among themselves and with men; they synchronized sexual activity in the name of collectivity and permitted the construction of vast cultural and cosmological traditions (225). As Knight’s anthropological research reveals, “no other primate shows so close a correlation between menstrual cycle length and the lunar month” (215). Ancient astronomical and arithmetic systems reveal the correspondence between female periodicity and the cycle of the moon. Women synchronized their periodic bloodflow towards definite sexual and political ends: to draw men into blood taboos around which reproduction was organized, to create a ritual domain of human life and death, and to maintain female solidarity. The first contracts, Knight insists, were signed in blood. As custodians of the lunar calendar, women initiated a “menstrual self-identity” and drew cooperative men into it.

Perhaps Pynchon glimpses this conception of the female body-clock when he depicts love and friendship between women. Throughout V., moreover, there are allusions to the “rhythms” and “pulse” of history, to V.’s clock-work eye, to the possible existence of another conceptualization of time (307).¹⁵ Rachel, for example, viewing the reflection of a clock in a mirror, ponders to herself:

here were time and reverse-time, co-existing, cancelling one another exactly out. Were there many such reference points, scattered through the world, perhaps only at nodes like this room which housed a transient population of the imperfect, the dissatisfied; did real time plus virtual or mirror-time equal zero and thus serve some half-understood moral purpose? (46)

As Eliade explains in The Myth of the Eternal Return, the world has not always been governed by a linear, apocalyptic conception of time, for a “cyclical conception of disappearance and reappearance” once existed (87). From this “lunar perspective,” an ontology of cyclical time, derived from the waxing and waning of the moon, linked humanity to the rhythms of the cosmos. With her red cape and “glass eye in the shape of a clock,” V. seems to conjure up a cyclical, menstrual dimension of time, which equivocates

the despair, articulated by Benny Profane, that “it’s one way. . . . All one way” toward death and destruction (V 388, 286).

V., endlessly conjuring up symbols of menstruation, is a sorceress or witch; “Oh, at last he knew: he was in the presence of a witch,” remarks Mehemet to Sidney Stencil on V.’s manifestation as Mara (462). She is the menstruous and monstrous figure who bewitches the text and exceeds the boundaries of representation. Spreading contagious advice and leaving traces of herself everywhere, V. diffuses; she inheres in an economy of fluidity which shimmers as both a curse and cure. By trying to pin her down in the memoirs they bequeath to the next generation, Stencil and Maijstral ultimately align her with the proliferating power of writing. V. links blood to ink, the poisonous cure of memory and intention in Derrida’s conceptualization throughout *Dissemination*.¹⁶ In the medium of blood-ink, V. unfixes truth—the intended meaning from father to child—and gives rise to multiple interpretations. As Jardine states, V. is “the space of slippage, the spaces of non-resemblance, within the sign, among the signifier, signified and referent” (248); menstrual blood, I contend, is the fluid medium of this slippery movement and indeterminacy.

When Sidney Stencil disappears in the Epilogue (which could also be the prologue, as it is dated 1919), his ship is slammed into the depths of the sea by a tremendous waterspout. It is an image that recalls the wrath envisioned in *Moby Dick*, in which the *Pequod*, Melville’s ship of state, is sunk as a result of its captain’s maniacal quest. V. thus ultimately positions itself within an American literary heritage, lamenting an increasingly technological world hell-bent on destroying itself. The Virgin Land—the “master symbol” of America—to borrow Henry Nash Smith’s term (50), is God’s promise; but it is lost on an overly ambitious, decadent people. Certainly, Pynchon’s V. reverberates with overtones of the American jeremiad rhetoric, upon which Melville and his contemporaries drew. The novel revives the language of the Puritan political sermons, retaining the message of what Sacvan Bercovitch characterizes as a voice of “doom and promise” (29). In V., the old world father leaves a legacy to his new world son, a legacy cryptically encoded as V. Perhaps the legacy is America, the Virgin Land, where the promise of

cyclical regeneration for a fallen world lies latent. Here, the promise and the warning materializes in V., a figure who embraces oppositions. Like America, her womb is both threatening and fertile—according to the imagery of the sermons. And according to Pynchon's imagery, this threat and promise (of destruction and creation) inheres in the menstrual aspect of his witch-goddess V.¹⁷

II. Menstruation and Melancholy: The Crying of Lot 49

I make His Crescent fill or lack—
 His Nature is at Full
 Or Quarter—as I signify—
 His tides—do I control—
 (Emily Dickinson #909)

Fifteen or twenty days out of twenty-eight . . . woman is not only an invalid, but a wounded one. She ceaselessly suffers from love's eternal wound.
 (Jules Michelet)

A dense, lyrical novel, The Crying of Lot 49 is a sustained investigation of language in almost all of its components: communication, interpretation, sacred and profane signification, silence and noise. In The Language of Allegory Maureen Quilligan argues that, categorically, allegory involves the “curious treatment of language as language” (42) and that Pynchon’s text thus embraces the genre. For Quilligan, an allegorical tale, such as Lot 49, unfolds and connects meaning across the horizontal surface of the text’s words and through the “pivotal phenomenon of the pun” (33). Quoting from Pynchon’s text itself, that there is “high magic to low puns” (CL 129), Quilligan moves toward her claim that allegory and its puns suggest a sacred dimension of language; “Christ as logos not only created the world, he sanctioned wordplay,” and the Church fathers (Augustine and Aquinas, for instance) recognized this holy endorsement (161).¹⁸

By redefining the allegorical genre from one which is traditionally discussed in terms of vertical levels of meaning to one which “accretes [meaning] serially” (28), and which relies upon interconnected puns, Quilligan signals a different process of reading. She explains that the allegorical motif of the quest, a horizontal movement itself, draws the complexity of the words and the pattern of the allegory together:

The “other” named by the term *allos* in the word “allegory” is not some other hovering above the words of the text, but the possibility of an otherness, a polysemy, inherent in the very words on the page; allegory therefore names the fact that language can signify many

things at once. (26)

Repudiating the traditional notion that allegory relies upon a vertical distance between words and a higher design, she argues that such a definition of allegory limits the reader; from this position the reader is confronted with a binary choice rather than with the extensive, even sacred, alternatives latent within the text's language. "Language itself," she maintains, "must be felt to have a potency as solidly meaningful as physical fact before the allegorist can begin" (156). It is on this horizontal axis of expanding significance, then, that an allegorical tale traces the way in which signs of some sacred order (or "other," as Quilligan terms it) appear to coexist with, or even inhere within, profane and everyday signification.

In The Crying of Lot 49, not only does a quest motif crowded with puns unfold, but a horizontal disclosure of meaning appears to materialize in the movement from right to left as well as from left to right. Initiating this prospect in the first chapter, for instance, Pynchon names a radio station "KCUF." Later in the narrative, from KCUF's "mobile unit" of communication, D.J. Mucho Maas experiences a parallel world of sound and meaning. Mucho explains: "I can do the same thing in reverse. Listen to anything and take it apart again" (CL 142). The significance of this movement of reading becomes more evident once the word "Tristero," a clue to the possibility of sacred meaning, is read backwards. If we take apart Tristero and read from right to left, or anagrammatically, the Italian phrase, "I was sad" (Ero triste) emerges as a pun to indicate or to illuminate Pynchon's identification of sadness with Oedipa's quest through realms of communication.¹⁹

Oedipa's experience of sadness or melancholy invokes the ontological crisis deeply associated with the thematic investigation of self and language in The Crying of Lot 49. Indeed, the "crying" in the novel's title does not exclusively refer to the calling-process of an auction, to Oedipa's position as the "executrix" of an estate that will be auctioned. "Crying" also appears to allude to a passionate response to the tear between signifier and signified--the loss of direct, prelapsarian access to the Word.²⁰ Thus also a tear, the tear or rift is a form of sorrow which both blurs the Word and perceives its leakage into profane

signification, into mere words, the “secular miracle of communication” (CL 180). At several stages in her quest, Oedipa breaks down and cries, and her tears prefigure or instigate a kind of epiphanic knowledge, or at least the desire for some experience of this knowledge.²¹ It is through her tears, for instance, that Oedipa utters the significant response, “I will,” to Metzger’s charged message, “Come back. . . . Come on” at the end of the second chapter (43).

With the words “I will,” Oedipa breaks out of the passivity which formerly defined her as a housewife locked in a “deckful of days which seemed (wouldn’t she be the first to admit it?) more or less identical” (11). Like a deck of tarot cards, Oedipa’s days assume greater significance once she learns a different set of codes. The tower in which she feels herself trapped prefigures dramatic change; depicted on a tarot card, it is simultaneously the most dangerous and the most hopeful card in the deck. When Oedipa observes the painting of women imprisoned in a tower, “embroidering a kind of tapestry which spilled out of the slit windows and into a void, seeking hopelessly to fill the void” (21), she cries. Her tears fill up her sealed sunglasses, and she suddenly experiences a yearning to “see the world refracted through those tears, those specific tears, as if indices as yet unfound varied in important ways from cry to cry” (21). Here, the possibility is raised that the world and the language that constructs or represents it are neither trapped in a tower nor adrift in a void. Rather a space resonating with bittersweet meaning, as tangible and intangible as a tear, separates and draws them both together. It is the experience of melancholia, according to medieval astrological traditions, that permits a glimpse into, to borrow Giorgio Agamben’s words, an “intermediate epiphanic space”; “the lesson of melancholy [gleaned from medieval mystics] is that only what is ungraspable can truly be grasped” (Agamben 25-6).

Giorgio Agamben’s astonishing study Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture (1993) devotes several compressed chapters to the concept of melancholy. He investigates the iconographic and philosophical link among melancholy, contemplation and love, repeatedly finding that each involves withdrawal and a kind of desperation for the unattainable. According to Agamben, medieval mystics understood melancholy in terms of sin and religious contemplation. As a “*tristitia utilis* (useful sorrow),” melancholy is

intimately involved in redemption (13); the melancholic, deep within the corporeal humors of blood and bile, finds “celestial desires” and “sorrow for . . . sins” (13). Moving between the writings of medieval mystics (Hildegard von Bingen, for instance) and Freud’s theory of melancholy as a narcissistic condition in which the ego longs for the lost object (the maternal penis), Agamben concludes that the “unreal object of melancholy” opens up a space of mysterious wisdom: the knowledge that “the object is neither appropriated nor lost, but both possessed and lost at the same time” (21). Melancholy arises out of a sense of need to make the absent present, whether this absent presence is meaning, a beloved or that beckoning lost object.

In synecdoche and metonymy, Agamben finds a parallel for the simultaneously invoked and negated absent object. Metaphor too implies a fundamental absence: it functions as replacement for an unnamed other. Language itself, then, becomes melancholic; its proliferating components emerge from the bar between signifier and signified, from the deferral or abyss of presence (137). For Agamben, this bar or abyss is also the locus of possibility, a glimpse, even, of a “god” who joins together opposites, who simultaneously sutures and lacerates. And for Pynchon, this bar is the site of “excluded middles,” of a third realm of meaning that emerges in the split nature of the sign. The image or emblem of the “unimaginable Pacific” as “the hole left by the moon’s tearing-free” (CL 55) illuminates the notion that the tear/tear is filled with significance, with the power to invoke and sustain contemplation. The Pacific mirrors Oedipa’s tears and melancholy; its tides are pulled by the distant moon in an “unvoiced idea” of redemption for the land of which it is and is not a part (55).²² Like signification itself, it is also already the trace of a loss, and Oedipa must learn that hope lies in the acceptance of proximity to something that cannot be entirely grasped. There is, as Agamben states, “no possible origin beyond the signifier and the trace: the origin is an *architrace*, which in the absence of an origin establishes the very possibility of appearance and signification” (Agamben 156).

Oedipa is cast adrift in the sea of writing, in search of a text, which, by its very nature as writing, cannot grant her access to a unifying truth. According to Deborah Madsen, in The Postmodernist Allegories of Thomas Pynchon, Oedipa’s quest, “in the

realm of *écriture*,” inheres in the novel’s critique of a culture and ideology which confine ontological and epistemological realities to one definitive version of “Reality” (Madsen 56-57). Oedipa’s introduction to Mr. Thoth, an allegorical caricature of the Egyptian messenger-god, gives her a glimpse into an alternative version of the reality which has trapped her. This alternative, in Madsen’s words, contrasts “the conventional progress of a figural hermeneutic that leads to the unification of signs into a transcendental One” (63). Madsen thus poises Thoth against the Christian god of Truth; Thoth appears in Lot 49 as an agent of multiple discourses and non-identity (64). He is not, however, dismissed from the narrative as quickly as Madsen says he is. On the contrary, Thoth’s absent presence is also implied throughout the text in the various references to medicines, drugs and poisons. While Madsen, drawing from Derrida’s Dissemination, offers a lucid analysis of Thoth’s role in the dislocation of metaphysical meaning, she overlooks his specific functions in writing and healing.

Thoth is god of the *pharmakon*, of the liquid that is both remedy and poison. And, as Derrida reminds us, “There is no such thing as a harmless remedy. The *pharmakon* can never be simply beneficial” (Derrida 99). While the *pharmakon* may be compensatory to health, it violates or supplants the “life” of a disease. A malleable substance, it functions according to imitation and displacement. Sharing its ambiguous properties with ink, with writing, which displaces the presence of speech, the *pharmakon* has no true essence. For Derrida, writing and the *pharmakon* inflict a painful pleasure; within their domains, such oppositions come together and play off each other. Purity is disrupted and transgression enacted through the introduction of difference or *différance*: “the disappearance of any originary presence, . . . the condition of possibility and the condition of impossibility of truth. At once” (168).

From the opening sentence, in which Oedipa enters the narrative having partaken of a fondue, heavy on the “kirsch,” to the dandelion wine she shares with Cohen, Lot 49 is saturated with references to liquids, remedies and toxins (CL 9). The second sentence of the novel finds Oedipa trying to get as “drunk as possible,” and the second chapter has her drunk on wine and tequila (10). Cans of hair spray and bug repellent go off, and a corporate executive pours gasoline over himself. Even the oregano in Oedipa’s garden

“contract[s] a strange mold” (23). Several characters in the novel smoke pot and bone-charcoal filtered cigarettes, while those in *The Courier’s Tragedy* poison a duke and make ink out of human bones. And, of course, there is also the heavy stuff: the LSD that blurs the “sharp edges” of Mucho’s identity and which Dr. Hilarius tries to push on Oedipa (136). In each case, some kind of escape is longed for or enacted, and some kind of resurrection is often implied. Drinking the dandelion wine, for instance, Oedipa muses that the bones, which fertilize the soil, nourish “the ghosts of dandelions. . . . As if the dead really do persist, even in a bottle of wine” (99). This possibility, moreover, emerges in another experience of melancholy: “No, thought Oedipa, sad” is the phrase which introduces her speculation about the bones and wine (99). The various references to the bone-based ink, smoke and wine create a pharmacopoeic link between life and death. Oedipa’s sense that a form of transubstantiation takes place within her permits her access to another type of communication across worlds.

This kind of passageway to former lives dissolves the border constructed around identity and associated with the anxiety of non-being. Without LSD, but through less perilous substances, Oedipa finds the ontological possibility that she is not necessarily trapped and alone with herself nor entirely defined by a single ideological system. Identity and nonidentity merge together and pull apart in a constant flux, and this liquid, intermediary space is the domain of Thoth. As a messenger of the “creative moment” and the god of nonidentity, in Derrida’s formulation (88), Thoth enters Pynchon’s text as Mr. Thoth, not to represent God or Truth but to speak of god’s proximity and of truth’s distortion in dreams and memory. When he reaches into a knitting bag to give Oedipa a clue to her quest, he forms a link with the embroidering women in the painting that makes her cry. Thoth is, after all, also the god who sews up wounds and heals the sick. This sewing, moreover, is intimately associated with writing, with both the “re-memoration” and the tear in which the proliferation of difference replaces metaphysical truth (Derrida 90).

As the god of combined oppositions, Thoth signals a nexus between life and death. For Giorgio Agamben, this space is apprehended in melancholy:

The imaginary loss that so obsessively occupies the melancholic

tendency has no real object, because its funereal strategy is directed to the impossible capture of the phantasm. . . . If the external world is in fact narcissistically denied to the melancholic as an object of love, the phantasm yet receives from this negation a reality principle and emerges from the mute interior crypt in order to enter into a new and fundamental dimension. . . . In this intermediate epiphanic place, located in the no-man's-land between narcissistic self-love and external object-choice, the creations of human culture will be situated one day, the interweaving (*entrebescar*) of symbolic forms and textual practices through which man enters in contact with a world that is nearer to him than any other. (Agamben 25)

Oedipa, as a melancholic, is both Echo and Narcissus²³ –or somewhere in between, in the “bad shit” of excluded middles (CL 181). Here, however, to quote George Levine, the option is not “either/or . . . and Oedipa’s ‘mixed shit’ isn’t shitty” (Levine 118). It is in this middle place that Oedipa, part Echo and part Narcissus, accepts the possibility of communion with the dead, with the “winged shape” of the deceased Driblette’s memories: “Perhaps her mind would go on flexing psychic muscles that no longer existed; would be betrayed and mocked by a phantom self as the amputee is by a phantom limb. . . . She tried to reach out, to whatever coded tenacity of protein might improbably have held on six feet below, still resisting decay” (CL 161). The act of reaching out in such a way invokes Agamben’s description of the melancholic’s “necromantic fascination but also . . . aptitude for ecstatic illumination” (Agamben 24). It is thus the act of holding two possibilities together in fluid suspension, of allowing oneself to come under Thoth’s power.

In this suspended position, Oedipa confronts the possibility of non-being, which is not necessarily a terrifying or pessimistic prospect. The god who allows contingency to be (and the contingency of being) is, according to Agamben, a god of love. Agamben’s chapter, “Demonic,” in The Coming Community argues that love inheres in the embrace of not-being and weakness in others:

Fleeing from our own impotence, or rather trying to adopt it as a weapon, we construct the malevolent power that oppresses those who show us their weakness; and failing our innermost possibility of not-being, we fall away from the only thing that makes love possible. Creation—or existence—is not the victorious struggle of a power to be against a power to not-be; it is rather the impotence of God with respect to his impotence, his allowing—being able to *not* not-be—a contingency to be. Or rather: It is the birth in God of love. (31 Agamben’s italics)

When Oedipa meets Mr. Thoth, she finds an elderly man whose apparent weakness or confusion is equivocated by the “sunlight pouring in all the windows” which he seems to attract or reflect (CL 92). Mr. Thoth thus emerges as Thoth, the ancient imitator-god of the sun-god, Ammon-Ra. As god of the moon, Thoth is an ancillary deity, supplementing the sun’s radiance and reflecting its presence. And while he counts out the days of life, he also weighs the souls of the dead.²⁴ Being and non-being, and the movement between them, come together under Thoth, and they converge in the melancholic’s sense of loss and openness to the world.

Imitating the twenty-eight day cycle of the moon, Oedipa’s quest leads her through realms of darkness and light to the god of the moon in the twenty-eighth year of her life.²⁵ There is a cyclical nature to her quest, where she often finds herself back where she started and where she moves along the edges of an “invisible yet congruent” world (CL 180). Her quest is transformative, a process of becoming and, like the moon, it is tied to the rhythms of larger, possibly sacred, realms. In The Sacred and the Profane Mircea Eliade investigates the lunar symbolism of sacred rituals and concludes: “In general most of the ideas of cycle, dualism, polarity, opposition, conflict, but also reconciliation of contraries, of *coincidentia oppositorum*, were either discovered or clarified by virtue of lunar symbolism” (Eliade 156). And this symbolism is closely linked with the menstrual cycle, the twenty-eight day rhythm in which the blood spilled at the end marks a beginning. It is necessary to remember that Pynchon’s quest figure is a woman and that the process of her “sensitization” to the clues around her involves not only a sense of alternating between saturation and emptiness, but also “headaches, nightmares, menstrual pains” (CL 177, 171). In this novel about language and subjectivity, menstruation emerges as a code or symbolic economy; it provides an alternative discourse to the tower/void opposition and the male/mail system, through which Oedipa experiences “all manner of revelations” (20).

The possibilities of these revelations coexist, in part, with the text’s interrogations of linear time or events: movie reels are reversed, time past and present further converge when Metzger sings along with himself in the film (31); Sunday always returns to mark the

novel's action (24, 26, 182); a newspaper (a chronicle of events) is called *Regeneracion* (121). The Christian liturgical calendar appears both in the title and in the frequent references to the Pentecost. Between Easter, the celebration of Christ's death and resurrection, and Pentecost, the celebration of Christ's return with the Holy Spirit (as tongues of fire)—events commemorated each year—an interval of forty-nine days takes place.²⁶ Time therefore involves waiting and returning; it is cyclical as well as linear. For Mircea Eliade, from whom Pynchon borrows the term "hierophany," cyclical time enacts an hierophany because it manifests the sacred.²⁷ And, the sacred, Eliade carefully illustrates in The Myth of the Eternal Return, is that which defies continuous or profane time. As a mythical "imitation of a celestial archetype" (5), cyclical time reproduces the eternal movement between chaos and creation; it coexists with a "lunar perspective":

We have elsewhere shown the importance of lunar myths in the organization of the first coherent theories concerning death and resurrection, fertility and regeneration, initiation, and so on. Here it will suffice to recall that, if the moon in fact serves to "measure" time [Eliade adds a footnote offering the Latin term *mensis*], if the moon's phases—long before the solar year and far more concretely—reveal a unit of time (the month), the moon at the same time reveals the "eternal return." The phases of the moon—appearance, increase, wane, disappearance, followed by reappearance after three nights of darkness—have played an immense part in the elaboration of cyclical concepts. (86)

Thus, according to Eliade, rituals of menstrual seclusion, in which a girl passes three days and nights in a dark hut, imitate the three nights of the moon's darkness.²⁸ Menstruation then becomes linked to a celestial event, to a sacred order (Sacred and Profane 101-102). Together with Pynchon's allusions to cyclical time, the moon and Sundays, Oedipa's "menstrual pains" gesture toward this sacred perspective of time in her journey. Her quest is intimately connected with the idea that she "bring[s] something of herself" to it, and this "something" may be as tangible as her female embodiment (CL 90). Her menstruating body forms a microcosmic link to the "constellations" of meaning around her.²⁹

The return of Sundays in Lot 49 invokes both the cyclical return of a measure of time and the Christian sabbath. Given the extensive Pentecostal images in the novel, the persistence of this particular day follows the motif of possible Christian revelation. Yet the

sabbath has ancient connotations; as the authors of The Wise Wound discover, the original sabbath was “the time of pause, the dangerous day of the moon, usually at its full, when the Babylonian Goddess was thought to be menstruating, or at the New Moon, which in other societies was thought to be the moon’s time of menstrual seclusion” (Shuttle and Redgrove 130). Oedipa’s journey both commences and concludes on a Sunday, and it takes her toward an understanding of her “encapsulation in her tower” (CL 44). One of her first experiences is that of being serenaded, like Rapunzel, from beneath her window by the Paranooids’ song about the moon:

As I lie and watch the moon
On the lonely sea,
Watch it tug the lonely tide
Like a comforter over me,
The still and faceless moon
Fills the beach tonight
With only a ghost of day,
All shadow gray, and moonbeam white. (39)

It is a melancholy song, and it foretells the tenor of Oedipa’s journey. In the “lunar perspective” of her quest, despair and menstrual pains enter into flux with epiphanic moments and receptiveness to grace.

The Crying of Lot 49 continually explores the language surrounding menstruation, sounding its associations with melancholy and sorrow. In the words of psychoanalyst Eric Erikson, “Each menstruation is a crying to heaven in the mourning over a child” (qtd in Lupton 80). Menstruation is, furthermore, Eve’s curse. With the words, “I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children,” God casts her out of paradise (Genesis 3:16). Banished from the presence of God in Eden, Eve is marked with a monthly reminder of this loss. In the discourse of the Old Testament, the womb becomes a wound, healed only by the temporary cessation of menstruation in pregnancy, which is Eve’s painful duty to humanity. Menstrual blood, from this perspective, is the sign of the Fall, of the fundamental rift between God and the world. It can thus also be perceived as the bar between signifier and signified, between the Word and the world of profane signs. The experience of menstruation is an experience of mourning and contrition; as the trace of a loss, menstrual blood shares its liquid trait with tears.

In The Crying of Lot 49 Oedipa finds herself banished from direct access to the meaning of the Tristero and must settle with proliferating clues. Her quest, however, takes her into a heightened awareness of love, in Agamben's sense of its affinity with non-being. When she meets the grief-stricken sailor, for instance, her apprehension that she can foretell his death coincides with her feeling of being "overcome all at once by a need to touch him" (CL 126). The frequently cited passage, in which Oedipa holds the sailor in her arms, is an image of a *pietà* or a "moment of *caritas*" (Madsen 73). Here, Oedipa resembles the iconographic depictions of Mary. But what follows afterward is left unaddressed in the criticism: the sailor turns on Oedipa, declaring her a "bitch" for handing him money under the envious eyes of another (CL 128). In a swift movement from Mary to "bitch," Oedipa is identified with Eve. She then straddles the two poles of femininity, moving between Mary's melancholic love and Eve's transgressive desire for knowledge.³⁰ From this position, she embarks on a long contemplation of the clues thus encountered and the language which weaves them:

She knew that the sailor had seen worlds no other man had seen if only because there was that high magic to low puns, because DT's must give access to dt's of spectra beyond the known sun, music made purely of Antarctic loneliness and fright. But nothing she knew of would preserve them, or him. She gave him goodbye, walked downstairs and then on, in the direction he'd told her. (129)

Significantly, when her contemplative journey becomes a physical one toward the W.A.S.T.E. mailbox, Oedipa realizes that she "had to look closely to see the periods between the letters" (130).

In this novel replete with puns and images of liquidity, the "periods" within an acronym correlate with the text's menstrual economy of images and meaning. The meaning of the word transforms and proliferates once the letters are both held apart and joined in a series of fluid intervals. It makes perfect sense that Oedipa first notices the "waste" symbol in "a ladies' john" (88) and that a character named Stanley Koteks points out the periods' significance to her: "'It's W.A.S.T.E., lady . . . an acronym, not 'waste,' and we had best not go into it any further'" (87-88). The periods permit the apprehension of an in-between state; like the pun on tear throughout the text, and like the period of waiting signified by the

novel's title, they transform the rift or void between signifier and signified into a duct or cleft filled with regenerating possibilities. Furthermore, words like "nada" and "waste," which seem to signify nothingness and decay, are metamorphosed by the periods that push apart the letters.³¹ Death, for example, becomes D.E.A.T.H.: "Don't Ever Antagonize The Horn" (121). The alternative system of communication is closely associated with the language surrounding menstruation, with the cyclical movement between death and life, and between emptiness or nothingness and replenishment. As Mary Jane Lupton claims in Menstruation and Psychoanalysis, "women resurrect themselves monthly" (Lupton 84).

Pynchon's text rewrites the negative assumptions which enclose menstruation and menstrual blood. Guided by figures named Mike Fallopian and Stanley Koteks (even Bloody Chiclitz), Oedipa moves into a newfound awareness of a different network of meaning. With allegorical names like these, her guides—which are, like the other male figures, eventually "stripp[ed] away" (CL 175)—gesture toward the messages emanating from her body in the quest. Remarking at one point about the characters in The Courier's Tragedy, the narrator hints: "heretofore the naming of names has gone on either literally or as metaphor" (71). Oedipa's own name, particularly when she is nicknamed "Oed," also announces the possibility that she is a source of limitless significance; we just have to look closely at the periods between the letters in order to glimpse an allusion to the Oxford English Dictionary.³² The menstrual pains Oedipa experiences communicate to her, like the aching fillings in her teeth, the sense that she is opening up to a "real alternative to the exitlessness, to the absence of surprise to life" (170). And, of course, the narrator surprisingly suggests that she becomes pregnant with grace: "Your gynecologist has no test for what she was pregnant with" (175). Like Spenser's Red Crosse Knight, for whom grace is experienced at the moment when he seems most lost, Oedipa renames herself Grace Bortz when she is paradoxically pregnant with utter emptiness and distress. To refer once again to Giorgio Agamben, it is the melancholic's desperation which invokes the "obscure wisdom according to which hope has been given only for the hopeless" (Stanzas 7). This hope, for Oedipa, is a physical sensation, and it is linked with that which is, in biblical terms, the dual sign of woman's curse: menstruation and painful pregnancy.

Oedipa's bodily interaction with the linguistic clues of her quest—or her corporeal extension of them—is intimated in the novel's original publication as a story entitled, "The World (This One), The Flesh (Mrs. Oedipa Maas) and the Testament of Pierce Inverarity."³³ Linked to the world and to a mysterious testament, the character of Oedipa invokes the Christian concept of the Word made flesh. According to the New Testament, the world's redeemer is the Word of God embodied as Christ. It is the sacrifice of his body, moreover, which atones for humanity's sins; worshipped as a god who bleeds, Christ turns the death of the flesh into the life of the spirit. His bleeding on the cross, in other words, enacts a temporary death. This iconography, however, extensively borrows from images drawn from the female body. The holy blood of Christ is derived from ancient goddess religions, in which the goddess in her menstrual aspect—for instance, India's Kali, Greece's Kore, Egypt's Isis—is venerated as a eucharistic and resurrection deity.³⁴ The image of the chalice in which Christ offers his blood/wine at the Last Supper occurs in depictions of the ancient goddess Charis. Significantly, when Oedipa drinks wine with Metzger she has only "one glass," and gallant Metzger, drinking from the bottle, does not detract from the possibility that Oedipa resembles Charis here (CL 29). As the authors of the *Wise Wound* claim, "the blood of Charis preceded the blood of Christ. . . . The male messiah or Word of God would not have come arrayed in a garment dipped in blood, if blood had not been the feminine manifestor of the Word as Wisdom" (Shuttle and Redgrove 205). Masculine blood, in the Judeo-Christian tradition, emerges to replace feminine blood in the iconography of the sacred. In Helen Smith's words, "Woman, snake, menstruation, and the tree—all previously interrelated symbols that reflected knowledge of the divine cosmic order—now become symbols representing the path away from knowledge" (Smith 203). Furthermore, woman must atone for her impurity and corruption. According to the prophets and the Church fathers, menstrual blood is pollution in the eyes of God. "Nothing is so unclean as a woman in her periods," says St. Jerome, "what she touches she causes to become unclean" (qtd in Smith 241).

By invoking words like "waste" and "death" and making them inextricable from Oedipa's quest for knowledge, *The Crying of Lot 49* brings together allusions to

menstruation with the possibility of sacred signification. Helen Smith's dissertation on the symbolism of menstruation quotes Philo of Alexandria on the link between female sexuality and death. "It was fitting," he asserts, "that man should rule over immortality and everything good, but woman over death and everything vile" (qtd in Smith 223). The word "waste" particularly has age-old etymological links to the female body and menstruation. As a form of plethoric blood, according to medieval and early modern medicine, menstrual blood is the lowest form of blood. It is waste, and every month women expel their bad blood.³⁵ Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century clinical observations, "stretching back to Hippocrates," as Thomas Laqueur says, found that menstruation was a way of eliminating from the body excess or superfluous blood (Laqueur 105). Helkiah Crooke's *Microcosmographia* (1615), for example, claims that menstrual blood "is an excrement of the third concoction, because it is as we sayd vomited away by the flesh when it is satisfied after the third concoction" (qtd in Paster 81). In *The Crying of Lot 49*, however, waste becomes linked to an overlooked "empire" of communication channels. This site of communication is, moreover, underwritten by waiting or by a kind of suspension for a coming tide of meaning; "waste" in the novel stands for "We Await Silent Tristero's Empire." And it appears that it is society's so-called refuse, the disinherited, who embrace the Tristero.

It seems quite possible, then, that the "bad shit" of excluded middles is associated in *Lot 49* with the significance of the "periods" between letters. Waste, shit and menstrual blood come together to form a realm of previously unheeded meaning; they are linked, as well, to the proliferating versions of a "corrupt" text which haunt Oedipa (CL 152). Each substance, acting as a kind of *pharmakon*, is involved in the novel's repudiation of an either/or logic or of one definitive truth. The possible existence of the Tristero at the edges of communication monopolies proposes another kind of logic, one that embraces oppositions. Menstrual blood, as a signifier of both absence and presence, enters into the *pharmakon*'s play of oppositions.³⁶ Pynchon's female questor, stripped of her men, finds an alternative code through the "unnatural roses, in whose red, scented dusk, dark history slithered unseen" (CL 163).³⁷

This “red, scented” history presents an alternative to the phallus throughout the novel. In The Crying of Lot 49, the phallus is no longer the privileged site of authority, presence and revelation. Its association with the monopolization of abstract power is parodied in the image of the “two sixty-foot missiles on either side” of the Yoyodyne building (25), in the “old, somnolent men” who run the Yoyodyne corporation (85), and in the name of the band “Sick Dick and the Volkswagens,” who are playing on Oedipa’s car radio as she leaves for San Narciso “with no idea she was moving toward anything new” (23). Its position as an abstract signifier—as that which is veiled and which orders meaning (in the discourse of psychoanalysis)—is reduced to something not that well hidden behind a zipper and ultimately not that meaningful. “Your fly is open,” Oedipa whispers to Cohen just before the bidder “reveal[s] himself” (183). The concept of revelation is then swept into the jokes and puns surrounding the phallus. That the phallus has an ahistorical, primary and transcendent claim to the order of signification and to the symbolic order is a lie, and one which Pynchon cleverly *exposes*. There are other realms of meaning apart from the phallus and its consolidation of one truth.³⁸

Several critics, for instance, have noted a feminine form of signification in The Crying of Lot 49. Tracey Sherard’s article “The Birth of the Female Subject in The Crying of Lot 49” draws on Hélène Cixous’ work and claims that the Tristero *is* female subjectivity; it involves Oedipa in the creation of a text for herself beyond the limits of patriarchal institutions. She quotes an interesting passage from the novel which describes the Tristero layered in female accoutrements: “As if the breakaway gowns, net bras, jewelled garters and G-strings of historical figuration that would fall away were layered dense as Oedipa’s own street-clothes in that game with Metzger” (72). From beneath these layers, the Tristero might emerge as “coy” or with a “luminous stare . . . speak[ing] words she never wanted to hear” (54). Sherard further links Emory Bortz’s speculation on the Tristero’s “silence, impersonation, opposition masquerading as allegiance” to the position of women in patriarchal culture (72); Oedipa herself increasingly embraces silence in order to become “illuminated” by the information she seeks. While Sherard does not discuss Cixous’s project to “make another way of knowing circulate” in the “struggle between

Blood and Words" (Cixous 96, 103), she works from the concept of breaking the mold of constructed female identity. Oedipa turns from Echo to Narcissus "in a strategic move" that enables her to see that "she has in fact been the Tristero all along, silent and waiting" (Sherard 73). Her laughter before the shattering mirror, like the laughter of Cixous's Medusa, predicts this realization. The Tristero, with its muted post-horn, symbolizes the creation of an "*écriture féminine*" on the borders of representational discourse.

In "Describing the Demon: The Appeal of Thomas Pynchon," Neil Schmitz describes the Tristero's symbol of the muted post-horn as "the silencing of the phallus" (Schmitz 16). Schmitz, however, claims that Oedipa is boxed inside her body; the womb envisioned in the novel is another sealed container. "In the dark," he says, "Stencil, Oedipa and Slothrop feel their way along the walls of the womb-world that confines them, looking for an opening, looking (to use an apt phrase) for the light at the end of the tunnel. No such light is ever shed" (123). Enjoying his metaphor of the vagina-tunnel, Schmitz misses the sunlight surrounding Mr. Thoth, as well as the possibility that the womb might offer something beyond the muted post-horn, and, I would add, the phallic tower. Like Wail Hassan, who claims that "Oedipa finds no escape from her tower" (Hassan 96), Schmitz sets up a success/failure opposition for Oedipa's quest. But this opposition does not work: Oedipa both succeeds and fails, escapes and returns. If, as Hassan states, Oedipa "understands less at the end" (96), then this emptiness opens her up to those excluded middles into which grace appears to enter. Oedipa may be enclosed in the auction house at the end, but she stands "in a patch of sun, among brilliant rising and falling points of dust" (CL 183).

The image of the menstruating womb in Lot 49 proposes a kind of discourse or vision which resists the entropic decay involved in a closed system. If Oedipa's is a "womb world," then it may be one which self-renews, which resonates with frequencies from other, outside sources. This vision unhinges the allusions to entropy which turn up throughout the novel. According to the second law of thermodynamics, entropy occurs when the energy of a closed system degrades; as the fast-moving molecules join the slow ones, a movement toward sameness and disorder, toward stagnation, takes place.³⁹ The

possibility of the universe's impending heat-death emerges out of this concept of entropy, terrifying Mucho at the car lot. The consistent exchange of used cars drives Mucho to a vision of "a salad of despair, in a gray dressing of ash, condensed exhaust, dust, body wastes. . . . To Mucho it was horrible. Endless, convoluted incest" (14). By using the word "salad," Pynchon invokes the image of Oedipa's Tupperware party, of her entrapment in a world of sealed containers and routine events. When Oedipa encounters Nefastis, however, she finds someone who believes in a promising decrease in entropy. By means of "Maxwell's Demon," Nefastis envisions a system which involves cycles and which communicates with the "sensitive" who invigorates the process. A connection arises, then, between the demon and Oedipa's revelations about the Tristero as an alternative source of communication. As J. Kerry Grant notes, "The cycling machine, with its seemingly miraculous openness to the flow of information from outside, thus constitutes an image of some power as Oedipa learns the danger of closed systems, and as she grows to understand the significance of Pierce's advice to 'keep it bouncing'" (Grant 95). As the machine becomes receptive to an outside source of information, so Oedipa becomes miraculously pregnant. Wandering the city, Oedipa begins to "sort" (like the demon) the night from her dreams, the clues from her imagination. She enters into a sense of synchrony with a city pulsing with blood: "The city was hers, as . . . it had not been before: she had safe-passage tonight to its far blood's branchings, be they capillaries too small for more than peering into, or vessels mashed together in shameless municipal hickeys, out on the skin for all but the tourists to see" (CL 117).

Devoting almost a chapter to the scientific evidence on the interaction between the moon and biological rhythms, Shuttle and Redgrove argue that the human body is incredibly sensitive to environmental signals. They conclude that there is a permeable boundary between an organism and electromagnetic fields of information from geophysical sources. Thus, "very low-frequency electromagnetic waves pierce through the walls of our laboratories, factories, homes, and bodies" (163). According to Shuttle and Redgrove, the uterus is one of the most receptive organs in the human body; it is "the receiver of so much influential information on so many unexplored wavebands" (164). The womb can therefore be understood in terms of a "closed system" which resists entropy and which, on

a symbolic level, lies somewhere in between the tower and the void.

In what Eliade terms “the economy of the sacred,” there is a “circulation of sacred energy” belonging to a long-forgotten vision of a cosmos shaped by cyclical rhythms (Eternal Return 110). Through scattered allusions to the worship of goddesses as healers and messengers, Eliade locates this vision in “biocosmic rhythms [which form] part of a larger system—the system of periodic purifications . . . and of the periodic regeneration of life” (52). Within the symbology of this system, there is no entropy, no linear movement from creation to apocalypse. It coincides with the pre-biblical history in which menstruation is not considered profane or abhorrent but part of a sacred order which is always ending and beginning. Here, menstruation forms part of the ontological order of the cyclical archetype in which, claims Eliade, “becoming” is “saturated with being” (123).⁴⁰ Thus says Oedipa of the Tristero’s effect on her: “they’ve saturated me” (CL 177). Nearing the point of suicide, Oedipa emerges with the hope of one who has “nothing more to lose,” and she becomes a “busybody” (182). She enters into the circulation of letters—whether meaningless or meaningful—to keep the system’s rhythm in motion; “It’s the principle,” Fallopian remarks (53), and it’s a principle Oedipa embraces at the end of the novel.

The novel in a sense comes full circle, with Oedipa returned to a state of waiting. The riddle she sought to answer appears to be left unsolved. This partial revelation, though, inheres in the sacred order which the novel proposes. Oedipa is perhaps not Oedipus but the sphinx, containing the essence of the riddle within her. It seems imperative that we make this shift in perspective; as Teresa de Lauretis proposes in Alice Doesn’t, “suppose we were to ask about the sphinx” (de Lauretis 109). What we have in The Crying of Lot 49 is a sphinx who does not kill herself, who continues to ask the questions. The “enigma of femininity” which de Lauretis interprets as the hero’s “obstacle on the way to manhood” is not an obstacle in this text (110). Rather, a female heroine enacts a journey which teaches her to preserve enigma. The desire that produces the narrative may be the “desire to know” but it is here a desire that is called, or cried, into question. Not-knowing is ushered in as a sacred alternative to the kind of quest which

situates the seeker at the center of knowledge. Unlike the male hero of mythical narratives whose quest is toward coherent self-hood, Oedipa does not have to cross an initiatory boundary in a linear plot; she menstruates, her initiation through a symbolic death is given, and it is an ongoing process of a self in flux.

According to de Lauretis, “her [woman’s] story is a question of his desire;” in a masculine narrative the woman must “consent or be seduced into consenting to femininity” to secure the borders of masculine subjectivity (133-134). What happens in Lot 49, however, is a kind of stripping of Oedipa’s constructed femininity, beginning with the game of Strip Botticelli she plays with Metzger and culminating, at one point, with the sticker slapped on her that identifies her as Arnold Snarb. Masculine and feminine, to borrow a phrase from de Lauretis, are “terms of identification” (138) with which Oedipa learns to play. This space of fluid identification is the “what else” that Oedipa discovers between “female cunning” and the “knight of deliverance”:

what really keeps her where she is is magic, anonymous and malignant, visited on her from outside and for no reason at all. Having no apparatus except gut fear and female cunning to examine this formless magic, to understand how it works, how to measure its field strength, count its lines of force, she may fall back on superstition, or take up a useful hobby like embroidery, or go mad, or marry a disk jockey. If the tower is everywhere and the knight of deliverance no proof against its magic, what else? (CL 21-22)

It is the first question she asks as she initiates her own deliverance from the tower. Oedipa’s is not Freud’s story of femininity, the “uneven battle with penis envy” (de Lauretis 131); her story is a gradual process of discovering for herself the composite nature of the sphinx on the threshold of identity.

Jean-Joseph Goux’s recent study of the Oedipus myth, Oedipus, Philosopher (1993), asks similar questions about the sphinx. For Goux, the Oedipal myth, or complex, is about failed masculine initiation. By failing to recognize in the sphinx a form of contact with death and regeneration, Oedipus never passes through a sacred realm. He does not learn “that not everything in man is human” (Goux 157). Solving the sphinx’s riddle with the word “man,” he “vanquishes monstrosity” and ushers in the *cogito*: his answer is a conquest of “intelligent matter,” an “act of self-consciousness through which the subject

knows itself“ (162, 166). Because the sphinx, for Goux, is a “teranthropic being,” her monstrosity grounds her in materiality as well as consciousness. Oedipus’s action, then, is an eradication of this monstrosity; he places “man” at the center and detaches himself from the mysteries of nature. At the core of his victory is a philosophical tragedy: the world no longer resonates with sacred enigmas. Oedipus may gain the knowledge of the philosopher, but he loses the “hierophanic knowledge of the prophet” (193). What the Oedipus trilogy eventually tells us, according to Goux, is that the sphinx secures the borders of alterity. We may cross over but we cannot overstep them; we must be opened up to the mystery of alterity, to the crossroad between the sacred and the monstrous which the sphinx represents.

While Goux addresses the female nature of the sphinx and acknowledges that the “Oedipean destiny” is one of masculine possession of all that is gendered feminine (mother, nature, matter, earth), he does not, I think, adequately investigate the meaning of the sphinx’s feminine monstrosity. Perhaps too close to Freudian thought, Goux associates the sphinx with a “dark, maternal element” and with metaphors of gestation and birth (27). The “promotion of Man” in Oedipus’s response, according to Goux, entails the “possession of Mother” (170). Like Freud, Goux betrays a blind spot in his approach to female sexuality. In other words, the depiction of a female being with “half its body still mired in the animal materiality from which it originated” (Goux 164) appears to be not an image of the maternal female, but a displacement in the myth of the menstruating female body. She embodies the oppositions inherent in the discourse of menstrual blood: human/monster, sacred/profane, life/death. Her monstrosity invokes the deep etymological links between the words *menstruous* and *monstrous*.⁴¹ Situated on a symbolic border, the monstrous sphinx guards the city as well as the passage into mysteries. Like the menstruating goddess Kali, the sphinx is depicted in Greek iconography as the monster that both kills and ensures rebirth.⁴² If the male hero must be wounded or “cut” in a process of initiation into manhood, this rite imitates the “wound,” according to Freud, of the girl’s passage into womanhood.⁴³ By failing to recognize the sphinx’s role, Oedipus is never properly initiated; the injury and the symbolic death which such rites enact are avoided

because his answer precipitates the sphinx's own suicide. Oedipus never sees in the sphinx her embodiment or materialization of this rite. "Consciousness," says Goux, "is the suppression of the sphinx"; the sphinx's "enigmatic alterity is obliterated by the *cogito*" inherent in Oedipus's answer (178, 165).⁴⁴ It is necessary to remember that "man" is his response and that it is not just the monstrous but also the feminine which is thus obliterated. Failing to discern one aspect of the feminine, Oedipus then goes on to misidentify another. Significantly, it is only when Oedipus is symbolically bled or emptied out that he is able to pass a sacred threshold; at Colonus he asks: "so when I am nothing—then am I a man?" (186).

With the name Oedipa, a character who finds herself at the end with "nothing more to lose," we have a pun on Oedipus and an encounter with a monstrous riddle. Why is the enigma of the alternative world of communication in The Crying of Lot 49 then connected to America? As Pynchon illustrates, at the edges of Oedipa's semi-revealed clues is the idea that Pierce's legacy "was America" (CL 178). The promise of a new beginning, extended by the New World to the pilgrims and exiles, is captured in the novel's vision of America. America is the crossroads, where east meets the west at the Pacific—the "primal blood of the Pacific," in Pynchon's words (162)—and where the sacred enigma of regeneration is offered to its settlers. Identified as a second Eden by the Puritan sermons, America is the site of "prophecy and promise," as Bercovitch explains (Jeremiad 71); she is also the Bride of God. The feminine imagery invoked by the sermons in the image of a fertile womb underwrites the promise, in Pynchon's text, of a new realm of language. Only in America, the land of hidden revelations, could the Puritans' lost vision of cyclical regeneration be restored, and it is restored by a female heroine who emanates this vision from her menstruating body.

Coda: The Crying of Lot 49 and Invisible Man

The discourse of menstruation deconstructs the either/or oppositions which occur

throughout the text, creating an in-between space for epiphanic moments and intricately sacred possibilities. When Oedipa “sett[es] back, to await the crying of lot 49” (CL 183), she enters into a kind of limbo space in which the promise of America—the promised land of the dispossessed—is both withheld and bequeathed. Yet, she is not alone in this border land. She shares it with both the disinherited Americans encountered on her quest (the poor, the drunk, the overlooked) and with other questors in the American literary tradition. “Feeling invisible” (122), Oedipa learns about this borderland. She thus follows in the footsteps of Ellison’s *Invisible Man*. “The joke, of course,” smirks the Invisible Man about his position against the powerful “Them,” is “that I don’t live in Harlem but in a border area” (Ellison 5). Oedipa’s quest through Pierce Inverarity’s monopolization of real estate and corporate bureaucracies resembles the Invisible Man’s attempts to drain energy for himself from “Monopolated Light & Power” in *Invisible Man* (5). The image of reality which “Monopolated Light & Power” projects is only one version of several realities. The Invisible Man has to awaken to this fact, has to find distortions in the American Dream. Moving into a “slightly different sense of time,” he discovers “unheard sounds . . . other voices” (8-9).

While white, corporate America excludes Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, white male America isolates Pynchon’s Oedipa. The hibernating bear and the Tristero, to lift a phrase from *The Crying of Lot 49*, “symbolize [respectively] the Other quite well” (CL 156). In both texts, other realities shimmer “beneath the surface” (Ellison 12) or tremble “just past the threshold of . . . understanding” (CL 24), and both questors have to throw off the identities which America assigns them. In order to hear the words on “some other frequency” (CL 25) or to speak on “the lower frequencies” (Ellison 581), Oedipa and the Invisible Man transform and redefine themselves; they learn “to live without direction” in a world of “infinite possibilities” (Ellison 577, 576). If the phallus underlies the construction of one truth in *The Crying of Lot 49*, white skin defines it in *Invisible Man*. The shift into the realm of several truths involves, in both novels, the deconstruction of divisive categories or so-called certainties. Thus, the Invisible Man learns to “denounce and defend . . . condemn and affirm, say no and say yes, say yes and say no” (Ellison 579). And, Oedipa, following him, can journey into the place between of excluded middles. “America

is woven of many strands," says the Invisible Man (577); it is a fabric, in Pynchon's text, spun by Thoth, the god of combined opposites and hidden messages.

Furthermore, in both novels, the imperative to redefine the discourse which separates the true from the false, the privileged from the mass, or the one from the many, involves sifting life from a culture of death. In The Crying of Lot 49, the incorporation of difference into sameness raises the specter of entropy, of an inexorable movement toward death without renewal within an insulated system. It is a nightmare that the Invisible Man glimpses in Ellison's text. Fearing that black and white will merge into an indistinct grey, the Invisible Man learns to embrace a "plan of living" within the "stenches of death" (580). It is the life of the nation for which both Oedipa and her Invisible predecessor speak. Their respective quests cycle backward to capture the mythological meaning of America as a land where one can, as the Invisible Man puts it, "shake off the old skin and come up for breath" (580).

III. The Sieve and the Rainbow Serpent: Bleeding Gravity's Rainbow

sieve: a utensil consisting of a circular frame with a finely meshed or perforated bottom, used to separate the coarser from the finer particles of any loose material, or as a strainer for liquids.

As used by witches for sailing in.

As used for purposes of divination.

To sieve, sift or strain is to examine, select or separate. Sieve also bears an affinity with the word riddle, as in to be riddled full of holes.

(Oxford English Dictionary)

The Grail, the Sangraal, is the bloody vehicle. . . . We drank the blood of our enemies. The blood of our friends, we cherished.

(Gravity's Rainbow 739).

Out of the sheer volume of episodes, digressions, dialogues and images in Gravity's Rainbow, one minor extract (a recollected conversation between Roger Mexico and a soused priest) functions to distil the intoxicating detail into a prescription for the reader, who must move through a text which contaminates pure terror ("A screaming comes across the sky") with residues of hope. Linking the image of a sieve to Mexico's statistical map of bomb hits, the Reverend Paul de la Nuit explains:

'The Romans, . . . the ancient Roman priests laid a sieve in the road, and then waited to see which stalks of grass would come up through the holes. . . . They used the stalks that grew through the holes to cure the sick. The sieve was a very sacred item to them. What will you do with the sieve you've laid over London? How will you use the things that grow in your network of death?'
(GR 56)

The sieve, a utensil for sifting, separating or leaking, is held up as a sacred symbol and as a way of reading. Like Ludwig forever catching sight of his lost lemming Ursula, the reader of Gravity's Rainbow might begin to see the sieve everywhere. Glimmering in various forms, it is an emblem of incompleteness, of cracks in a totalizing system, and of the "silver chances of song" in the network of spaces in Slothrop's harmonica (63). It is there

on the second page of the novel, in the “percolating” light that announces the arrival of dawn (4). As Gravity’s Rainbow progresses, it also becomes a grid, “readable only to those who journey outside,” or the vehicle through which “other orders behind the visible” filter in (89, 188). There are perhaps gaps in the borders between this world and another, possibly conducting return passages. In other words, if Pynchon’s text proposes a belief in a process (perhaps dialectical) which undermines the apocalyptic terror embodied in the Rocket, this process is glimpsed in part through the sieve. The sieve is the medium by which one substance is altered and separated into two, or where two sift together to become one, transfigured substance. In the vast network of illusions and control which the powerful create, some kind of escape, the novel suggests, appears to be viable. For every word that seems to construct an idea or a system, another possible definition slips through.

As a result, the sieve is that which contrasts the parabolic course of the Rocket, the shape of “no second chances, no return” (209). Furthermore, functioning as a medium *up* through which something moves or grows, (inverting the downward movement of sifted substances) the sieve, as the Reverend describes it, works against the law of gravity, the force which pulls the Rocket back toward the Earth in a threatening arch. While the Rocket comes crashing down, forms of life grow up through sacred spaces. The paradox of the sieve, however, to which Gravity’s Rainbow repeatedly and obsessively returns, is the fact that (as a perforated object) its spaces must be punched out; its very form requires violent composition. The sieve does not necessarily precede the bombed cities, does not layer over them, but emerges as a text within the destruction. Only then can parabola be sifted into parable by the “scholar magicians of the Zone” (520). The supposition that there can be no text without a trace, incision or hammering on a surface becomes an almost incomprehensibly violent condition when the earth itself is transformed into the stretched vellum or stone tablet. Gravity’s Rainbow, then, attempts to comprehend the global warfare of the twentieth century as a kind of writing. The novel’s plots range across the centuries and continents investigating sacred scripts and contemplating the kabbalist idea that the vessel is still shattering into what we perceive as creation, that god’s text is still in the process of formation; the scattering shrapnel created by W.W.II bombs are perhaps flying fragments of truth’s dissemination. As Slothrop notes, there are “patterns in the

ashes,” walls are “broken in specific shapes that may also be read” (623). The world around him is passed through a sieve and what survives in the gaps may reveal new messages or forgotten knowledge.

With its system of crisscrossed lines and spaces, the sieve is an embodiment of combined opposites and, perhaps, evidence of sacred meaning which the narrative hopes exists. It is the site of a “charred patch becoming green,” of “forget-me-nots . . . growing among the snarl of cables and hoses” (560). The smashing force of the Rocket both destroys and produces pockets of life; its passage through space creates a passage of text, as well as an entrance into new forms of conceptualization. The novel, as a kind of sifting sieve itself, is a rite of initiation into the kabbalist contemplation of self-negating or incompatible terms which aims toward a moment of divine insight.⁴⁵ It is, to borrow a theoretical term from Barbara Herrnstein Smith, a “parabolic text”: “displaying the open curve of a parabola, and forming parables for an infinite number of propositions” (Smith 144). Each parable, moreover, is like a perforation which permits the reader a point of entry. Like Slothrop, sucked through the toilet after his harmonica, the reader is pulled into the novel’s mesh of fiction and fact, of clarity and profanity. With the word “follow” thrice repeated, we are urged in with Slothrop. In one of its self-reflective moments, the text offers the promise of a harmonica’s song on the other side: “A hopeful thought,” it says, “to carry with you down the toilet” (GR 66). Down through the toilet or up through the sieve, there is, as we know, the “domain between zero and one,” where possibilities exist (55).

Here, the transformation from sieve to toilet introduces Pynchon’s startled reader to his scatological world. Designated as part of the novel’s “unofficial discourses,” according to Steve Weisenburger’s Companion to Gravity’s Rainbow, such excretory adventures highlight Pynchon’s attention to his Puritan past. Weisenburger further explains: “The moments that speak most resonantly for him are those when lowly, seemingly preterite stuff is raised, when its hidden signs and broader humanness stand redeemed. . . . ‘All the shit is transmuted to gold,’ as one of his stoned characters puts it” (Weisenburger 7). Slothrop himself, we early learn, is descended from New England Puritans. Through the

metaphor of the reversed film, as David Seed points out, Pynchon “presents [Slothrop’s] entry into the Zone as a return to his ancestral past (‘Signs will find him there in the Zone [here quoting Pynchon], and ancestors will reassert themselves’)” (Seed 163).⁴⁶

Slothrop’s heritage, moreover, bears certain affinities with contents of the “loathsome toilet” (GR 63). We are told, for instance, that Slothrop’s ancestors manufactured paper—a medium, he explains, for “shit, money, and the Word” (28). Significantly, the constant shifts between shit and the Word in Gravity’s Rainbow come together to echo the Puritan sermons of colonial America. As David Leverenz illustrates in his exhaustive study, The Language of Puritan Feeling, the sermons consistently rely upon scatological imagery. From Leverenz’s Freudian perspective, the sermons exhibit an intense anal fixation; unrepentant sinners, he finds, are manufacturers of defilement and excrement who reject God’s cleansing hand. Sinners are no better than “stinking sinkholes” or “filth in moats,” and sin itself is excrement or “dung” (qtd in Leverenz 187). Slothrop’s fantasy of being sucked down the toilet joins a number of similar allusions to excrement which, in David Seed’s words, “imply an attenuated Puritan disgust at the body. . . . The novel repeatedly discredits Protestantism for growing out of a loathing of the body, for fostering shame and a sense of sin, . . . for promoting power-structures through the elect/preterite division” (Seed 171, 189).

Examining the gap or division between the pure and the defiled, or the powerful and the disinherited, Gravity’s Rainbow looks for salvation among the “wastes of the World.” In a phrase reminiscent of Oedipa’s movement into the world of W.A.S.T.E. and into the “bad shit” of excluded middles, Enzian wonders: “Somewhere, among the wastes of the World is the key that will bring us back, restore us to our Earth and to our freedom” (GR 525). For Pynchon, the key may lie with the lowly, profane preterite—those who do not prosper but persist, and those who are “the disposable human material available to ruling groups” (Seed 186). Through Tyrone Slothrop’s memory of his New England ancestor William, the terms elect and preterite reverse and transmute. William Slothrop’s heretical tract *On Preterition* redefines the division and offers the possibility of a “route back” from this destructive split:

Nobody wanted to hear about all the Preterite, the many God passes over when he chooses a few for salvation. William argued holiness for these 'second Sheep,' without whom there'd be no elect. You can bet the Elect in Boston were pissed off about that. . . . Could he [William] have been the fork in the road America never took, the singular point she had jumped the wrong way from? Suppose the Slothropite heresy had had the time to consolidate and prosper? Might there have been fewer crimes in the name of Jesus, and more mercy in the name of Judas Iscariot? It seems to Tyrone Slothrop that there might be a route back. (555-556)

According to Marcus Smith and Khachig Tololyan, in their essay "The New Jeremiad: Gravity's Rainbow," Pynchon's novel both addresses the "original sin of Puritanism"—its divisive, aggressive energy—and offers a "brilliant reworking of the old Puritan jeremiad" (Smith and Tololyan 145, 139). They illustrate that, like his own Puritan predecessors, both literary and familial, Pynchon laments the state of the world and searches for evidence of God's blessing within affliction. It is the text's jeremiad rhetoric which captures the sense of God's wrath together with the "recurring yet fragile possibility" for redemption (148). Pynchon's vision of the "Immanent End" also encompasses fleeting moments of special dispensation. It is clearly a Puritan vision that emerges, as Smith and Tololyan explain, in his attention to the word "Now" and to the typical jeremiad figures of the "Hand of God, the Hourglass of Mutability, God's obliterating Light, the Towers of the New Jerusalem, the Apocalyptic Horsemen" (140, 141).

Smith and Tololyan's is a ground-breaking article which takes Sacvan Bercovitch's Horologicals to Chronometricals: The Rhetoric of the Jeremiad as its primary source of jeremiad research and interpretation. Moving from Bercovitch's demonstration of the apocalyptic yet salvational vision of the early American jeremiads, the authors place Gravity's Rainbow within a distinctively American literary tradition. Like Cotton Mather, Jonathan Edwards, Henry David Thoreau and Henry Adams (about whom Bercovitch writes), Pynchon simultaneously laments and elevates the meaning of America. And, like the jeremiads' projection of two levels of time, he sets relentless doom against the "possibility of freedom from history's curse" and finds the nexus between the two in America (146). The nexus also occurs in the American lieutenant in Europe. Through Slothrop's Puritan eyes, salvation and annihilation mirror each other, churchtops resemble

“rocket fins guiding the streamlined spires,” and America represents “a way to get back” to a time unshackled from the present-day horrors (GR 624). “The one ghost-feather his fingers always brush by,” the narrator remarks about Slothrop, “is America. Poor asshole, he can’t let her go. She’s whispered *love me* too often to him in his sleep, vamped insatiably his waking attention with come-hitherings, incredible promises” (623). One of America’s promises, in the New England sermons and in Gravity’s Rainbow, involves a sacred redefinition of time. Or, to restate Smith and Tololyan’s argument, provisional and predetermined time—the “horological” and the “chronometric”—intersect in Pynchon’s construction of America’s place in a world at war.

Because Smith and Tololyan work from Bercovitch’s Horologicals to Chronometricals, they do not address the concept of cyclical time which Bercovitch develops in another study and which contributes to the structure of Gravity’s Rainbow. For instance, Bercovitch’s The American Jeremiad, uncovering the rhetoric of regeneration and new beginnings in the early American political sermons, opens with the claim that “the New England sermons embody a cyclical view of history” (Bercovitch 16). This particular argument illustrates the jeremiad construction of America as a return to Eden or Jerusalem. As Bercovitch demonstrates, the sermons rest upon a symbolic economy of rebirth and ritual purification. The “mixed tones of thunder and consolation” in the American jeremiad tradition partake in the elaboration of a “new world of regeneration” (85, 25). Thus when Slothrop recalls that America went wrong in the name of the elect, he invokes the rhetoric of cyclical regeneration in the sermons. This time, though, it is the preterite who will show the way. His musings represent America as the Puritans did—as a “route back” into a second chance for spiritual innocence. Slothrop’s hopeful reverie is, moreover, set against Blicero’s monologue just before he launches the deadly Rocket 00000. Blicero declares: “America was the edge of the World. A message for Europe, continent-sized, inescapable. . . . America was a gift from the invisible powers, a way of returning. But Europe refused it. It wasn’t Europe’s Original Sin—the latest name for that is Modern Analysis—but it happens that Subsequent Sin is harder to atone for” (722 Pynchon’s italics). Between Slothrop and Blicero, America emerges as a sacred message, as a holy beckoning to start again, which the world has forgotten. The Rocket may obliterate or recapture this memory.

If time is cyclical, if creation follows destruction in a ceaseless movement between endings and beginnings, then the regenerative possibility lies latent in Gravity's Rainbow. Again, as Steve Weisenburger's Companion reveals, a circular design and chronology connects the seemingly disparate narratives:

Everywhere in Gravity's Rainbow the parabolic arch symbolizes disease, dementia, and destruction. Its counterpart is the circular mandala, a symbol of opposites held in delicate equipoise. In the novel drinking games and dances move in circles; the Herero villages used to be arranged mandala-like, and in every episode are windmills, buttons, windows, eyes, Ferris wheels, roulette wheels, rocket insignia, and other cast-down indexes of the novel's grand cycling. (Weisenburger 11)

The novel's "grand cycling" also occurs in the image of the sieve, the circular and porous object which opens up spaces for hope and movement through destruction. According to Maureen Quilligan, "the book searches for a means of salvation" (Quilligan 204); this quest, moreover, tends to cycle in and out of the multitudinous dialogues, connecting them through a "dense web" of correspondences (220). In concurrence with most critics of Gravity's Rainbow, Quilligan finds that Pynchon's vision, while tragic, is not pessimistic. The "proper reader" of this text, she says, must be "someone who is willing to entertain the possibility of making a religious response to the ineffability invoked by the polysemous language" (223). To put this assertion another way, like the sieve, an object used for purposes of divination, the "polysemous density," which Quilligan locates in Gravity's Rainbow, engages interpretation as a kind of divination or "holy activity" (218). If, as Quilligan claims, the sacred and the profane intersect, the waste of the world may then be read as a source of renewable (cyclical) energy. And the novel's temporal period—a gestative nine months—signals both the ending and the beginning of a cycle. "Is the cycle over now, and a new one ready to begin?" Blicero asks near the end of the novel (GR 723).

Pynchon's characters are consistently readers and interpreters, as Quilligan reminds us. Everywhere are signs, clues and legends waiting "to be deciphered" and "translated into action by the people" (GR 73, 155). The characters also partake in another "holy activity," drug experimentation, as they seek out epiphanic moments. The two activities

link up in the image of the sieve. While the Rocket splinters the earth into new messages, what survives or pushes through its cracks, to return to the Reverend's emblematic sieve, is medicinal. The proliferation of drugs from benzedrine to reefer in Gravity's Rainbow locates the search for a cure for the world's annihilating pain in the concept of the Word as antidote (the word-made-flesh as antibody).⁴⁷ The mind-altering dope, which the world's preterite exchange among themselves in the shelled spaces of the Zone, creates hallucinations or visions of "other orders" as well as underground communities; its illegal status imposed by state powers testifies to its creative potential.

According to Hanjo Berressem, Pynchon constructs a "'state of mind' in which psychic and geographic space are conflated;" psychic landscapes and temporal loops unveil the theme of life "under the shadow of death" (Berressem 121, 191). Such psychic landscapes are mapped throughout the text not only by dreams, films and paranoia, but also by drugs. Exchanging drugs and alleviating pain, Pynchon's characters break through borders of nationality and form alternative alliances. In the snarled grid of smashed buildings and tanks, sacred rituals emerge as "thousands of arrangements for warmth, love, food, simple movement along roads, tracks and canals. . . . Temporary alliances knit and undone" (GR 290-291). The pun on "grass" in the Reverend's description of the Roman rite becomes evident once Pynchon's characters start smoking it. Punning words and dope-smoking come together as a force against "Them" when, for instance, Slothrop's new ally, Säure, holds up his Zig-Zag brand of rolling papers in response to the command "'You will show me your papers!'" shouted by the "Berlin police supported by American MPs" (442). By recoding the word, Säure creates an antidote which counteracts the original command.

The antidote is magical, and Säure and Slothrop slip away. Maureen Quilligan pinpoints the use of the "very bad pun" as an instance of freedom from the "bureaucratizing control of experience" in Gravity's Rainbow; Pynchon's silly punning ("but these are not malignant puns," the narrator slyly remarks at one point) indicate "the magic potency of language" (Quilligan 209). Using a very sieve-like image, Quilligan claims that the book is structured according to a "polysemy" rather than a "system of metaphors" (210).

Resembling a meshed object, the novel is “interlaced” with puns (205). Entrelacement or interlace is involved, Quilligan explains, in the unfolding of sacred meanings within and among the words themselves. In Quilligan’s estimation, Gravity’s Rainbow is an allegorical text which searches for salvation through the magical power of language:

Pynchon’s drive to get to the ineffable through the anomalies of language (such as the magic correspondences indicated by puns, silly or otherwise) owes little directly, I should think, to any one theorist of language; but that texts like The Crying of Lot 49 and Gravity’s Rainbow can now be written and read derives absolutely from the context of a widely-felt concern for the being of language in the last half of the twentieth century. (216)

The surviving communities and the black market drug trade in the Zone, furthermore, provide not only an alternative arena for certain magical potencies but return Slothrop’s faith in the Word: “the Word made printer’s ink, dwelling along with antibodies and iron-bound breath in a good man’s blood, . . . with its cold cutting edge, slicing away every poor illusion of comfort the bourgeois takes for real” (GR 571). In the image of a cutting edge or matrix through which illusions must pass, the Word becomes a sieve, a filtration system of the blood.

Although drugs appear to oil this system, to provide an encounter with transcendence or immanence, drug *addiction* moves in the direction of death. In Pynchon’s diagnosis the problem is finding a release that does not move in another, infinitely less entertaining, direction of death. What we need to consider, the text reveals, is the real addiction to a “culture of Death,” to the comforts and so-called necessities designed by “men whose only talent is for death” (176, 747). The leaves of grass that grow in the spaces produced by the war’s bombs may be addictive but they may also be the leaves of a text of life, a text formerly rendered invisible by other, more subtle, forms of State sadism.

The god of Gravity’s Rainbow, if there is one, may be manifest in this text as the combined opposites of curse and cure. Linking god and drug in the pun on thiophosphate, Pynchon returns to the concept of the Word as antidote in a conversation between Tchitcherine and Wimpe:

Tchitcherine: “You mean *thiophosphate*, don’t you?” *Thinks indicating the presence of sulfur. . . .* Wimpe: “I mean *thiophosphate*, Vaslav,” *indicating the Presence of God.* They

shoot up . . . initiation into the bodyhood of steel . . . no way to separate this from theophosphate. (702 Pynchon's italics)

The epidermic needle, the “bodyhood of steel,” punctures the skin’s surface—as the Rocket punctures that of the earth—to bring about another order of consciousness. It partakes in a theology that places at its center a vision of redemption, of spiritual healing, in the puncture wounds of a crucified god. The punctured body of Christ, stretched on the cross, becomes the mystery of the sieve that sifts together curse and cure, death and life. The bleeding holes are evidence of both an end and a beginning, of a return to original sin and a vanquishment of it. The Word as Flesh is iconographically porous, weaving together the sacred and the profane. It is, as Piero Camporesi asserts in The Juice of Life: The Symbolic and Magic Significance of Blood, an “anatomical sieve” in a “trickling universe . . . of archaic liquidity” (Camporesi 70-71). Drawing from the writings of medieval and sixteenth-century mystics, Camporesi continues:

the blood of Christ [acquires] the precious thaumaturgical value of a magic ointment that could annihilate the stench of sin, the fetor of the excremental human being, the acrid, musty stench of the polluted community, the miasmas of malignity: unique and and precious balm, most exquisite of distillates, issuing not from the emporium of any mortal druggist, but from the wondrous grotto of the side of the Protoapothecary who has vanquished death. (72)

Blood, the “perfect ointment,” oozes from the sieve-like body, transforming it into a “sensual alphabet”—the pierced Word at the “origin of mystical language” (70).

Pynchon’s investment in the energizing, healing dimensions of language is similar to de Certeau’s in The Practice of Everyday Life. With its salvational dimension The Practice of Everyday Life argues that survival and enjoyment in the cracks of a power system exist by virtue of the differential structure of language itself. Within a dominant economy that inscribes its laws into bodies (creating a body politic stretched across “the grid of discipline”), “infinitesimal transformations” and manipulations ensure the survival of the weak and the unfortunate (de Certeau xiv). If we cannot escape technocratic systems, we can bring about slight alterations through tricks and manipulations that outwit “Them.” For de Certeau, although language is subordinated to social codes and prescribed forms, “unforeseeable sentences” emerge in the smallest alterations; every reader or

consumer of a text is also a writer, shifting meanings and eluding intention. The “‘information’ distributed by an elite (or semi-elite)” cannot evade the reader’s creativity (172).

The predominant metaphor of de Certeau’s argument is the sieve or grid. Not only does it appear in his announcement of a “sieve order” (107), but it emerges in his various references to gaps and spaces in systems, to passages into other places. It also occurs in his focus upon synecdoche and asyndeton (the stylistic figures of “everyday expression”). While synecdoche foregrounds detail in an expression, asyndeton amplifies its separations (101). The common reader-writer-speaker can transform meaning, make it stray off course. Language, in the end, belongs to no one. Closing his argument, de Certeau states, “the symbolic is inseparable from gaps” (202), and these sieve-like gaps are where mutations occur, where blind spots in power structures reside.

The playful and extensive use of phonemes, acronyms, slangs, curses, abbreviations, official and unofficial discourses in Gravity’s Rainbow testifies to its location of hope in the ever-expanding field of language. Under the threatening arch of the Rocket which seals the link (“the progressive *knottling into*”) between lift-off and target, the limericks, paradoxes and puns serve, perhaps, as the “disentanglement from” the terror of screaming into silence (3 Pynchon’s italics). Mixture and dissemination in Gravity’s Rainbow take place under the rocket’s parabola; the combinations of words and people produce a kind of alchemical formulation that transmutes despair into its opposing term, hope. The god who oversees the world of Gravity’s Rainbow is perhaps Thoth, ancient predecessor of Christ. Thoth is the “god-pharmacist-magician” in Derrida’s genealogy, who presides over alchemy, writing, hidden texts, astrology, and who can heal the sick (Derrida 90). For Derrida, Thoth is also the god “of absolute passage between opposites” and of the crossroads (93); “sly, slippery and masked” he is present in the signifier that refuses to be pinned down (93).

He is present in Slothrop. Often disguised and impossible to capture, Slothrop, at one point, becomes a crossroad himself: “and now, in the Zone, later in the day he became a crossroad, after a heavy rain he doesn’t recall” (GR 626). Pynchon’s principal character is forced through a sieve; he disseminates, scatters, and his identity is detached from the

solid and “steel erection” of the Rocket. “Some believe,” the narrator remarks in an aside, “that fragments of Slothrop have grown into consistent personae of their own” (742). An Osiris-figure, as many critics have noted, Slothrop is not only a figure of regeneration but also one who is connected to Thoth.⁴⁸ In the war between Seth and Osiris (which causes Osiris’s dismemberment and scattering) it is Thoth who switches from camp to camp and who sews up the wounds. Where Osiris is present or implied, so too is Thoth.

Thoth’s domain extends through the *pharmakon*, the poison that is also a remedy. A magical liquid, its power lies in ambiguity, reversibility, transformation—in the flux or threshold between healing and harming, good and evil. Gravity’s Rainbow, a novel spilling over with references to poisons and cures, is enveloped in the *pharmakon*’s suspicious powers; the *pharmakon* appears as the distilled drug that grows through the war’s sieve, as that which is addictive and liberating, painful and beneficent at once. In Dissemination Derrida links script and the *pharmakon* through Thoth’s manifestation in medicine and writing. Their power of seduction, of the ways in which each functions as a kind of wandering or displacement, pulls them together as convincing mimes. Writing displaces and mimes memory when “type passes for the original,” and the *pharmakon* mimes disease, pushing it aside and introducing in its place a remedy that is “disturbing in itself” (Derrida 99-100). Each shares a similar non-identity, a way of playing at the boundary between affirmation and negation. The *pharmakon*, writing and grammar (which also means magical charm) all constitute a “movement of *différance*” which “threatens the paternal logos” and its internal order (167).

When Pynchon’s Blicero asserts that “fathers are the carriers of the virus of death,” he distills a kind of patricidal message earlier suggested in Enzian’s musings that the Rocket, “beyond simple steel erection,” is “an entire system won away from the feminine darkness” (GR 723, 324). From molecular bonding to male bonding, the text indicates that violent systems begin at the smallest level and become increasingly larger. It then returns to the components of words and sentences, passing them through a sieve and breaking them away from the coherence of the “paternal logos.” As one of Pynchon’s female characters, Leni Pökler, asserts, there are “Signs and symptoms. Mapping on to different

coordinate systems" (159). Hers is a different kind of knowledge, "a dream of flight. One of many possible," Pynchon's narrator states. "Not A before B, but all together. . . ." (159 Pynchon's ellipses). Leni thus believes in a kind of magic which Pynchon's witch, Geli Tripping, practises. It is a magic of love distilled from hatred. In its preoccupation with cycles and returns, with dissemination, magic and semantic crossroads, the novel ultimately searches for a language that escapes phallic sedimentation.

According to Marjorie Kaufman, in her essay "Brünhilde and the Chemists: Women in Gravity's Rainbow," it is quite possible that Pynchon's text is "downright anti-masculinist" (Kaufman 225). She moves toward this possibility through an examination of Pynchon's female characters. Are they given a "fair shake?" she asks, and can we see beyond their inability to resist jumping into bed with Tyrone Slothrop? (200) Ultimately, Kaufman finds that the novel both elevates sexual energy and variety above confining, gendered roles and presents female characters who are much more than Slothrop's sex partners. Swept into the War and into the System, they maneuver their ways through the ensuing evil and try to find meaning in it. Survival, delight, and magic cluster around the female characters; Katje, for example, is evicted from the Dutch underground operations because she believes "there's a real conversion factor between information and lives" (Pynchon qtd in Kaufman 223). Pynchon, moreover, parodies the cliché, uttered by a chorus line in the Zone, "Tits 'n' ass. . . . That's all we are around here" (GR 507), and weaves the women characters into his preterite world of warmth, compassion and safety.

The war is a masculine prerogative, as it is in V., and femininity may offer the "route" out of the destruction. Phallic power, inscribed, for instance, in Slothrop's map of "conquests," may be balanced in the text by magic like Geli's, Jessica's and Leni's. Jessica tears "the masks off the x's and y's of Roger's equations" and exposes the people whom his letters hide (Kaufman 209). Her argument against statistical reductions echoes Leni's words about parallel worlds. And Geli diverts one of the novel's main plots; casting a spell upon Tchitcherine, she ensures that he does not murder Enzian. "This is magic," the narrator remarks, "but not necessarily fantasy. Certainly not the first time a man has passed his brother by, at the edge of the evening, often forever, without knowing it" (GR 735). Love underwrites the anti-System, and while it may stereotypically fall into the

women's hands, the System is undoubtedly run by men. Not all men are bad, nor all women good, but the "World just before men" was governed by something other than this "*mission to promote death*" (720 Pynchon's italics). Although Kaufman does not illustrate that Pynchon's "They" are men—consisting of those who have "a name and a penis" (GR 521)—she does locate compassion in the female characters and shows how they extend it to male characters. She claims, nonetheless, that the System pulls the women into its mass. "In such a world," she remarks, "what is it to say that, after all, the contributions of the sexes are equally dismaying?" (Kaufman 226). It seems, though, that the tension is not resolved this way; several of the women continue to pull in their direction. If the Rocket v. the Earth⁴⁹ is a manifestation of the destructive split between masculine and feminine (like elect and preterite) in Gravity's Rainbow, part of the novel's quest involves investigating this division and unsettling its foundation.

Slothrop's phallic divination of the rocket, its reversal of cause and effect, finds a counterpart in the sieve. It is a feminine image, both noted in the OED as a witch's ship and discussed by Gail Kern Paster as an icon of the porous female body. In her book The Body Embarrassed: Drama and the Discipline of Shame in Early Modern England Paster investigates the discourse of the female body-as-vessel. While she finds that the production of fluids by both male and female bodies is potentially shameful, the female body is constructed as less enclosed, more embarrassing. In early modern medical texts, iconography and proverbs, "the weaker vessel is a leaky vessel" (Paster 24):

That women's bodies were moister than men's and cyclically controlled by that watery planet, the moon, was a given of contemporary scientific theory. Their bodies were notable for the production of liquids. (39)

Women were not only associated with liquids; they were also unable to contain them. Their bodies became chaotic, aligned with natural forces rather than with the boundaries of culture. Women were dangerous and, like water, unreliable and changeable. In menstruation, they could not hold their blood; in lactation, they spilled milk. Furthermore, as Paster discovers in the medical discourses, women were said to cry, urinate and talk too much. Paster reproduces several wood prints from the sixteenth century to illustrate the

pervasive iconography and ideology of the incontinent female body. A wood print of a barrel riddled with holes and streaming with liquid, for instance, adorns a verse about womankind's excessive nature (48).⁵⁰ Like the damaged barrel, the leaky sieve enters into the emblematic portrayal of femininity.

An emblem of the powers of discernment, the (magical) sieve that does not leak, as Paster discovers, is an image of virginity:

The trope comparing women and water appears in a subverted form in the famous iconographic depiction of female virginity as a sieve that does not leak, an allusion to the vestal virgin Tuccia who carried water in a sieve from the Tiber to the Temple of Vesta in order to prove her virginity. (50)

Thus Queen Elizabeth I is depicted in many paintings with a sieve. It symbolizes her virginity and separates her from other women—"from the contradictions of a woman ruler" (50). In a painting which Paster reproduces, Elizabeth significantly holds a large sieve directly over her genital area. Although Paster does not mention this particular detail, the implication is quite clear within the context of her argument; the magically secure sieve contrasts the normative construction of women as leaky vessels, a powerful message serving the "interests of patriarchal ideology" (63).

If Pynchon's destructive Rocket is an icon of masculine power and its perversions—"Cruel, hard, thrusting into the virgin-blue robes of the sky, my friend. Oh, so phallic. Wouldn't you say?" (GR 465)—his sieve is iconographically feminine. It is that which emerges as a different kind or source of divination and power. In Gravity's Rainbow, it is both enchanting and leaky, an instance of renewal in the text's fragmented, scatological vision. The Earth, punctured by the Rocket, becomes a sieve. And that which spills out of it contrasts the malevolent purity of the Rocket's energy. As another of Pynchon's priests asserts, "For every kind of vampire, there is a kind of cross. And at least the physical things They have taken, from the Earth and from us, can be dismantled, demolished—returned to where it all came from. . . . Some chance of renewal, some dialectic, is still operating in History" (540).

Deeply influenced by Mircea Eliade's The Myth of the Eternal Return, as Edward Mendelson illustrates,⁵¹ Pynchon's beliefs may lurk behind Father Rapier's. Gravity's

Rainbow consistently foregrounds images of regeneration within destruction. According to Eliade, a cyclical cosmology is optimistic; “suffering has meaning” because it signifies renewal rather than finality (Eliade 96). An apocalyptic, eschatological, ideology has not always existed. Its “coefficient of irreversibility” emerges with the belief in one, controlling God—a God who consolidates sacred energies (104-110). The biblical consolidation of teaching by a “religious elite,” as Eliade illustrates, banishes the worship of goddesses like Baal and Astarte, declares their cyclical energies illegitimate (107-108). Yet, the pre-biblical ideologies of cycle and return do not conceive of a straight line toward apocalypse. What Christianity accomplishes, Eliade further explains, is an ontological order of human individualism. Each individual is concerned with his or her own salvation, each partakes in a limited, profane existence. Conversely, in an ontology of cyclical time, collective identity cradles those individuals lost to death and destruction (89-101). Human life and death form a microcosmic link to planetary rhythms. In such “primitive” religions, the human and divine realms are not split apart. Rather, an economy of circulating, sacred energy gathers them together. Theirs is a world of “periodic regeneration” and of “biocosmic rhythms” (52).

It appears, then, that Gravity’s Rainbow mourns and tries to recapture traces of this world; the violent systems of division inhere in an ideology imposed upon another, older way of perceiving the world. Sounding the thoughts of a minor character, the narrator illuminates this conviction:

Bland, still an apprentice, hadn’t yet shaken off his fondness for hallucinating. He knows where he is when he’s there, but when he comes back, he imagines that he has been journeying underneath history: that history is Earth’s mind, and that there are layers, set very deep, layers of history analogous to layers of coal and oil in Earth’s body. . . . Because it’s hard to get over the wonder of finding that Earth is a living critter, after all these years of thinking about a big dumb rock to find a body and psyche. . . . To find that Gravity, taken so for granted, is really something eerie, Messianic, extrasensory in Earth’s mindbody. (GR 590)

The system behind the Rocket, the “Rocket cartel,” as Pynchon calls it, repudiates the kind of wonder which Bland expresses. But there are cracks in the system; Slothrop’s erections, as they divine targets well before rockets are launched, suggest another source of

magic, perhaps located in the Rocket's double. And this double may emerge, as the text suggests, not only in the image of the sieve but in what I believe it alludes to: the frequency of "menstrual cycles being operated upon in some mysterious way" (86).

Menstrual blood, an occult liquid which combines life and death, ending and beginning, in one sign, also doubles the blood spilled in the war. It is, or bears affinities to, the blood which leaks through the sieve. In virtually all mythologies, as Chris Knight reminds us in Blood Relations, menstrual blood is associated with blood from a wound: "In hunting symbolism, wounds and bleeding vaginas are frequently juxtaposed, and the one form of blood may be thought to promote the flowing of the other" (Knight 395-396). The two kinds of blood, often "conceptually confused and combined," entail the danger of being stained, and are even—in an abstruse sense—equivalent (400). Menstrual blood, like the wounded citizens and soldiers of the Zone, haunts the edges of Gravity's Rainbow; it signifies the clash and resolutions of extremes, of the "excluded middle" in the black and white vision that destroys the world.

In fact, the colors black, white and red predominate in Gravity's Rainbow, and they occur with remarkable frequency. David Seed, for instance, calls our attention to the black/white combination and the ways in which this color scheme accrues elaborate sets of associations. "Blackness," he illustrates, "is linked variously with nightmare, faeces and the devil; whereas whiteness is related to purity, idealism, the north (ice) and bureaucracy (paper). . . . Pynchon shows an unusually acute awareness in tracing the kind of colour-symbolism to its cultural and psychic roots. . . . It soon becomes evident in Gravity's Rainbow that blackness is a symptom which cannot be read with innocence" (Seed 169). I would argue that neither is red. Between black and white, all the way through the text, the color red emerges and clusters around cyclical/circular images. It is the "drastic stain" of a sunset (GR 111, 215), the "primal red" of the "presence of the Creator much more direct" (214), the shade of "red-ring manacles" (472), and of the sacrificed Gottfried's nipples (750). Red alternates with black on the roulette wheel which Slothrop plays (208); it shows itself in Bodine's "reddened fingers" (740) and in the "blood of our enemies . . . the blood of our friends" (739). In the "black-and-white bad news" of the horrifying war (209), the color that both mediates and menaces is not gray but red. For Katherine Hayles

and Mary Eiser, in “Coloring Gravity’s Rainbow,”⁵² color names are inseparable from thematic concerns surrounding the war and the System:

When colors arise that can mediate between the black/white poles, the implicit hope is that some way may be found to escape the rule of the excluded middle. The codes that govern this complex emergence and disappearance of color can be illustrated by three color groupings: the black-red-white triad, the three most pervasive colors; the blue/yellow complements associated with Gottfried and Enzian; and the color transformations that Slothrop undergoes. (Hayles and Eiser 2).

While they claim that red lies somewhere between black and white in the “overarching color code” of Gravity’s Rainbow (1), they do not address its emblematic significance and attachment to menstrual blood.

In their literary and historical study of menstrual blood and its cultural connotations in the West, the authors of The Curse: A Cultural History of Menstruation argue that the appearance of the color red in literature is almost always a submerged signifier of menstrual blood. “Redness and blood,” they say, “are recognized [as menstruation] in ways that are devious and ways that are explicitly crude” (Delaney et al. 116). Citing the various jokes and euphemisms surrounding menstrual blood, they offer an interesting example: “Frenchwomen may see the ‘landing of the English,’ an ironic expression also stemming from the Middle Ages, when an English debarkation usually meant a bloody massacre” (160). War, menstruation and the color red appear in this expression, revealing a deep conceptual association. The Curse’s authors also note that fairy tales conjure a symbolic economy of menstruation through the recurrence of emblems and motifs that “go back to the mythic and ritualistic origins of the tales. One such recurring motif is the use of the colors white, red, and black” (166). They argue that this triad of colors is associated with the “eternal feminine life cycle:” the whiteness of the new moon, through to the red, full moon, and then to the decline of the old and blackened moon--or the White Goddess of birth, the Red Goddess of love and battle, the Black Goddess of death and divination (166). Mary Jane Lupton (one of The Curse’s authors) expands upon this motif in Menstruation and Psychoanalysis. Here, she relates the three colors specifically to menstruation as she restores the “allegorical framework” of menstruation to Freud’s “The

Theme of the Three Caskets” (1913):

Another threefold goddess pre/visions the Three Fates and the Three Caskets: the Great Goddess of ancient mythology, symbol of fertility and power. Critical to the concept of the Great Goddess is her menstruation, recognized and revered by early civilizations as a source of life and death. . . . During puberty she represents virginity; her symbols are the color white and the new moon. In her reproductive years she embodies the fullness of female sexuality (the menstruating woman); her color is red, her emblem the full moon. The final phase, the menopause, is comparable to Freud’s Atropos; represented by the color black, the menopausal Great Goddess is the witch, the old moon, the Mother Earth who prepares the grave. (83)

In a text as erudite and hermetic as Gravity’s Rainbow the running motif of black-red-white may be linked to, or influenced by, this ancient lunar and goddess pattern.⁵³ If, as Weisenburger claims, the novel extensively borrows from folklore and from legends about witches, and foregrounds the image of the moon, then it is quite possible that the color motif is informed by fairy tales and goddess mythology.

Bonnie Lenore Surfus’s article on V., “She Lives (In a Time of her Own),” examines this possibility. She argues that Pynchon “seems to utilize findings and claims of contemporary archaeologists, anthropologists and historians as evidence of the conspiracy [against women’s place in culture and history] that is revealed . . . in his novel V.” (Surfus 3). The archaeological confirmation of a goddess culture, in which the symbol “V” appears on female figurines, provides Surfus with the evidence for her argument. She explains:

Scholars are aware of Pynchon’s knowledge of the work of Robert Graves, particularly his book The White Goddess. In her book, Thomas Pynchon, Professor Judith Chambers notes Pynchon’s indebtedness to Graves, notably in his central concerns: gynocentric cultures and their repression, and the Goddess, with her fate at the hands of a patriarchal culture devoted to destruction. (Surfus 3)

The Goddess who materializes as V. in Pynchon’s first novel returns in his third in a more oblique style. Disseminated among the colors, the feminine symbols of the Earth and Moon, and the female characters, she inheres in the traces of a culture that does not entirely disappear. Significantly, her menstrual aspect emerges in the novel’s title, in the “rainbow” of Gravity’s Rainbow, and in the images of the rainbow and rainbow serpent that occur

throughout the text.

Such a semiotic connection forms to chapters of Chris Knight's Blood Relations, in which the rainbow and the rainbow serpent are discovered to underwrite ancient symbolic systems of menstruation. Multicolored, iridescent, and fluid, the rainbow and rainbow serpent are mythologically identified with "feminine wetness and blood" in cultures all over the world (Knight 459). Because, as Knight consistently remarks, menstruation is "irrespective of time and race," it predictably underwrites such world mythologies (482). Almost every culture, including the African Herero—the tribe in Gravity's Rainbow—has a snake and rainbow myth that consolidates life and death, and represents rebirth following a kind of mass swallowing by water. Knight finds that menstrual synchrony and seclusion have been and are described in terms of entering a snake and sharing its pulsing life. Coiled within the colorful snake, women prepare to be reborn as "daughters of the rainbow" (477). The snake's undulating movement, as well as its ability to shed its skin in its entirety, metaphorically captures the movement of the seasons, the cycles of dry and wet spells, and it gathers menstruating women into its cosmological significance. Many cultures attribute the origin of the world to the rainbow snake; as a symbol of the birth of human culture, Knight argues, it is inseparable from menstrual synchrony.

What Pynchon's text illustrates is the perversion of this mythology (of its cyclical swallowing and rebirth) in the Rocket—the Rocket which has a "womb" in which Gottfried is stuffed and sacrificed to masculine technology.⁵⁴ The rainbow snake, the image of menstrual synchrony, rhythm, undulations, sex, blood and death—the mythic creature who unites opposites—is converted into a "Rocket state-cosmology" in Gravity's Rainbow:

the Rocket does lead the way—among others—past these visible serpent coils that lash up above the surface of the Earth in rainbow light, in steel tetany . . . these storms, these things of Earth's deep breast we never told . . . past them, through the violence, to a numbered cosmos (GR 726).

The Herero dream of the "Great Serpent holding its own tail in its mouth" invokes an image of an ouroboros, a pre-Christian symbol of menstruation; in Kekulé's dream the Serpent announces that the "World is a closed thing, cyclical, resonant, eternally-returning" but the System has lost this vision, has converted the coiled serpent into a destructive

benzene ring (GR 412-413). The mass suicide of the Herero tribe occurs because they “are split off from the old tribal unity,” a unity connected to menstruation. They embrace death through abortion and a pact to “calculate no cycles, no returns” (318).⁵⁵

References to the serpent occur not only in the Herero sections but throughout the novel. Rainbows and the rainbow snake, when they are glimpsed or apprehended, signify sources of hope in the terrifying destruction. For instance, forms of communication hidden from Slothrop have “rainbow edges . . . rippling most intense” (203); Seaman Bodine’s “subversive garment” (his enormous zoot suit) is rainbow colored (710); Katje wears a “rainbow-striped dirndl skirt of satin, which shimmers underneath the skylight” (208); Pan, a member of the spirits “we are not supposed to be seeing,” enters the scene as a “beautiful Serpent, its coils in rainbow lashings in the sky” (720-721). It is my contention that these multiple allusions to rainbows inhere in the text’s menstrual economy—that which the totalizing power of the destructive, masculine Rocket technology tries to contain and distort. The snake mythology of menstrual synchrony combines life and death in an endless rhythm; like the “Interface” in the life cycle which Enzian observes, “it’s a long rainbow” (524) and part of an older way of knowing and surviving.

The Rocket’s parabolic arch is an imitation, a perversion, of the rainbow. It hides the vision of the rainbow and snake that actually circle the earth—it is the circle cut in half. The “dreaming Serpent . . . surrounds the World” (412), cradles the world, while the Rocket’s arch proclaims its devastation. We should not be blinded by this vision, the narrator asserts. The rainbow requires us to see through the Rocket’s screaming announcement of power,

not, as we might imagine, bounded below by the line of the Earth it ‘rises from’ and the Earth it ‘strikes’ No But Then You Never Really Thought It Was Did You Of Course It Begins Infinitely Below The Earth And Goes On Infinitely Back Into The Earth it’s only the *peak* that we are allowed to see, the break up through the surface, out of the other silent world. (726 Pynchon’s italics)

Another circular image, the Earth’s rainbow, struggles against “brainless men without vision, without imagination” (401). Like the serpent, it is a phallic symbol, to borrow Chris Knight’s words, only within “the context of male rule” (Knight 473).

Along with the rainbow's, the messages of the moon are lost. Scattered throughout the novel is the belief that the moon represents a sanctuary from the world's destruction. Pökler tells his daughter, a prisoner in Dora, that someday she may escape, "perhaps to the Moon" (410). And Enzian's quest for the Rocket 00001 involves the hope that it can take his people to the Moon:

The history of the old Hereros is one of lost messages. It began in mythical times, when the sly hare who nests in the Moon brought death among men, instead of the Moon's true message. The true message has never come. Perhaps the Rocket is meant to take us there someday, and then Moon will tell us its truth at last. (322)

One rocket destroys the earth, the other may recapture the moon's message. It is a clash between the phallic and the menstrual. And Blicero seems to know it: "Will our new Edge," he brutally asks, "our new Deathkingdom, be the Moon?" (723). In the Herero mythology, Pynchon has Enzian explain, the Moon is "both the bringer of evil and its avenger" (322)—not a death kingdom but a symbol of the continuous movement between death and life. It is connected to blood; when it emerges in the night sky, for instance, it attacks the sun "until its blood runs out over the horizon and sky" (322). The bloody sunset signifies the end of one day and the beginning of the next. In the symbolic system of menstruation, the moon is a clock which initiates humanity into a collective rhythm. In synchrony with the moon, women's bodies are time-keepers and sources of ritual power. Menstruation means "moon change" all over the world (Knight 328); it is the sign of humanity's survival and interconnection. However, as the authors of The Curse note, when the moon appears in "poetry, fiction, or mythology, critics are reluctant to associate [it] with that most female of attributes, the menstrual cycle" (Delaney et al. 49). Nowhere in the criticism of Gravity's Rainbow is there mention of menstruation's symbolic capacity to deconstruct the phallic power represented throughout the novel.

The fact that two of the characters refer to menstruation when recalling an event draws the symbolism together and gestures toward its deployment in the text. Franz Pökler, for instance, remembers sleeping with Leni "two weeks since her last period" (GR 397). And Geli Tripping tells Slothrop, "I've been up there every Walpurgisnacht since I had my first period" (293). Furthermore, Geli is a sorceress, an apprentice witch from

some other-worldly place: “Nowhere in her eyes is there any sign of corrosion” (290). As a witch, Geli introduces another emblem of menstruation into the text. In fairy tales, poetry and fiction menstrual themes and allusions filter through the character of the witch, a figure conceptually linked with fears of menstruation.⁵⁶ In Gravity’s Rainbow, this young menstruating woman takes Slothrop in and tells him to “flow along” with the suspended rules of the Zone (294). She wanders in the moonlight thinking about love; she is a “World-choosing sort” of witch who searches for Tchitcherine (718). And when she finds him, she resolves to “purge,” to bleed, him of his hatred for his black half-brother Enzian. Her magic potion dissolves the murder plot along with Tchitcherine’s memory of Enzian’s face.

Like Geli, Katje, who has “the moon in the soles of her feet” (657), also plays a witch’s role. It is when Slothrop curls up with her in a red table cloth, where it’s “cozy and just as red as a womb in here” (198), that he begins his passage away from a singular identity associated with the Rocket and its technology. In the fluid discourse of menstruation, there are many selves that modulate in a movement of life and death. Like the magical *pharmakon*’s play of oppositions, menstrual blood is a substance that can renew and transform itself. Slothrop’s gradual disappearance or dissemination recalls Katje’s words, “I don’t think they know . . . about other selves . . . yours or the Rocket’s (224 Pynchon’s ellipses). If we can sift language through a sieve, through the “womblike matrix of writing” (to quote Dissemination 194), the malleable part will leak through and leave the sedimentation of thought and identity on the other side.

The novel closes with a hymn by William Slothrop, “centuries forgotten and out of print” (GR 760). We are thus returned to America. It is the promised land, in the jeremiad rhetoric of the seventeenth century, which offers escape from corruption and renewal. The Puritan language of returning cycles and regeneration is, however, even older than the Bible from which it comes; it bears the traces of a cosmology also “centuries forgotten.” In other words, if there is a serpent in this American Eden, it may not be such a bad thing to find. This cosmological vision must be sifted or strained out of the discourses that contain it—just as the reader strains to understand the complexities of Gravity’s Rainbow. This

experience of sifting is, unlike the hunt for Slothrop, as much about losing things as about catching them. One moves in through a certain space in the text and, rather than accumulating or duplicating meaning, airs out or bleeds its ever-renewing potential for interpretation.⁵⁷

¹ The conjunction “sacred because dangerous” is cited in Chris Knight’s Blood Relations: Menstruation and the Origins of Culture. Quoting George Devereux’s essay, “The Menstruating Woman as Witch,” he illustrates that the equation is also reversible: “dangerous because sacred” (Knight 384).

² Similarly, Gayatri Spivak, examining the role of the feminine in philosophical investigation, writes: “The discourse of man is the metaphor of woman” (Spivak 44). In an article entitled “Displacement and the Discourse of Woman,” she invokes Derrida’s turn on the word “we” as “we-men” (the “we-men” of philosophy) in order to claim that “‘we-women’ have never been the heroes of philosophy,” of the kind of interrogations which nonetheless use femininity in the enterprise of interrogation (49). The philosopher’s relation to a world gendered feminine displaces women; the world becomes the womb and then the “idea” (56).

³ These constructs nonetheless give rise to the kind of interpretation that, for example, Melvin New delineates in his essay on V: “Like Godolphin, we would like to impose our own ‘dream of order’ on the ever-moving surface of V, for like Vheissu, V, and all significant literary works can be considered a tattooed woman whose mystery we are driven to penetrate and possess” (New 102).

⁴ The image of the rainbow invokes a complex symbolism of menstruation. Chris Knight’s Blood Relations: Menstruation and the Origins of Culture locates rainbow and rainbow serpent images in cultures throughout history and throughout the world, illustrating intricate connections to rituals of menstruation. My section of Gravity’s Rainbow discusses Knight’s thesis in detail.

⁵ The Oxford English Dictionary, under the word “vicarious,” cites the nose as a “vicarious” source of (excess) menstrual blood. There is, then, an implicit association here between a bleeding vagina and a bleeding nose. Thomas Laqueur’s Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud locates the link between nosebleeds and menstruation in the writings of Hippocrates and Aristotle. Hippocrates, for instance, held that “nosebleeding was a prognostic sign that blocked courses, amenorrhea, would soon resolve” (Laqueur 39). And, Aristotle said that women “do not suffer from hemorrhoids or nosebleeds as much as men do, except when their menstrual discharges are ceasing” (37).

⁶ Furthermore, while both Fina and Sarah are sacrificed to Pynchon’s thematic treatment of male violence, they leave the reader with a haunting image of “hollowed” and “mirthless” eyes, eyes formerly filled with reflections of the sky and sea (152, 271).

⁷ Jardine, for instance, claims that V, illustrates the son’s return “to the mother’s-body-in-narrative in order find himself through an act of heroism and will—one directly leading to his death” (Jardine 256). And Stimpson asserts that the text engages only two types of women: “mothers and lovers”; according to Stimpson, “ordinary women,” in Pynchon’s utopic vision of the world, “would be fertile. Goddesses would protect the natural bounty of the womb” (Stimpson 80, 91).

⁸ This insistence is apocryphal in Pynchon criticism. Bob Orlowsky wrote to the Internet Pynchon list the following anecdote about a woman who met Pynchon and referred to his novel as V. Pynchon is reputed to have exclaimed: "It's V period. Not V! Damn it! V PERIOD." Orlowsky ventures, "railing not at her, but at stupid reviewers and readers, I guess" (Pynchon-l@waste.org. Nov.8/94). Other list members have heard similar stories involving strangers who receive this admonition.

⁹ The barricade of colonial settlers, drinking and dancing while the rebellion rages outside, recalls the upper class revellers in Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death," who similarly and frivolously attempt to seal themselves off from a source of danger. In The Curse: A Cultural History of Menstruation, Delaney et al. cite Claude Daly's essay, "The Menstruation Complex in Literature" (1935), on his analysis of Poe's "Masque." They write: "Daly thought that Poe's story "The Masque of the Red Death" fully captured the menstruation trauma [the male's fear of castration and death]. The red, disease-bearing visitor comes [as Daly states] like a 'pall of death, shutting out the prehistoric past'" (Delaney et al. 186).

¹⁰ The connections among sewage, menstrual blood and waste reemerge in The Crying of Lot 49 and contribute to the alternative, or W.A.S.T.E., system of communication. Menstrual blood is waste—a form of plethoric blood, according to medieval and early modern medical discourses. My section on Lot 49 expands upon this etymological link.

¹¹ The iconography of the eucharistic, bleeding god borrows from the menstrual symbolism of goddess religions. See Helen Smith's unpublished dissertation, The Female Questor, as well as Gail Kern Paster's chapter entitled "Laudable Blood" in The Body Embarrassed.

¹² V.'s comb, which shows up in the hair of various female characters (Paola, V., Victoria Wren), also connects her to Kali, as Stimpson notes (Stimpson 83). For Stimpson, the comb's carving of five crucified soldiers is a combined image of destruction and resurrection—the two realms over which Kali presides.

¹³ See Knight's association between the Rainbow Snake and the menstrual dance: "the 'Snake' is nothing other than women's culture-creating, menstruation-synchronising dance" (477).

¹⁴ Knight reproduces these images throughout the illustrations in Blood Relations.

¹⁵ The moon is also, at one point, "impossibly bright," and the characters remark upon it (V 392).

¹⁶ Linking ink to the *pharmakon*, the poison/remedy, Derrida writes: "there is no such thing as a harmless remedy" (Derrida 99). See my chapter on The Sound and the Fury for a full analysis of Derrida's deconstruction of Plato's *pharmakon*.

¹⁷ This section on V. is forthcoming in Pynchon Notes.

¹⁸ Here, Quilligan refers to Walter Ong's "Wit and Mystery" (1974), in which Ong illustrates how wordplay, or "semantic coincidence," was used by Latin hymn-writers to "penetrate to startling relations in the real order of things" (Quilligan 161).

¹⁹ The novel is filled with words from other languages: *inamorati* (lovers, in Italian), the name *Schrift* (*shrift*, a confessor; the revelation of something private or secret, derived from Scandinavian languages), *Fangoso* (slimy, in Italian) to name only three. *Schrift* is also *script*, in German. C. Morris *Schrift* may be a hidden imperative: "see Morse script," or "see more writing." The imperative directs us to the periods between letters, to the hidden messages in the novel's "excluded middles"—which may be the dots of the Morse code. Edward Mendelson, in "The Sacred, the Profane, and The Crying of Lot 49," reads both an "illicit relationship" (a *tryst*) and the word "*tristesse*" into the name *Tristero/Trystero*: "For if even the smallest event carries large significance, then even the smallest loss, the most remote sadness, contains more grief than a secular vision can imagine" (Mendelson 114). His essay focuses, however, upon the relevance of Oedipa's experience of paranoia rather than upon her melancholia.

²⁰ The Crying of Lot 49 is a novel about forgeries, corrupted and missing texts, and multiple versions of stories. Driblette, a spokesperson for the loss of access to an origin/original, has eyes which seem furrowed by tears: "They were bright black, surrounded by an incredible network of lines, like a laboratory maze for studying intelligence in tears" (77). Tony Tanner writes: "Communication . . . can only be imperfect, incomplete. Oedipa is later to wonder if all the clues that come her way [here quoting Pynchon] 'were only some kind of compensation. To make up for her having lost the direct, epileptic Word, the cry that might abolish the night' . . . The 'cry' that might abolish the night is replaced by a 'crying' that can only extend it" (Tanner 181).

²¹ I disagree with Deborah Madsen when she describes Oedipa's tears as "self pitying" (Madsen 55). Nor do I agree with Wail Hassan's article "This is not a novel," which claims that Oedipa "is not a mystic" (Hassan 92).

²² Deborah Madsen sees a similar significance in this image: "it is a presence that indicates an absence, containing or straddling the two, and so reifies the position in which [Oedipa] is located by her *Tristero*-quest, poised between presence (her clues) and an absence (their secondary meaning)" (Madsen 65).

²³ Oedipa, as countless critics point out, is linked to the representation of a nymph on the sign at "Echo Courts," the motel where she stays. "The face of the nymph," Pynchon writes, "was much like Oedipa's" (26). The nymph is described in a series of negatives, equivocating a straightforward identification with Echo: "She was smiling a lipsticked and public smile, not quite a hooker's but nowhere near that of any nymph pining away with love either" (26-27). Similarly, Oedipa is neither Echo nor Narcissus, but somewhere in between the extreme positions of self-negation and self-centeredness.

²⁴ See Dissemination 86-93.

²⁵ When Oedipa considers the "seven years' bad luck" for having broken the mirror, she says, "I'll be 35" (Pynchon 41). Thus, Pynchon indicates that her age is twenty-eight.

²⁶ Throughout The Myth of the Eternal Return, Eliade argues that the cyclical nature of the Christian liturgical calendar is a residual aspect of an ancient belief in the “eternal return.” Referring to the title of the novel, Edward Mendelson writes, “But why the *forty-ninth* lot? Because Pentecost is the Sunday seven weeks after Easter—forty-nine days. But the word Pentecost derives from the Greek for “fiftieth.” The crying—the auctioneer’s calling—of the forty-ninth lot is the moment before a Pentecost revelation, the end of the period in which the miracle is in a state of potential, not yet manifest” (134 Mendelson’s italics).

²⁷ Pynchon describes Oedipa’s reaction to Fangoso Lagoons: “Some immediacy was there again, some promise of hierophany” (Pynchon 31). Mendelson explains that “hierophany” is a term coined by Eliade in The Sacred and the Profane and that Pynchon is familiar with Eliade’s work (Mendelson 122).

²⁸ Eliade makes this argument in The Sacred and the Profane (1955).

²⁹ Micro- and macrocosm are linked in Oedipa’s decision to pursue her quest: “She had caught sight of the historical marker [of the play, “The Courier’s Tragedy,” which dramatizes the emergence of the Trystero] only because she’d gone back, deliberately, to Lake Inverarity one day, owing to this, what you might have to call, growing obsession, with ‘bringing something of herself’—even if that something was just her presence—to the scatter of business interests that had survived Inverarity. She would give them order, she would create constellations” (CL 90). And, “the next day,” as the narrator informs us, she meets Mr. Thoth.

³⁰ Mary’s melancholic love, emblemized in centuries of pietá (and resembling portraits of Venus weeping over the dead Adonis), combines *eros* with *tristesse*, further expanding the feminine connotations or iconography of the Tristero.

³¹ I disagree with David Seed’s point that the puns indicate the futility of Oedipa’s quest. He states: “It is at Yoyodyne that Oedipa meets Stanley Koteks whose name and whose membership in WASTE [sic] comically hint at the possible futility of Oedipa’s search” (Seed 126). Admittedly, Oedipa’s search for the veracity of the Tristero may be futile, but the quest itself—and what it implies about the possibility of a menstrual discourse—is not.

³² Several critics have made this connection. See, for instance, Judith Chambers, Thomas Pynchon, p.100.

Maas also resonates with definitions. It alludes, for instance, to the the Spanish word “more” (indicating that Oedipa finds herself filled with more meaning as she moves through her journey), to the celebration of the Eucharist (to the Christian Mass), or, as Judith Chambers finds, to a Dutch word meaning “mesh” or “stitch” (Chambers 101). Chambers further explains that “maas” is idiomatic in Dutch for slipping “through the meshes [to] find an avenue of escape” (101). This image of a mesh returns in Gravity’s Rainbow in the recurring emblem of the sieve, the symbol of escape and transformation which, as I demonstrate, contrasts the annihilating force of the Rocket.

For an interpretive catalogue of the names in The Crying of Lot 49 see J. Kerry Grant’s A Companion to the Crying of Lot 49.

³³ See the copyright information in the Harper and Row edition of Lot 49.

34 Helen Smith's doctoral dissertation The Female Questor: An Analysis of the Gender Conflict in the Mythic Symbolism of Menstruation and the Quest for Knowledge (University of Toronto 1991) offers extensive research on this iconographic link.

35 Gail Kern Paster, in The Body Embarrassed: Drama and the Discipline of Shame in Early Modern England (1993), finds that women's bodies are, according to the Aristotelian influence upon Renaissance thought, more moist than men's: "Their bodies were notable for the production of liquids--breast milk, menstrual blood, tears" (39). When coupled with urine and excrement, these liquids come under the category of waste. In her chapter "Laudable Blood" she explains: "Menstruation comes to resemble the other varieties of female incontinence--sexual, urinary, linguistic--that served as powerful signs of woman's inability to control the workings of her own body. It is not too much to argue that these historical signs of uncontrol bear implications for the ideology and politics of reproduction that we live with still" (83).

36 Its absence, in other words, signifies the presence of fertilization.

37 This remarkable sentence combines red, scent, flowers, snake and an invisible history, compressing--I would argue--the text's extensive menstrual economy and feminine imagery into one line. The modifier "unnatural" appears to establish the roses as metaphors of menstruation's mystical and cultural meanings.

38 "Suppose that society is a lie," the authors of The Wise Wound suggest, "and the period is a moment of truth which will not sustain lies" (Shuttle and Redgrove 58).

39 J. Kerry Grant's A Companion to The Crying of Lot 49 offers a thorough discussion of both this concept and its occurrence throughout the novel.

40 In other words, "being" fulfils the regeneration of time. "Just as the disappearance of the moon is never final," Eliade explains, "the disappearance of man [sic] is not final either" (87).

41 See Ottavia Niccoli's "'Menstruum Quasi Monstruum': Monstrous Births and Menstrual Taboo in the Sixteenth Century" (1990); Marie-Helene Hunt's Monstrous Imagination (1993); Piero Camporesi's Juice of Life: The Symbolic and Magic Significance of Blood (1995). Camporesi, for instance, quotes Pliny on the subject: "Nothing is more monstrous than women's menstruation" (115).

42 Goux's research finds this iconography of the sphinx; she is a psychopompos, conveying the notion that "death is rebirth" (56).

43 According to Goux, “the deepest core of every initiation is constituted by the rite that provides a pathetic symbolization of the neophyte’s death, . . . followed, after a period of uncertainty and mourning, by the initiate’s return among the living. . . . He undergoes an ordeal that is supposed to leave an indelible trace, or some substitute for bodily mutilation, such as circumcision, the extraction of a tooth, scarification, the tearing out of hair” (41). Chris Knight’s Blood Relations argues that this type of rite is a ritual of “male menstruation” (36-37).

44 Goux further explains: the riddle “is a trial that involves the head and that requires its sacrifice. But the sacrifice of the head is precisely the sacrifice that Oedipus is unwilling to make. . . . Weak-footed, Oedipus is strong-minded; he is not intimidated by the Sphinx’s insidious question, for to him her enigmatic profundity, the secret hiding places of meaning, the rich obscurity of hidden revelations of the initiatory arcanum (the cryptophoric symbol, in a word) is all superstition” (57).

45 As David Seed says in The Fictional Labyrinths of Thomas Pynchon, “The critical reader is thus forced to choose between the unacceptable option of silence and the inevitably distorting effects of separating out [or sifting out, I’d say] different aspects of the novel for examination” (Seed 158).

46 The reversed film constitutes or describes Slothrop’s memory of the “first American Slothrop” who had been a “mess cook or something” on the Puritan ship, *Arbella*: “there go that *Arbella* and its whole fleet, sailing backward in formation, the wind sucking them east again, . . . as the old ships zoom out of Boston Harbor, back across the Atlantic whose currents and swells go flowing and heaving in reverse . . . a redemption of every mess cook who ever slipped and fell when the deck made an unexpectant move, the night’s stew collecting itself up out of the planks and off the indignant shoes of the elect . . . and the vomit he slipped on goes gushing back into the mouth that spilled it” (GR 204).

47 Piero Camporesi, in The Juice of Life: The Symbolic and Magic Significance of Blood, draws a similar equation between the Word and its pharmacological effects. Christ’s divine blood, he says, is experienced as “an inebriating drug” (Camporesi 73).

48 see Seed’s Fictional Labyrinths, 164.

49 Throughout Gravity’s Rainbow, technological power becomes another instance of masculine domination over feminine earth. Enzian muses, for instance, about his “discovery” that love among European men “had something to do with masculine technologies, with contracts, with winning and losing. Demanded, in his own case, that he enter the service of the Rocket, . . . an entire system . . . held against the entropies of lovable but scatterbrained Mother Nature” (GR 324).

50 The authors of The Curse also mention the medical construction of the womb as a defective barrel. They cite a seventeenth-century physician, Dr. de Graaf, who writes: “the menstrual blood escapes the feeblest parts of the body, in the same way that wine or beer undergoing fermentation escapes by defective parts of the barrel” (Delany et al. 47).

⁵¹ See Mendelson's "The Sacred, the Profane, and The Crying of Lot 49" (Pynchon: A Collection of Critical Essays. Ed. Edward Mendelson. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1978).

⁵² I am grateful to Keith McMullen for giving me this reference.

⁵³ Katje, for example, is a kind of white goddess, manipulated by the System into a "Golden Bitch" who begins "to leak away from this world" (GR 658). When we see her in the Counterforce chapter, she wears a "white kerchief . . . a lean white dress. . . . She has felt the moon in the soles of her feet, taken its tides with the surfaces of her brain" (656-657). The narrator continues: "How can she pass now through so much blackness to redeem herself?" (656).

⁵⁴ "The 00000 is the womb into which Gottfried returns. . . . One of these valves, one test-point, one pressure-switch is the right one, the true clitoris, routed directly into the nervous system of the 00000" (GR 750-751).

⁵⁵ The Herero resistance to German colonisation occurs as a refusal to reproduce; it is a "racial suicide" relying upon menstruation as a sign of progression to a "negative birthrate" (317). While menstruation is not directly spoken, its surrounding symbolic economy is laid out as it slips away: the end of "bloodlines of mother and father," the relinquishment of the sacred "birth-knot," the loss of the "Moon's true message," the vanishing belief in the sunset's "blood" and rebirth every morning (316-322).

⁵⁶ Chapter 16 of The Curse, titled "The Bleeding Tower: Menstrual Themes in Fairy Tales," deals extensively with the connection among witches, young women and menstruation.

⁵⁷ This section on Gravity's Rainbow has been published under the same title in The Journal of Narrative Technique. 28:2 (Spring 1998). 186-213.

**CHAPTER TWO: WILLIAM FAULKNER
THERE'S A CURSE ON US**

I. "Between Two Moons Balanced": Menstruation and Narrative in The Sound and the Fury

Oh her blood or my blood Oh
(The Sound and the Fury 135)

It is generally acknowledged that Faulkner's The Sound and the Fury is a tragic tale that recounts the dissolution and final years of a Southern aristocratic family; trapped by suicidal compulsions and by a value-system that no longer serves or preserves them, the Compson family is dragged under the wheel of fortune. From this thematic and critical perspective, the novel is about loss and despair, about the curse—"theres a curse on us," Quentin repeatedly says (SE 158)—that haunts and ruins the Compsons.¹ Seen through the eyes of the tortured narrator-brothers, the vision of their loss, shame, and fury is compelling and bleak. But a slight shift in perspective, a turn toward the counter-narrative, displaces the novel's pervasive sense of tragedy and wretchedness. Miss Quentin's escape with her mother's money is a triumph that invests the title-word "fury" with its feminine, mythological resonances. From the daughter's perspective, the spirit of retributive justice against a household which banishes Caddy and persecutes her daughter is conjured in the name of the ancient female spirits. Born from the blood of a Titan god and invoked to punish those who transgress kinship ties, the furies exact retribution where human laws fail.

When Miss Quentin smashes a hole through Jason's window and breaks his "metal box," she seizes what is rightfully hers (283); to read the scene through the eyes of one of the servants is to participate in his sense of conspiratorial pleasure in her flight. Although Luster does not necessarily know that Miss Quentin has burglarized Jason, he delights in the sounding horns and the shaking tree which announce her escape. Clutching the

carnival ticket or quarter with which Miss Quentin possibly purchased his refusal to announce her getaway, Luster says to Benjy: "*Miss Quentin give it to me. I knowed they couldn't keep me out....Here she come, he said. Be quiet, now. We went to the window and looked out. It came out of Quentin's window and climbed across into the tree. ... Come on, Luster said. There now. Hear them horns*" (73-74). Jason, infuriated by her escape, believes that Miss Quentin, like her mother, embodies all loss: the loss of money, of a job, of respectability, of his father and, by extension, of the Civil War. The novel, however, interrogates the way in which the female figure resists her role as the empty center of a masculine narrative; emptiness, within a symbolic economy of menstruation, gives rise to replenishment. Through Caddy and Miss Quentin, the demise of the Compsons, of the old South, occurs as both an ending and a beginning.

Caddy's absence, her position as an empty center around which the Compson brothers' obsessions circulate, certainly captivates Faulkner scholars. Yet, the remarkably complex treatment of menstruation in The Sound and the Fury receives little more than cursory attention in the tradition of criticism; it is noted, but it is not investigated as a dominant trope. John T. Matthews, for instance, interestingly alludes to the "stains of time" and to the way in which the Compson family fortune is "bled away," but he refers only once to Caddy's muddy drawers, to "the marks of sexual maturation—whether the bloodstains of menstruation or the simple mud of human flesh" (Matthews 47, 72, 42). Although Matthews discerns an association between mud and blood, he dodges the possibilities it offers. For Matthews, while Caddy occurs as a figure of resistance in her own right, she nonetheless embodies the "logic of loss" in the novel (Matthews 37). Her brothers associate her with sex, death and time—and the capacity of each to stain and wound (47-53). Doreen Fowler, beginning with a similar premise, constructs a Lacanian reading which claims that Caddy, the novel's "absent center," announces the larger configuration of woman as "phallic lack" (Fowler 5). Caddy, a "mother-surrogate," also represents the lack and loss of a mother to her despairing brothers (5). Although, at one point in her essay, Fowler states that Caddy and Miss Quentin are "identified with signs of slippage and leakage" in paternal authority, she does not follow through on the implications of this point; rather, quickly changing course, she moves into an analysis of the phallic

symbols (those precarious ramparts against lack) which run through the novel (7-9). Identified with the maternal body, and posing the threat of castration, Caddy becomes linked to the “primal unconscious life” which dangerously beckons Benjy, Quentin, and Jason (12).

Other scholars similarly approach and avoid the subject of menstruation. Diane Roberts’s reading equates Caddy’s muddy bottom with a kind of general “defilement” and loss of virginity (Roberts 121). Eric Sundquist states that the image of Caddy in the tree is a “vaguely erotic suggestion of something ‘dirty’” (Sundquist 10). Even Minrose Gwin, who discusses the oozing fluidity throughout Faulkner’s texts, twice remarks, with seeming discomfort, that the focus of her argument is “untidy” (Gwin 126, 129). Furthermore, Gwin argues that Caddy speaks a “maternal language” and gives rise to a “bisexual space” of creativity which contrasts the Compson brothers’ despair (41). While I agree that Caddy introduces a counter-narrative in The Sound and the Fury, I think the site of this narrative emerges, not in a maternal nor a bisexual power, but in the signifying capacity of menstruation.

Faulkner scholars, particularly those indebted to psychoanalytic theory, betray a blind spot in their approach to female sexuality; menstruation recedes to the background of critical analyses as emblems of maternity and castration take center stage. Although the Freudian and post-Freudian interpretations have brilliantly illuminated the narrators’ preoccupations with the lost object, Caddy, there is a tendency in such criticism to reiterate the brothers’ oedipal despair, to verify only their perspectives. For André Bleikasten, Caddy “deserts” her family; and although “unwitting,” she is an “instrument of disaster and the main cause of Benjy’s present misery” (Bleikasten 63). Her daughter, moreover, is scarcely discussed. Only the brothers are devoted extensive sections of interpretation. Wesley Morris’s analysis of the novel goes further to repudiate Caddy and Miss Quentin’s positions in the text:

The feminine becomes for [Faulkner] a weapon to challenge the hegemony of the oedipal father, the symbol of authority, but our primary sympathies are clearly supposed to go with the male Compson children, those Descendant figures repressed by the First Ancestor, by the symbolic father in Quentin’s oedipal monologue. (Morris 147)

In an otherwise insightful interpretation, Morris does Faulkner's text a disservice by asserting that it is "a monologic text deeply resistant to the dialogic voice of the other" (149). The Sound and the Fury, so full of puns, profanity and multivalent symbolism, speaks on several frequencies and repudiates coherence around a single focus. From the opening sentence, where Benjy offers a way into the text "between the curling flower spaces" (SE 3), to the last words of the novel (which we can interpret ironically), "each in its ordered place" (321), the text invites us to read between the lines. The borders around the meanings are fluid and shifting, and the story is as much about daughters as it is about sons.

As the Compson household collapses around its inability to keep women and black servants in their place, the image of Caddy tearing into a picture book to change the story assumes particular significance as an emblem of reading against the prevalent narrative and its tragic structure. "When I was little," Quentin recalls, "there was a picture in one of our books, a dark place into which a single weak ray of light came slanting upon two faces lifted out of the shadow. *You know what I'd do if I were King? she was never a queen or a fairy she was always a king or a giant or a general I'd break that place open and drag them out and I'd whip them good*" (173). The "torn out, jagged out" page does not signify loss but a release or transformation (173). Similarly, the broken window in Jason's apparently secure and locked room, which reinvokes this image, shatters his scheme to imprison Miss Quentin and accumulate her money. The *coup de grâce*, moreover, is delivered through her escape by the "soiled undergarment of cheap silk a little too pink" (282) which stains the Compson house with a trace of the sexuality Jason hates rather than with a suicide note. Like her mother before her, Quentin leaves Jason with an image of her "muddy drawers" as she breaks out of her role in his self-serving narrative (152).

Through Caddy and her daughter Quentin, The Sound and the Fury envisions a female line of descent that tears away from the lost Compsons and rewrites the notion of the family's "curse." Unlike Caroline, who disavows their "bad blood" (104), they are not keepers of the old order and they do not inherit her set of rusted keys "like a mediaeval jailer's" (281); rather, both Caddy and Quentin are associated with the symbolically

forbidden tree in the Compson garden by which they transgress the family's rules. In other words, their association with this tree and transgression invokes their symbolic association with Eve and her refusal to transmit the law of the Father. The "curse of Eve" marks woman's expulsion from the garden, her fallen status and her threat of polluting the patronymic identity:

'Your paw told you to stay out that tree.' Versh said. . . . 'You the one going to get whipped. I ain't.' He went and pushed Caddy up into the tree to the first limb. We watched the muddy bottom of her drawers. . . . 'You, Satan.' Dilsey said. 'Come down from there.'
(39-45)

The view of Caddy's "muddy bottom" from the tree haunts her brothers. "Caddy do you remember how Dilsey fussed at you because your drawers were muddy," Quentin later asks her (152). It is an intimation of her sexuality, or, more specifically, of her menstruating body –of bloody/muddy drawers—which she refuses to conceal or confine and which her brothers associate with the curse that ultimately vanquishes them. Although she is seven years old at the time of this episode, her dirty underwear creates a lasting impression, becomes entwined with images of menstruation, and returns as the emblem of her disobedience.

Like menstrual blood, historically thought to poison plants, dull blades, cloud mirrors, even spread leprosy, Caddy's sexuality suffuses the atmosphere;² it is, moreover, a poison and remedy at once, a *pharmakon*, contaminating the structure of purity which the family tries to maintain around her. In The Sound and the Fury the tragedy of the ruined Compson family is underwritten by the figuration of a menstrual economy which assumes a pharmacopoeic structure, a bleeding that is at once traumatic and healing, profane and sacred. If Caddy brings the family's "curse" to fruition by her promiscuity and by the birth of Quentin, whose father she cannot name, she also marks a turn in its history, dismantling the family's identification as a white patrilineal Eden. "How did The Sound and the Fury begin?" Jean Stein vanden Heuvel asks in a transcribed interview with Faulkner. "It began with a mental picture," he responds. "I didn't realize at the time it was symbolical. The picture was of the muddy seat of a little girl's drawers in a pear tree" (Meriwether and Millgate 245). That he "could never tell it right" (245) links the symbol to the writing

itself—and the writing to the traumatic healing communicated in the text’s symbology of blood.

In his compelling, influential essay “Plato’s Pharmacy” Jacques Derrida develops his reading of Plato’s *pharmakon* from The Phaedrus. An “occult drug,” he says, the *pharmakon* is simultaneously remedy and poison, pain and pleasure: “It partakes of both good and ill, of the agreeable and the disagreeable. Or rather, it is within its mass that these oppositions are able to sketch themselves out” (Dissemination 99). According to Derrida, the *pharmakon* is the gift of Thoth, god of writing, hidden texts, astrology and alchemy. Taking its qualities from Thoth, who is also the god of “the absolute passage between opposites” (93), the *pharmakon* is furthermore the production of difference, of differentiation within language, and the element in which opposites play or reverse themselves. It is the essence and non-essence of writing:

Thus, writing is *given* as the sensible, visible, spatial surrogate of *mneme*; it later turns out to be harmful and benumbing to the invisible interior of the soul, memory and truth. Inversely, the hemlock is given as a poison that harms and benumbs the body. But it later turns out to be helpful to the soul, which it delivers from the body and awakens to the truth of the *eidōs*. (127 italics in original).

Writing is the “filial inscription” of the Father’s word; it is waste, expenditure and regeneration, in which the non-presence of the “paternal logos” is present, in which being and non-being, truth and falsehood converge and play off each other (70-167). By virtue of its “strange sort of sympathetic ink”—in Barbara Johnson’s introductory words (xix)—writing is a *pharmakon*, a “suspect power,” which leads intention astray (or gives intention’s impossibility away) and which diffuses meaning among generations of readers. Like the *pharmakon*, it has no ideal identity; writing is a mime, a masquerade of memory and speech: “For writing has no essence or value of its own, whether positive or negative. It plays within the simulacrum. It is in its type the mime of memory, of knowledge, of truth, etc.” (105). There is, moreover, no “full being” which precedes speech or grammar (165).

Returning to the *pharmakon*, Derrida then contends that, because its essence is malleable, the *pharmakon* belongs to a liquid realm. “Liquid,” he states, “is the element of the *pharmakon*”:

It is absorbed, drunk, introduced into the inside, which it first marks with the hardness of the type, soon to invade it and inundate it with its medicine, its brew, its drink, its potion, its poison. In liquid, opposites are more easily mixed. (152)

I would argue that menstrual blood, one significant (“thick, cloudy”) liquid Derrida does not mention (169), is the *pharmakon*’s most appropriate element. Menstrual blood, like Plato’s *pharmakon*, is “undecidable,” signalling both the end of one cycle and the beginning of another. It is also the sign of Eve’s curse, of her punishment, which her daughters inherit, for having opposed the Father’s word. In another essay, Derrida himself states: “the difference between speech and writing is sin, the anger of God emerging from itself, work outside the garden” (qtd. in Aichele et al. 127). Yet, he fails to mention woman’s monthly blood-loss as the mark of humanity’s banishment from the Father’s presence and from direct access to the Word; more tangibly than “work,” it declares, as the trace of “sin,” the fall into proliferating signs, into writing. Furthermore, while signifying the separation from the Word, menstrual blood also anticipates its return in the flesh. It foretells and recalls the blood sacrifice of the redeemer. Both curse and cure, menstrual blood is therefore pharmacopoeic. Simultaneously the sign of loss and regeneration, spilled menstrual blood infects the life/death opposition. As a cyclical reminder of life as well as mortality, of fertility and its non-event, it assumes the sacred/profane resonances of the *pharmakon*. And, resembling the *pharmakon* in its flux between oppositions, menstrual blood signifies through absence as well as presence—or signifies absence (of fertilization) through its presence. Together with writing and the *pharmakon*, menstruation appears to come under the domain of Thoth. If Thoth, the moon god, is also the god of constellations and alchemy, then perhaps he oversees those who follow the moon’s course, whose bodies can transmute blood into placenta.

Menstrual blood, as Derrida says of the *pharmakon*, thus “introduces itself into the body of discourse with all its ambivalence” (70). It is, discursively, an antisubstance: beneficent and maleficent, fascinating and disgusting. If we work within the terms of Derrida’s analytic movement through Plato’s texts, we can modify them somewhat, replacing Derrida’s attention to sperm with an insertion or interpretation of menstruation. When Derrida states, “Sperm, water, ink, perfumed dye: the *pharmakon* always penetrates

like a liquid," blood is conspicuously absent, particularly when he later argues that the *pharmakon* can "equally well serve the seed of life and the seed of death; childbirth and abortion" (153). Once "penetration" is replaced with dispersion or with Derrida's own "dissemination," which is, in his words, "the *periodic* regularity of the white in the text" (178 emphasis added), Derrida's terminology invites this menstrual interpretation. Dissemination is, after all, the refusal to seminate, or, the onset of menstruation. Sperm, moreover, does not invoke the ambiguities which its female counterpart does. Unlike sperm, which Derrida likens to the *pharmakon*, menstrual blood is not semantically linked to the essence of the soul (as Aristotle exhaustively explains) nor is it enveloped in a discourse of value and conservation. Because the "ideal self" is masculine, it is distinguished from the feminine, material self—a distinction derived from Aristotelian thought. "While the body is from the female," claims Aristotle, "it is the soul that is from the male" (qtd in Laqueur 30). Menstruation and semen are lined up, furthermore, under the matter/spirit opposition. Semen, according to Aristotle contains no matter; it is refined blood while menstruation is plethoric blood (Laqueur 35). Menstrual blood is thus paradigmatic waste; resembling Derrida's concept of writing, it is a "lost trace," a stain, or the strange, impure matter which "threatens the paternal logos" (*Dissemination* 152, 167). Derrida's description of the text as a "womblike matrix of whiteness" (179) implies the mark of bloodlike letters, the signifying power of menstruation. Otherwise, Derrida unconsciously reproduces Aristotle's hierarchy, in which sperm, as the active principle, transforms the inert, feminine matrix into a site of procreation.

Throughout "Plato's Pharmacy," Derrida places Plato's opposition of speech and writing within a familial scenario:

The *pharmakon* is here presented to the father and is by him rejected, belittled, abandoned, disparaged. The father is always suspicious and watchful toward writing. . . . Not that logos is the father, either. But the origin of logos is *its father*. One could say anachronously that the 'speaking subject' is the *father* of his speech. . . . Logos is a son, then, a son that would be destroyed in his very *presence* without the present *attendance* of his father. Without his father, he would be nothing, but, in fact, writing. (77 italics in original)

Later in his analysis, writing becomes "the miserable son," a "bastard," who threatens his

father with the “impossibility of full being” (149, 166): “Inscription is thus the production of the son” (161). Again, to shift Derrida’s terms, perhaps the daughter better resembles the rejected position of writing; the son, whether “orphaned” or not, may assume the role of a father, may duplicate his image. As the descendant who leaves the family, assumes another name and propagates under this name, the daughter, like writing, is the “lost trace” (152). She threatens the father’s order with mischievous wandering and nonidentity; as a result of sexual difference, she both resembles and does not resemble him. In the metaphor of the family, writing, as the mark of the father and “its erasure” (5), assumes a daughter’s role. The ink of writing, rather than an “outpouring of sperm” (149), is then menstrual blood: the potion and poison of inscription.

In “The Double Session,” the section which follows “Plato’s Pharmacy” in Dissemination, Derrida inserts a letter by Philippe Sollers. In her introduction to Dissemination, Barbara Johnson writes: “the letter plays on Mallarmé’s *Mimique*, whose text it transforms by twisting its graphic and phonic signifiers in such a way as to reveal surprising associations and unexpected intersections with the text of “The Double Session” into which it is inserted” (xix). Her translation of the letter reveals multiplying puns on menstruation, in which menstrual blood is intimately engaged with reading and writing, staining bed-sheets and the sheets of a text:

the scene makes illustrious, beneath the lustre, only the well red
sheets of d’s(ire)

...

The high men
The I menses

...

be for the bored, their hymn bled Poe’s story
sure prize? oh, then tent city
between the she and the I, the diction and the light of reading.

(xxiii)³

“The Double Session” associates the hymen with the *pharmakon* of the preceding essay. Derrida’s interpretation of Mallarmé’s text settles upon “hymen” to extend the significance of the “virginal” white page and the white paint of Mallarmé’s mime. The hymen also marks the place of simulation, of the “mimed event” (208), and of Mallarmé’s insistence on theater: “a dramatization,” Derrida explains, “which *illustrates nothing*, which illustrates

the nothing, lights up a space, re-marks a spacing as a nothing, a blank: white as a yet unwritten page, blank as a difference between two lines” (208 italics in original). For Derrida, the hymen is a sign, like the *pharmakon*, of fusion and confusion. “Thanks to the confusion and continuity of the hymen, and not in spite of it, a (pure and impure) difference inscribes itself without any decidable poles, without any independent, irreversible terms” (210). Taking an image from the female body, Derrida not only expands his argument about writing and difference (*différance*); he unwittingly places writing at the site of menstrual blood. The blood passes through the hymen without breaking it; it spills and makes a mark, to borrow Derrida’s words, “without a mark” (213). Both menstrual blood and the hymen form a “double scene,” and each occurs, as Derrida says only of the hymen, “between the inside and the outside of a woman” (213). The betweenness of the hymen signifies spacing and articulation at once; such a combined incompatibility ceaselessly extends the possibility of meaning within a text. “Literature,” Derrida states, “voids itself in its limitlessness” (223). In other words, it bleeds meaning without dying.

When we turn to *The Sound and the Fury*, we are faced with a story obsessed with blood, purity and Caddy’s torn hymen. In fact, it is the non-presence of Caddy’s menstruation—her pregnancy—which is the occasion of her banishment from the house as well as of her narration in her brothers’ memories. What her brothers, particularly Benjy and Quentin, constantly try to recapture is the time before her pregnancy, a time pervaded by images of Caddy’s menstruation. Her remembered blood (“*Oh her blood*”) then situates her at a crossroad of purity and impurity. When Miss Quentin enters the text, she becomes the focus of similar, even identical, obsessions. Together with her mother, she is the scapegoat of the Compson family’s misfortune. For Derrida, the scapegoat and the *pharmakon*, as introjected and projected “evil,” are similar in character. Each embodies the menacing oppositions of curse and cure. Caddy and Quentin’s roles as chaotic feminine principles, as potentially polluting, menstruating daughters thus function according to the properties of the *pharmakon*. Scapegoated in Caroline’s words as the “judgment” upon her, and associated in Jason’s mind with disease, with leprosy (SE 207), Caddy and her daughter threaten to contaminate the Compson household. Their blood is poisonous:

“Finished. Finished. Then we were all poisoned,” Quentin maintains (102), and when Jason relates it to leprosy, he invokes the historical connection between menstruation and the disease’s transmission.

The Leviticus prohibitions, for instance, connect menstrual seclusion with seclusion from lepers. Like a leper, a menstruating woman defiles everything she touches. Seemingly conscious of this association, Jason takes out the bible and uses it to keep Caddy out of the house: “I told Dilsey she had leprosy and I got the bible and read where a man’s flesh rotted off and I told her that if she ever looked at her or Ben or Quentin they’d catch it too” (207). Menstrual blood and the decaying flesh of a leper belong to the realm of the abject, as Julia Kristeva illustrates in *Powers of Horror*, in order to maintain a “clean and proper” space distinguished by an “own and clean self” (Kristeva 8, 53). The abject, like Derrida’s *pharmakon*, is ambiguous, composite, “because it draws attention to the fragility of the law” (3). It occurs, moreover, in the “deep well of memory that is unapproachable and intimate” (6) and that must be repressed. Paradigmatically feminine, abjection is coextensive with the construction of symbolic and social order: “the masculine, apparently victorious, confesses through its very relentlessness against the other, the feminine, that it is threatened by an asymmetrical, irrational, wily, uncontrollable power” (70).

As *pharmakon* or abjection, the contamination Caddy and Quentin represent is also the cure of an ideology that divides women into “ladies” and “bitches” and that extends its roots into a history of slave holding. The Compson family’s investment in the exchange value of their virginal purity—and in the use value of a “kitchen full of niggers” (SE 278)—is undermined by the healing “pollution” of their sexuality. Like the *pharmakon* that contains within itself opposing identities, the text itself yields opposing interpretations. Caddy and Quentin do not represent an empty center around which the Compson tragedy circulates; on the contrary, their menstrual blood leaks through to, or out of, the center of the text, filling it with meaning and equivocating the narrators’ agonized impressions. Miss Quentin’s flight from the clutches of the Judas-like Jason invests her with a kind of feminine heroism and offers to answer her question, “I don’t see why I was ever born” (188); the Compson lineage may die out but the fatherless Quentin strikes a new path,

leaving evidence of her life-blood on the bedroom floor. The Easter-Resurrection theme that frames the temporal structure of the novel assumes a feminine significance in the body and blood of Caddy Compson and coincides with the traumatic healing of the Christian event. Consequently, the “curse of Eve” both signifies a fallen state (Caddy as “fallen woman”) and initiates the possibility of renewal; the menstrual economy of Faulkner’s text expends and transfigures its tragic focus.

When we make this shift in focus, the damnation of the Compsons entails the collapse of the oppressive ideology on which the family is precariously founded. The illness which pervades Benjy’s section (Mr. Compson’s alcoholism, Caroline’s hypochondria, Roskus’s arthritis) metaphorically expresses the illness of the South, its own participation in its defeat in the Civil War. The South’s aristocratic values and system of slavery are purged by the blood lost in the War, but it is a slow, painful bleeding, through which the slaves are transmuted into servants and through which the North’s capitalist formula introduces a dubious alternative. Benjy’s autism reflects the post-war South’s solipsistic response to its loss. Like the statue of the Confederate soldier, which gazes “with empty eyes” (319) and which Benjy resembles, the South of The Sound and the Fury gazes on the future with blank despair. But the menstrual subtext of the novel equivocates this despair. Not necessarily symbolic castration, the blood loss experienced by the South inheres in a cycle of renewal. For Dilsey, who sees “the beginning and the ending,” there is regeneration after the “whelmin flood” (296); at the Easter service in the novel’s conclusion, she sits “quietly in the annealment and the blood of the remembered lamb” (297). It is necessary to note here that the imagery of the bleeding body of Christ assimilates the iconography of the menstruating goddesses whose worship preceded, and was abolished by, Christianity; the “humanized Christ,” to quote Gail Kern Paster, “has a female body” (Paster 108).⁴ The “blood of the remembered lamb,” in the context of Faulkner’s novel, is thus also Caddy’s. In her rebelliousness and her blood, for which she is sacrificed to the family’s honor, is an inscription of another order beyond the one her family obeys.

The Sound and the Fury appears to fathom the extensive conceptual alignment of

menstrual blood with other forms of flowing blood—from the blood of wounds to the sacrificial blood of Christ. According to René Girard, in Violence and the Sacred, we cannot understand the ritualistic and sacred resonances of violence without acknowledging the relationship between menstrual blood and blood spilt by violence. “Any bloodletting is frightening,” he says. “It is only natural, therefore, that menstrual bleeding should awaken fear” (Girard 34). From this claim, Girard goes on to explain:

The fact that the sexual organs of women periodically emit a flow of blood has always made a great impression on men; it seems to confirm an affinity between sexuality and those diverse forms of violence that invariably lead to bloodshed. . . . We ought, however, to go further: to inquire whether this process of symbolization does not respond to some half-suppressed desire to place the blame for all forms of violence on women. By means of this taboo a transfer of violence has been effected and a monopoly established that is clearly detrimental to the female sex. (35-36)

Menstrual blood was not always associated with impurity and chaos; it was once associated with rites of purification and cultural order. This conceptual shift, accompanied by the control of men over women, created a “sacrificial crisis,” in which rites designed to abolish and contain violence were abandoned (Girard 238). Chris Knight’s exhaustive investigation of menstruation, Blood Relations: Menstruation and the Origins of Culture, concurs with and extends this claim; the sacred significance of menstrual blood and its ritual power “were usurped by men” and powerful coalitions between the sexes were replaced by systems of violence, by the glorification of blood spilled in war (Knight 37). For Girard, this seemingly endless violence constitutes the crisis of the Western world; for Knight, it is a crisis intensified by the ideology of race, of blood “purity.” The Sound and the Fury, situating this crisis in the South following the Civil War, attempts to disclose, in Girard’s words, that “sexuality is part of the larger problem of violence and the sacred” (Girard 219). Its attention to menstrual blood communicates a buried and distorted symbology within an ideology that violently valorizes white, male blood and that fears the “impure” blood of everyone else.

In the opening narrative, images of menstruation materialize out of the distorting effects of Benjy’s memories and bellowing. These images form a kind of mysterious realm of significance and comfort for Benjy. His recollection of Caddy’s “muddy bottom,”

together with his consistent memories of her scent, is also punctuated by the servants' otherworldly intuitions about the Compsons' demise and by their talk of conjure. Benjy, for instance, is said to have a sixth sense: "'He know lot more than folks thinks.' Roskus said. 'He knowed they time was coming, like that Pointer done'" (SE 31). In the twilight, the eerie space between night and day, which pervades his section, Benjy is held in an uncanny state of suspension. Writing and magic—the realms of Thoth—come together in the opening pages to conjure Caddy at the ages of seven and, significantly, fourteen. Here, on the threshold between girlhood and womanhood, she emerges in a pharmacopoeic blend with the servants' words about signs and trances in Benjy's narration. Her menstruating body signifies something to Benjy that he cannot articulate: "Caddy smelled like leaves. . . . Caddy smelled like trees. . . . 'What is it.' Caddy said. 'What are you trying to tell Caddy.'" (6-7). Anything which blocks this smell—her perfume, her pregnancy—severs his sense of connection to her. In Benjy's olfactory world, Caddy's scent keeps her immediately present. There is, as Jane Gallop remarks in *The Daughter's Seduction*, "an intense immediacy" to the "odor di femina"—the smell of menstruation which displaces the privileges of sight and speech in phallic signification (Gallop 27). It is not the sight of Caddy's wedding dress, for instance, which upsets Benjy; it is the fact that, because she is pregnant, he "couldn't smell trees anymore" (SE 40). Unable to speak, Benjy inhabits, even gestures toward, a different symbolic order. And Caddy's menstrual blood underwrites this order, signifying another way of knowing beyond sight and sound. By holding onto the flowers the others consistently hand him, Benjy is able to retain her scent, her presence, after she leaves.⁵

From a feminist perspective, *The Sound and the Fury* weaves together the thematic threads of sexual identity and social order. In Quentin's section, Caddy's menstrual blood and its odor invade the entire structure of his world. It is the mark of her "dirty" nature. Eric Sundquist succinctly explains that "Quentin's paradoxically puritanical concept of Caddy's purity had become nothing more than the entire burden of white identity," and the burden of this identity is placed in the custody and virginity of white women (Sundquist 24). There is, as he illustrates, a myth of purity at the heart of the novel. The subjugation

of white women (as well as black women and men) to this ideology is captured in the repeated labels of Caddy and Miss Quentin as “nigger wenches” (SF 92, 189). In the Compson family’s eyes, Caddy and her daughter blur the distinction between black and white by refusing to act like “ladies.” According to Sundquist, miscegenation casts the shadow over the memory and dream of a white South in The Sound and the Fury. More specifically, though, it is the fear of the contamination of “white blood” which causes this shadow to loom so monstrously, and this mixture is reflected or mirrored in the fixation upon menstrual blood. The obsession of Jason, Quentin and Caroline Compson with the lost purity of white Southern womanhood transforms their tragic suffering into narcissistic self-pity. Despite the splint that Dilsey and Luster, out of an unfailing or indoctrinated sense of duty, place on the narcissus flower at the end of the novel, the stalk remains broken and drooping. To take the image further, Caddy and Miss Quentin, by assuming control over their own bodies, refuse to act as the splints to the family’s phallic, narcissistic and crumbling order.

This is not to say that Caddy and her daughter thoroughly menace the white patriarchal system which defines the South; certainly both figures maneuver their ways through the system, possibly prostituting themselves and often internalizing their society’s messages. Their victory is qualified. They move out of the family and into a wider ideological version of it. For Faulkner, though, the line between victory and defeat is never clearly demarcated; the two terms involve a mixture of good and evil. Caddy and her daughter represent or gesture toward the possibilities latent within such uncertainty or indeterminacy. Doom and promise converge, for instance, in the indeterminacy of a coming event—in this case, that of the future release from patriarchal restrictions. Unlike their brothers, Caddy and Miss Quentin do not appear to desire transcendence, power or certainty. If in each of these terms inheres a phallic economy of meaning—its presence, stability and erection of truths—Caddy and Miss Quentin introduce a different site of meaning, one which is both positive and negative, momentary and cyclical, and which does not value certainty over possibility. Theirs is the realm of writing, bleeding, dissemination—of those processes which expose the cracks in phallogocentric structures.

In Quentin Compson’s section, a sense of hostility toward anything indeterminate

and unfamiliar occurs alongside a desire for purity and transcendence. André Bleikasten illustrates that Quentin, split into a “gross corporeal self” and an “ideal self,” longs to inhabit a realm of purity purged of “being burdened with a body and a sex” (Bleikasten 103, 89). He wants to be “*walled by the clean flame*” (SE 117). But Quentin is not simply an idealist, “a potential artist or poet figure,” in Bleikasten’s words (104). What he repudiates most about his body is its mixture of feminine and masculine characteristics. Sexually inexperienced and unable to defend himself in a fight because he “pass[es] out like a girl” (Faulkner 162), Quentin divides against his sense of femininity. As David Williams maintains, in Faulkner’s Women, Quentin’s hatred of materiality is “typical of the male spiritual principle:”

it is an antivital fanaticism directed against life itself. Whatever creates, sustains, increases life—and the feminine is its archetype—is regarded negatively because male consciousness desires permanence not change; it wants eternity and not transformation, law and not creative spontaneity. (Williams 82)

Quentin is not only trapped in his material body, he is also consistently spilling blood. Following his fight with Gerald Bland, for example, Quentin is covered in blood; the “rag” he uses to clean his clothes “stain[s] the water” (164), and he becomes obsessed with his inability to remove the blood. In an attempt at humor, he remarks, “I’m sorry I didn’t bleed on him a little at least” (165). And Shreve quips, “I think you lost caste . . . by not holding your blood better” (165). This exchange, however, further genders Quentin female, further reminds him of his filthy materiality. To quote Gail Kern Paster’s The Body Embarrassed, “the male body, opened and bleeding, can assume the shameful attributes of the incontinent female body as both the cause of and justification for its evident vulnerability and defeat” (Paster 92). In an economy of blood and bleeding, men are “naturally whole . . . self-contained;” the wounded, bleeding male body consequently signifies the lack of control “associated with a woman in her monthly ‘courses’” (92). Thus Quentin’s failure to “hold his blood” aligns him with a menstruating female; like a woman, he leaks involuntarily.

The entire structure of Quentin’s world is thrown into chaos by his fixation upon Caddy’s sexuality. He cannot envision something pharmacopoeic, something that exists in

an in-between state or as a sign of indeterminacy. He is trapped in an oppositional discourse that he does not entirely understand. “Poor kid, you’re just a girl,” he says to the child who follows him out of the bakery (138). And, associating black people with liquid contagion, he says to himself, “They come into white people’s lives like that in sudden sharp black trickles” (170). The dirt and odor he associates with Caddy’s “nigger” behavior—he remembers asking her, “*Why must you do like nigger women do in the pasture the ditches the dark woods hot hidden furious*” (92)—penetrate him, fill him with the desire to separate cleanliness from dirt. He recalls his mother describing Caddy to his father: “She not only drags your name in the dirt but corrupts the very air your children breathe” (104). Furthermore, the corruption surrounding Quentin is of a particularly liquid kind: “black trickles,” mud, a nickel “moist and dirty” (“I could smell it, faintly metallic”), a man’s bald spot like a “drained marsh” (126, 85). In the last hour of his life, his mind spinning with these memories, he meticulously brushes his hair and teeth, and he cleans the blood off his watch, his clothes and his hands. He performs this ritual like an initiate preparing for passage into another realm.

Perhaps this is what haunts him about Caddy; her menstrual blood, like her loss of virginity, marks her passage into adulthood (a passage Quentin never makes).⁶ At one point in his narrative, Quentin recalls being told about a man who “mutilated himself:”

He went into the woods and did it with a razor, sitting in a ditch. A broken razor flinging them backward over his shoulder the same motion complete the jerked skein of blood backward not looping. But that’s not it. It’s not having them. It’s never to have had them.
(116)

Bleikasten refers to this incident as castration. But castration is not entirely clear; the anecdote also appears to witness something ritualistic. In *Blood Relations*, Chris Knight finds that male rites of initiation—for which there is “a body of perplexing ethnographic evidence”—involve slicing the penis and causing it to bleed (Knight 428); Knight terms this event “male menstruation” (428). He explains that, as men monopolize ritual power, “male ‘menstrual blood’ becomes sacred and life-giving, whilst women’s becomes polluting and feared, the first symbolizing solidarity and power, the second, isolation and exclusion from power” (431). As self-inflicted, the wound remains within an economy of control,

simultaneously imitating and outdoing women's flow of blood. Whether castration or male menstruation, the image of the man's bleeding genitals fascinates Quentin, and the scene occurs in the context of Quentin's obsession with Caddy's sexuality.

This obsession is, furthermore, inextricable from his sense of being surrounded by images of menstruation. It is as though the pervasive scent of honeysuckle ultimately drives him mad; to Quentin the odor of honeysuckle is the odor of Caddy's menstrual blood, the "liquid putrefaction" about which Mr. Compson speaks:

Because women so delicate so mysterious Father said. Delicate equilibrium of periodical filth between two moons balanced. Moons he said full and yellow as harvest moons her hips her thighs. Outside outside of them always but. Yellow. Feet soles with walking like. Then know that some man that all those mysterious and imperious concealed. With all that inside of them shapes an outward suavity waiting for a touch to. Liquid putrefaction like drowned things floating like pale rubber flabbily filled getting the odor of honeysuckle all mixed up. (128)

This image of "periodical filth" occurs, in a sense, between that of Caddy's muddy bottom near the beginning of the novel and Miss Quentin's soiled undergarment near the end. The two moons are ovaries, markers of time, and the perimeters of the text itself. A kind of formidable fertility, "full and "yellow," emerges in the imagery—an emergence, however, quickly controlled by the allusion to the discarded condom. Both condom and menstruation, associated with the circumvention and possibility of pregnancy, equivocate phallic power. Disappearing from the flabby condom, the phallus leaves no other trace of its presence. It does not necessarily transform virgins into mothers. Likewise, the menstrual flow, to quote Jane Gallop, "ignores the distinction virgin/deflowered" which phallic penetration tries to make (Gallop 83). Quentin's memory of his father's monologue associates menstruation with a kind of negative, expansive power, and with his sister's rebellion against the distinctions which try to fetter her menstruating body.

Quentin repeatedly returns to the phrase, "getting honeysuckle all mixed up in it," and to the words, "*my blood or her blood . . . her blood or my blood*" (134, 135). The overpowering odor of the "drizzling honeysuckle" (154) and the out-of-control status Quentin assigns to Caddy combine to contaminate his sense of order, his belief in the distinct roles he and Caddy should occupy. "Menstruation," as Kristeva explains, "stands

for the danger issuing from the identity (social or sexual); it threatens the relationship between the sexes within a social aggregate, and through internalization, the identity of each sex in the face of sexual difference” (Kristeva 71). In Quentin’s mind Caddy is not so much a lack or an absence as a seeping liquid, a disorder that leaks into and corrupts his own self-image. “When it rained,” he recalls, “the smell began to come into the house at twilight . . . after the honeysuckle got all mixed up in it the whole thing came to symbolize night and unrest . . . thinking I was I was not who was not was not who” (SE 170). At one point, he plunges into a hog wallow, and gets his own drawers muddy in a masochistic identification with Caddy. His memories of Caddy consistently depict her as dripping wet, covered in mud and surrounded by “water gurgling . . . and waves of honeysuckle” (152); “damn that honeysuckle,” he says, “I wish it would stop” (153). The scent of mud and honeysuckle—of the “liquid putrefaction” with which they become intimately connected—literally invades his sense of coherence. It leaks into the tear in the story book (“then the honeysuckle got into it”), and then contaminates the very syntax of his narrative, distorting its rules and eventually turning his “I” into a diminished “i” (173, 177). According to Mary Jane Lupton, in Menstruation and Psychoanalysis, “to entertain the power of menstrual blood is to unveil the unbearable and invite one’s own annihilation”; “as men have feared death, they have also feared menstruation for its intimations of death and difference” (Lupton 86).

Menstruation is a “submerged signifier”; it appears, as Lupton explains, in disguise, in covert or metaphoric representation (61). Flowers, such as Quentin’s honeysuckle, are particularly symbolic of menstruation; in the biblical Song of Solomon, for instance, the image of the female speaker’s womb as a lush garden flowing with wine and honey suggests menstruation. “Do not forget,” Freud says, “that blossoms are actually the genitals of plants” (qtd in Lupton 68). Other biblical books, however, invert the erotic symbolism of the Song. Flowers and menstrual blood are, for example, directly linked in a metaphor of pollution in Leviticus: “And if any man lie with her at all, and her flowers be upon him, he shall be unclean seven days” (15:24). The Book of Ezekiel uses menstruation in a simile of God’s “fury”—a simile which appears to inform the Compson household’s sense of damnation:

Son of man, when the house of Israel dwelt in their own land, they defiled it by their own way and by their doings: their way was before me as the uncleanness of a removed woman. Wherefore I poured my fury upon them for the blood that they had shed upon the land, and for their idols wherewith they had polluted it. (Ezekiel 36:17-18)

Old Testament discourse is scattered through Quentin's section. He is oppressed by his mother's cries of the "absolution of my sins" (SE 104) and by his father's words, "Women do have . . . an affinity for evil" (105), and he envisions Caddy as "*the voice that breathed o'er Eden . . . the nose seen above the apple*" (106). Yet, the scent of honeysuckle, combined with Quentin's desire to run away with Caddy, recalls the erotic passages of the Song of Solomon: "Thou has ravished my heart, my sister, my spouse" (4:9). For Quentin, menstruation is as enticing as it is terrible.

Caddy's menstrual cycle pervades Quentin's section; not only does it emerge in the overwhelming scent of the honeysuckle, but it also appears in the clocks and watches that drive Quentin to distraction. "Christ was not crucified," he says at one point, "he was worn away by a minute clicking of little wheels. That had no sister" (77). In his Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis, Freud claims that clocks are representative of menstruation because of their repetition and cyclical regularity (Freud 226). Mixed in with Quentin's obsession with time is his recurring memory of feeling Caddy's blood "steadily beating and beating" against his hand when he touches her throat (SE 164). In order to possess her in eternity he proposes to cut her throat and then his own. A substitute-phallus, Quentin's knife can stop her rhythmic blood, can impregnate her before somebody else does. It is a violent fantasy that Quentin reenacts when he breaks his watch and leaves a "red smear on the dial" (80). Impotent against the clicking of time, Quentin escapes it altogether. The sound of clocks, the scent of honeysuckle and the memories of Caddy's blood all crowd together in his tormented sense of impotence and disintegration, and he drowns himself. His death by water indicates his lost battle with the flowing currents of blood and time.

Turning to Jason's section, we encounter the harsh opening statement, or mantra, which cynically solidifies the masculine attitude that Quentin cannot precisely articulate nor emulate: "Once a bitch, always a bitch" (180). The strength of Jason's convictions about

his niece virtually eclipses the possibility of resurrecting her from his perspective. Indeed, very little is said about her in the criticism of The Sound and the Fury; she is dismissed, for instance, by Cleanth Brooks as “a cheap little wanton, offering herself to almost any man who puts in an appearance” (Brooks 340). But Miss Quentin’s plaintive cries for her mother and the profanity she hurls back at Jason punctuate his monologue and pry open the impression he tries to consolidate around her. If, as the text obliquely suggests, Quentin prostitutes herself, it is because she has no other way of releasing herself from Jason’s prison. Like Luster, who does not even have a nickel with which to purchase a ticket for the carnival, Quentin is completely disempowered by Jason’s tyranny: “‘Whatever I do, it’s your fault,’ she says. ‘If I’m bad, it’s because I had to be. You made me. I wish I was dead. I wish we were all dead’” (260). Next to the notion that she is the embodiment of his lost job, Quentin is also, in Jason’s mind, a contaminant of his name, a contagion that must not be permitted to spread outside of the house.

Jason’s narrative resembles a dark or parodic fairy tale with Jason in the role of a monstrous jailer and Quentin in that of an imprisoned princess-figure. Separated from her mother and unsure of her destiny, Quentin is immured within the walls of Jason’s house and associated with the curse that overshadows it. As the “curse” and the “judgment” of the Compson household, Quentin is thus associated with transgression and doom. Because she is a “bad” daughter who resists Jason’s captivity, and because, in his words, “blood always tells” (238), she is also a kind of internal pollution. When Jason, reaching for his belt and hoping to thrash her into passivity, calls her a “dam little slut” (185), he betrays a terror of her sexuality. From his point of view, Quentin is a devious, secretive and protean witch who smears on make-up and disappears around corners. As the authors of The Curse: A Cultural History of Menstruation explain, “There is an extensive fear among all peoples that witches and menstruating women are the archetypal castrating females” (Delaney et al. 163). And, of course, when Quentin finally escapes, she steals the money which is, to quote John T. Irwin, “a symbolic castration of [Jason’s] power to buy sex” (Irwin 155).

Jason’s repeated utterances, “Like I say blood always tells” (SE 238), “If you’ve

got blood like that in you, you'll do anything" (238), and "blood is blood and you cant get around it" (243), are the hallmarks of his obsession with Quentin. In his eyes, she is nothing but a vessel of bad blood which infuriates him, which makes him "see red" (238). The color red, in fact, pervades his narrative. It is the color of Quentin's bright lipstick, of the debit side of Jason's ledger, of the money, his "red cent" (235), which he steals from Caddy and Quentin. Along with flowers and fluid, red is emblematic of menstruation. It is therefore not surprising that Quentin's lover's red tie also enrages Jason. "I'll make him think that dam red tie is the latch string to hell," he pronounces, "if he thinks he can run the woods with my niece" (241). Quentin's refusal to be confined indoors is a breach of the borders and the order Jason constructs around her—and "it's in her blood" (232). The red tie provokes him; it flickers at the edges of his vision as he chases Quentin across town.

Furthermore, because menstrual blood is coded as a mode of seepage from the female body-as-vessel, both Quentin's body and her behavior thus destabilize limits and inflict Jason with a sense of chaos. He desires to "control her," to spill "a little blood, if I had my way" (181). By maintaining control of her blood, of her sexuality, he maintains control over his household and secures his future from the losses of the past. According to Lynda Boose's essay, "The Father's House and the Daughter in It," menstruating women are associated with points of vulnerability, both in the father's house and the body politic, because their own bodily margins are thought to be permeable:

Menstruating women thus pose a particular threat of pollution to the male houses and societies they occupy. . . . The loss of family blood that marks the threshold of her maturity symbolically asserts the subtraction she signifies and physically defines her as a breach in the wall of the family enclosure. . . . Since menstruation marks the daughter's entrance into the margins of desire, her presence likewise threatens to invite incestuous desire and hence pollution within the family boundaries. (Boose 35)

Given that Jason's "slut" niece indirectly purchases sex for him from a prostitute who calls him "daddy," and given that Jason is the "nearest thing to a father" that Quentin has, it seems likely that Jason's obsession with Quentin and her "blood" extends the novel's thematic thread of incest (SE 259). Jason is thus himself implicated in the sense of sexual pollution he attributes to Quentin. It is a contagious obsession, repeatedly emerging in the

male Compson blood until the end.

Quentin's escape out of her window to flee with her lover then rounds out the fairy tale structure of the Jason-Quentin plot and it occurs, as John Irwin reminds us, on the day before Easter, "in the context of Christ's death and resurrection" (Irwin 155). Thus, the curse which Quentin signifies is linked to its opposite definition, to the cure and renewal inherent in Easter. Quentin is thus pharmacopoeic: she is both evil expelled and the sacred judgment upon Jason's oppressive narrative. Associated with death and resurrection from the beginning, when Caroline woefully utters that "her own flesh and blood rose up to curse her" (181), Quentin's bad blood is therefore sacred and/or profane, depending upon which perspective we assume. In Derrida's words, the *pharmakon* inheres in a "dialectical inversion"; "Apprehended as a blend and an impurity, the *pharmakon* also acts like an aggressor or a housebreaker, threatening some internal purity and security" (Dissemination 128). Like her mother before her, whom (the male) Quentin associates twice with a tear in a page--the tear in the story book and the torn newspaper which reminds him of Caddy's lost virginity (SE 147)--Miss Quentin becomes linked to a broken window and a cracked metal box. She also becomes linked to Jason's cracked head: when Jason hits his head during his pursuit of Quentin and her lover, he asks three times if he is bleeding. Ultimately, both female figures push, shift and split the limits of the narrative of purity and power upon which the Compson household rests. And Jason is forced to articulate its conclusion: "outwitted by a woman, a girl" (307).

The soiled underwear that Quentin leaves on the floor recalls the image of Caddy's muddy drawers. Together, the similar images balance the chaos in the text "between two moons"--between two emblems of menstruation. Faulkner's well-known remark about the novel's inception--that it occurred with "a mental picture . . . of the muddy seat of a little girl's drawers"--situates Caddy and her daughter at the perimeters of The Sound and the Fury:

I realized the symbolism of the soiled pants, and that image was replaced by the one of the fatherless and motherless girl climbing down the rainpipe to escape from the only home she had, where she had never been offered love or affection or understanding. (qtd. in Meriwether and Millgate 245)

Because direct references to menstrual blood are uncommon in literature and myth, the “unmentionable” is usually disguised in images of mud, bathing, odors, stains, flowers and the moon, to name a few. The Sound and the Fury uses the full range of these symbols to capture the elusive centrality of its initial vision and to invoke a menstrual discourse, to render in words the sound of Caddy’s blood pounding, “her heart thudding” (SF 150), and to challenge the structures that enclose and define it. Through a type of cyclical repetition, Quentin, following her mother, disappears into the tree in the garden and, under cover of the night, escapes Jason’s house and surveillance.

Disempowered by her role in the financial negotiations with Jason and by the maternal role she feels compelled to assume with Benjy, Caddy does not entirely escape her self-sacrificing ties to the Compsons—until Quentin’s flight. Quentin severs all links, refusing to play the part of dutiful daughter to Jason and surrogate mother to Benjy. She thrusts the responsibility for the Compson destiny back upon Jason and Caroline, and her escape leaves Jason with no bargaining power over Caddy. The “beginning and the end” about which Dilsey speaks form a circle around Caddy and Quentin and associate the “curse” they embody with Easter. Their blood carries a principle of rebirth and desire, articulated by Caddy when she feels her heartbeat and mimics Christ’s promise; “I would die for him I’ve already died for him” (151). The “curse of Eve” brings the possibility of resurrection, and this possibility is placed not in the son’s domain but in the daughter’s.

In his analysis of The Sound and the Fury, Eric Sundquist argues that the text engages with the nostalgia for the “clean, pure space” that seemingly defined the South before the Civil War (Sundquist 23). The image of Caddy disappearing out of the house in her wedding gown occurs, for Sundquist, as “the wondrous center of the book;” it is “the death of Eden, Jefferson, April 1910; and the resurrection of the Edenic myth, Faulkner, 1929” (11). Although intensified by the loss of the War, this Edenic myth is not particular to the South; it is a motif which extends from the Puritan jeremiad sermons and into the canonical tradition of American literature. As Sacvan Bercovitch illustrates in The American Jeremiad, this tradition draws upon the jeremiad construction of America as “the child of prophecy and promise,” as “a second Eden” that must not succumb to corruption (Bercovitch 69, 71). In his concluding chapter Bercovitch states: “All our classic writers

(to varying degrees) labored against the myth [of the American Eden] as well as within it” (179). To Bercovitch’s list of writers—from Henry David Thoreau to Thomas Pynchon—we can add William Faulkner. The Sound and the Fury conjures up the image of Eden and then interrogates the rhetoric of purity upon which it rests, showing that the “sacred drama of American nationhood” involves bloodshed and conformity (Bercovitch 132).

Faulkner’s text then situates this bloodshed within a discourse of menstruation which both inflects the eschatological vision of American history with uncertainty and deconstructs the opposition between purity and corruption. This tropology or language of menstruation shifts our gaze from the Compson brothers’ imprisoning despair to the possibility of hope surrounding Caddy and Miss Quentin.

In his genealogy of Egyptian gods Derrida discovers that Thoth, god of writing, the “author of differentiation within language,” is also the god of memory and medicine (Dissemination 94). Linking the “suspect powers” of writing to the *pharmakon*, Derrida argues that both produce the opposite effect from what is expected; because their power lies in ambiguity, “one and the same suspicion envelops in a single embrace the book and the drug” (72-73). Thus when The Sound and the Fury attempts to embrace Faulkner’s image of “a little girl with muddy drawers,” the text’s words and its vision pull apart (FU 61).

As Faulkner explains,

It was, I thought, a short story, something that could be done in about two pages, a thousand words, I found out it couldn’t. I finished it for the first time, and it wasn’t right, so I wrote it again, and that was Quentin, that wasn’t right. I wrote it again, that was Jason, that wasn’t right, then tried to let Faulkner do it, that still was wrong. (FU 61)

For Faulkner, The Sound and the Fury is his best “failure,” and his description of his efforts to capture Caddy invokes Derrida’s explanation of “writing as estrangement from the origin” (Dissemination 74). In other words, The Sound and the Fury is the catharsis of Faulkner’s vision of Caddy, a catharsis that slides into the mischievous elusiveness of writing. Caddy is thus associated with the act of writing itself, with its wandering ink, and with the healing and bleeding powers of the *pharmakon*. She is not the empty center of Faulkner’s text but the fluid expansion of its interpretations.⁷

II. Light in August: “The Phantom of the Old Spilled Blood”

Yes I would say Here I am I am tired I am tired of running of having to carry my life like it was a basket of eggs.

(Light in August 319)

There is no inheritance without a call to responsibility.

(Jacques Derrida, Specters of Marx 91)

Derrida’s *exordium* in Specters of Marx opens with the words, “Someone, you or me, comes forward and says: I would like to learn to live finally” (Specters xvii). Learning to live, Derrida ultimately explains, demands learning to live with ghosts, to comprehend and inhabit a haunted and in-between space where being-in-life accommodates non-being: “And this being-with specters would also be, not only but also, a *politics* of memory, of inheritance, and of generations” (xix; Derrida’s italics). Derrida then gathers them together to form a principle of justice. He specifies the affinity of justice to temporality, and deconstructs temporality by placing it between life and death, by declaring the indeterminacy of linear time. His *exordium* announces that it is not enough just to live. One must live justly, and life cannot be just unless it disjoints itself from present time and extends responsibility both to the ghosts of the past and to those “not yet born” (xix).

This conceptualization of living justly requires a paradigmatic shift from the comprehension of justice as restitution or retribution to the conviction that justice is a gift. Excessive, supplementary, and without debt, the gift of justice is ultimately a promise to hold memory and hope together, to make justice possible for others “without expecting anything in return” (65). The living do not occupy a discreet link in historical “progress.” On the contrary, they are “enjoined,” Derrida contends, in “two directions of absence,” as they inherit the past and bequeath the future to others (25). With a characteristic play on words, Derrida turns ontology into “hauntology.” Being is inseparable from inheritance, time and the ghosts created by time; inheritance is inseparable from the responsibility it demands, and responsibility pairs justice with ontology. The evils of the world—economic

oppression, starvation, death by sexual and racial violence—are every living being’s inheritance. It then follows, according to Derrida’s logic, that a promise to redress the conditions of violence and suffering is an imperative of the inheritance. The promise of a “democracy to come,” out of responsibility to the memory of those murdered and dispossessed ghosts, is necessary despite its inadequacy: “one must leave an empty place, always, in memory of the hope—and this is the very place of spectrality” (65).

But what if, as is the case with Faulkner’s Light in August, the imperative is to learn to live without ghosts? How can justice begin to unfold when the ghosts of the past exert incapacitating pressure upon the spirits of the living? The quest of Light in August as Donald Kartiganer puts it, is “a quest simply to be” (Kartiganer 15). In Darrel Abel’s words, it is one of “becomingness” (Abel 42). The central figure of Faulkner’s text, however, vainly attempts, against great adversity, simply to live, simply to be. His only inheritance is his destiny: to die as a black man at the hands of a white man. Like the Compsons, Joe Christmas is born into a backward-looking world haunted by a triple curse: defeat in the Civil War, the so-called burden of black people, and the uncontrollable women who refuse to endorse racial purity. This triple curse is not a debt taken on nor an admission of responsibility; it partakes, rather, in an accumulation of guilt and a preoccupation with ghosts. It is, moreover, and more clearly defined than in The Sound and the Fury, a corollary of the South’s Puritan heritage, a heritage which gives rise to fanatics who rob Christmas of his life. The sense of responsibility, of being in debt to others and, as Derrida illustrates, to the “other,” lurks just (and justly) beneath the surface of the social world Faulkner presents in Light in August. The text articulates the necessity to bring responsibility to the surface and into life against the pressures of the past and the South’s inherited Puritan ideology. Although often overwhelming, the ontological doctrine of damnation and predetermination is neither a certainty nor a truth; it threatens or promises to give way to another way of being, one which the future holds forth somewhere between knowing and remembering—or, in Faulkner’s words, among “knows remembers believes” (LA 111).

Faulkner’s recorded and transcribed lectures at the University of Virginia indicate his concerns about justice. While the editors of these collected lectures caution against

taking Faulkner's notoriously self-contradictory words at face value,⁸ a certain uncontradicted refrain emerges throughout these lectures: the necessity of responsibility. On more than three occasions, Faulkner claims that "mutual salvation" depends upon responsibility and that part of his project is to convey the imperative of "responsibility toward others" (FU 237, 242). His novels, he says, poise the "moil and seethe of humanity" against the "shame of irresponsibility" (243, 237). He returns again to his point, that "we have to be responsible," and states: "the acceptance of the responsibility increased all of us, just like the refusal of it diminished us" (237, 238).

Responsibility occurs as one of the principal subjects of Specters of Marx; Derrida explains, in fact, that there can be neither justice nor democracy without it. "No justice is possible," he asserts, "without the principle of some responsibility" (Specters xix). Like Faulkner, who speaks of humanity's "moil and seethe," Derrida attempts to define the meaning of "infinite responsibility" through inextricable ties with others across time and space (147-149). In other words, if there is to be an international "logic of survival," there must also be a commitment to redress the trauma of international forms of violence and oppression. America's place in this "global crisis" must also be taken into account (xi). Condemning Francis Fukuyama's best-seller, The End of History and the Last Man (1992), with its declaration that America has emerged as a beacon of democracy within this violence, Derrida urges against teleological flights from responsibility:

For it must be cried out, at a time when some have the audacity to neo-evangelism in the name of the ideal of liberal democracy that has finally realized itself as the ideal of human history: never before have violence, inequality, exclusion, famine and thus economic oppression affected as many human beings in the history of the earth and of humanity. (85)

America, he says, has neither achieved a just form of democracy nor progressed to "the end of history" (73).

Faulkner similarly repudiates teleological conceptualizations of history. For example, his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, delivered in 1950 under the shadow of the bomb, pairs Faulkner's fearful question, "when will I be blown up?" with his hopeful pronouncement, "I don't accept the ends of man."⁹ Derrida's position against "the end of

history” in Specters of Marx is thus a haunting echo of Faulkner’s.¹⁰ In a sense, it clarifies Faulkner’s words. History, as Derrida says, is not “made up of successive links” (70); rather, the ghosts of the future and past—of “those not yet born or who are already dead”—demand a “work of inheritance” which pulls together past, present and future (xix). This kind of work informs Light in August. A novel about ghosts and puritan predestination, it creates a highly symbolic tension between the imminent death of Joe Christmas and the imminent birth of Lena’s child. In order to redress Christmas’s terrible history, some notion of responsibility must link the “already dead” with the “not yet born” in a vision, not of providential design but of justice.

As Pynchon does approximately forty years later in both Gravity’s Rainbow and The Crying of Lot 49, Faulkner establishes a connection between puritanism and entropy in Light in August. The South of this novel appears as a closed system, as a world preoccupied with sin, filth and decay.¹¹ Hanging in decrepit suspension somewhere between death and life, the South, as Faulkner presents it, risks collapsing into itself. And Christmas is caught within its clearly defined boundaries, its preoccupations with divisive categories. His identity, for instance, “hang[s] in suspension” between white and black in an already written script: “*Something is going to happen. Something is going to happen to me,*” he repeatedly predicts as the walls of his world close in around him (110). “Suspended” (Faulkner again uses the word) between sleep and hunger just before he dies, Christmas senses that his life is a “circle and he is still inside of it. . . . ‘I have never got outside that circle,’” he says (321). Some kind of force seems to “glare with bodiless suspension” from the faces of the men running after him (438). It is the force of attributing responsibility to a higher order, of assuming to act in the name of this order. The cost of relinquishing responsibility is enormous; vitality is hollowed out of the living, and righteousness without conscience fills the void.

According to William Van O’Connor, “William Faulkner saw the Protestant or puritan spirit as . . . one of the most significant factors, even the key factor, in the tragedy of Negro and white relationships” (O’Connor 86). Light in August is certainly a severe indictment of puritanism, the “spirit” of which is not an animating principle but the

haunting curse of a deadly script. The race relations are already written and “black blood” is a malediction. God’s will is negatively witnessed, but witnessed nonetheless, in the signs of his curse: “the womansign of God’s abomination” and the “niggers” whom “God has marked” (LA 353, 362). As Faulkner delineates it, puritanism is a religion which, to borrow André Bleikasten’s words, “divides to oppose: ideal versus real, male versus female, white versus black” (Bleikasten 326). It is a patriarchal religion inextricable from masculine idealism: “Flesh is filth, sex is sin”; the “ultimate abomination is therefore the ‘womanshenegro’” (Bleikasten 323, 321).

Bleikasten’s exceptionally thorough analysis of puritanism in Light in August ascertains its links to almost every aspect of the text. From sexual repression to the economic sublimation of this repression, the puritan ethos “imposes itself as an all but exclusive way of thinking and speaking” (323). The rigid divisions between soul and body, ideal and real, elect and reprobate establish a foundation for the split between male and female, white and black. And, as Bleikasten reminds us, “this disjoining is of course anything but neutral. . . . One term in the binary opposition is always valued over the other. Whereas ideality, masculinity, and whiteness are exalted, their opposites are abased” (326). Although “the most vociferous spokesman of racist and sexist ideology is Doc Hines,” Bleikasten states, “nearly everybody subscribes to its basic tenets” (321). In Simon McEachern, for instance, puritanism expresses its affinity with the virtues of ownership, work and thrift. Bleikasten then clearly illustrates the ways in which “sexual morality and economic morality are the two sides of the same coin” (324); from McEachern’s point of view, Christmas’s relationship with the prostitute Bobbie is particularly unpardonable because it “combines waste with lechery” (324). In Hightower, puritanism occurs as idealism. Turning away from the world, Hightower sacrifices life and love. He retreats into his visions of ghostly heroes, and martyrs himself, as Bleikasten puts it, to “fantasy and memory” (306). Similarly, Joanna Burden’s Calvinist heritage pulls her between an obsession with purity and an “intoxication” with corruption (309). Purity and corruption, for Joanna, become inextricable from her belief that the black race contaminates the white race, that they are entwined in an ancient and divinely ordained “curse.” A sense of inevitability emerges in the pervasive, perpetuating force of Calvinist

ideology; the characters interconnect as victims of its doctrine and victimizers of each other.

The racist strain of Calvinism is particular to America. In his study Begrimed and Black: Christian Traditions on Blacks and Blackness Robert Hood finds that the leaders of the Protestant Reformation in Europe, Martin Luther (1483-1546), John Calvin (1509-64) and Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531), did not interpret blackness as a curse. While fifteenth- and sixteenth-century theologians began to produce documents upon the sin of mixed blood, the evil surrounding blackness, and the “natural” servitude of Africans, “none of the leaders of the Protestant Reformation seemed to have taken a pejorative view of blackness as the color of a people or of Africans” (Hood 128). He claims that, although Luther believed that Ham and his descendants populated Africa, he did not associate African slavery with Ham’s curse.¹² Neither did Calvin, who “failed even to connect the curse on Canaan with Africans at all” (130). With gathering momentum, though, the institution of slavery found biblical legitimacy in both Catholic and Protestant countries. Blackness came to represent an “alien dark underworld that opposed the Christian world of light” (123). With this foundation in place, the racial underpinnings of slavery became institutionalized in the New World colonies. And Hood finds that seventeenth-century Protestant theologians in America “steadily connected Christian doctrine with beliefs about blackness and blacks” (152). In America, the enslavement of blacks was justified by the curse of Ham. Protestant sermons from the seventeenth century onward claimed that black skin was a definitive sign of evil, inferiority and exile.

In his influential book Faulkner: The House Divided Eric Sundquist combines a literary interpretation of Light in August with an historical analysis of American “hysteria” about blacks. Documenting turn of the century legislation and so-called anthropological studies, Sundquist finds the early colonial rhetoric of Protestant sermons alive and well in Faulkner’s South. Light in August is also framed by early twentieth-century debates about segregation and white purity, by the laws surrounding miscegenation and black citizenship, and by the “scientific” publications linking blacks to apes. The novel’s “brutal gothicism,” Sundquist illustrates, “grows out of a union among Calvinism, racism, and naturalism” (Sundquist 85); the assumptions which the text encodes and interrogates bring into view “a

very peculiar strain of Southern racist thought” (80). The past imposes itself on the present with enduring justifications of white supremacy. Miscegenation, as Sundquist describes it, becomes a “specter” and a reenactment of the curse of original sin.¹³ With its own version of original sin, the South is caught in a crisis of history, in a “state of seizure” (84). According to Sundquist, Christmas and Joanna Burden enact the “climactic realization of a hysteria that had necessarily been building since Reconstruction” (84). In Light in August, the Civil War does not create a break with the past but a pervasive nostalgia for both the era preceding it and the heroes who fought for its continuation. To borrow Derrida’s words, the Southerners “learn to live with ghosts” but not out of a sense of justice nor through a politics of responsibility. There are no black ghosts because they are not mourned by white Southerners. Only white ghosts matter, and they return with a vengeance to haunt the living and demand remembrance.

According to Sundquist, Faulkner’s novel investigates the “stranglehold of the past” and poises historical responsibility against the crooked notion of “preordained justice” (74, 77). The text attempts to include the tragedy of black history by expressing its entanglement in the tragedy of the South. This latter tragedy, to expand upon Sundquist’s thesis, is the South’s denial of black life and death, and its substitution of inertia and fear for an obligation to justice. Black history, then, from the perspective of the white South, occurs as a burden, and this conceptualization threatens to ruin both whites and blacks. Although Sundquist does not speak of slavery, war and reconstruction in terms of what Derrida would call a “trauma” that must be mourned and redressed, he speaks about the South’s “crisis of blood” (94). Joe Christmas embodies this crisis, making it both “visible and immediate” (90).

Drawing upon René Girard’s Violence and the Sacred, Sundquist examines the connection between sexuality and racial hysteria in Light in August. He sees in the novel a perpetuating cycle of violence which resembles Girard’s theory of the inevitability of violence within human societies. Moreover, Sundquist notes that references to menstrual blood and scenes of violence persistently occur together throughout Faulkner’s novel. Sundquist then explains:

We should emphasize, in this regard, that the novel's focus on sexuality at its climactic moments represents both a furthering and a containing of the form of violence it continually refers to more obliquely—the violence of slavery and racial hysteria, which either immediately or more remotely is dependent upon sexuality; that is, on 'blood.' The importance of this sacrificial scene [the scene in which Christmas slaughters a sheep] thus lies in part in the fact, as René Girard has pointed out in a different context, that menstrual blood may easily be taken as 'a physical representation' of sexual violence. (81)

Sundquist goes on to connect the twin "specters" of sexuality and miscegenation, and the ways in which each curses the relationships or unions among Faulkner's characters. Christmas's action of sacrificing the sheep in order to distance himself from menstrual blood, for example, resembles Percy Grimm's belief that he purifies his community by slaughtering Christmas, by eliminating someone with mixed blood. Christmas's death "is a sacrifice," Sundquist remarks, because Christmas is a "surrogate victim [in a Girardian sense] who can contain the spread of violence by taking it upon himself" (93). But the violence does not end with this sacrifice; according to Sundquist, it cannot end because the perceived menace of miscegenation remains, and this menace "engulfs the promise of freedom" (95).

Although Sundquist addresses the subject of menstruation and connects it to the politics of blood and the proliferation of violence in Light in August, he does not account for its centrality to the text. In his argument, menstruation is an aspect of the "crisis of blood" rather than a focus of the trauma and defilement surrounding Joe Christmas. In fact, menstruation pervades the text, marking the descriptions of every female character in one way or another and preoccupying almost all of the males. Sundquist leaves us wondering what roles Joanna's menopause, Lena's pregnancy, Bobbie's periods, and Milly's bloody death play in the novel's crisis of blood. Furthermore, his focus on race and violence, while it includes the sexualized expression of violence, does not extend to the violence against women in the novel. Women bleed both monthly and at the hands of men. And if they are not physically brutalized, they are often thoroughly beleaguered by the patriarchal world they inhabit. Menstruation marks them as cursed and chaotic—as carriers of the "curse of Eve"—and the system of domination depends upon the continuity of this

association.

The patriarchal, puritan world represented in Light in August not only devastates women, but it also participates in world-wide destruction. There are references to both the Civil War and to America's involvement in the First World War.¹⁴ Joe Christmas's death hints at the level of violence on this global scale; in an image which prefigures the phallic symbol *par excellence* of Gravity's Rainbow, and which similarly combines menstrual and phallic imagery, blood spurts out from between Christmas's legs like a "rising rocket" (LA 440).¹⁵ His ejaculating blood is accompanied, moreover, by a wailing siren, by a symbolic announcement of approaching peril or trouble:¹⁶

the pent black blood seemed to rush like a released breath. It seemed to rush out of his pale body like the rush of sparks from a rising rocket; upon that black blast the man seemed to rise soaring into their memories forever and ever. They [the men present at Christmas's murder] are not to lose it. . . . Again from the town, deadened a little by the walls, the scream of the siren mounted toward its unbelievable crescendo, passing out of the realm of hearing. (440)

This incredible description of Christmas's dismemberment and death gestures toward World War One and the continued construction of rockets following the war. An ominous scene, it extends the issues of racial and sexual/sexualized violence in America outward to include America's involvement in the imperialist violence of global warfare. Each type of ferocity is part of the same destructive ideology. Yet, while the rocket announces a new and frightening world order, the text searches for some kind of hope. Herein lies the main similarity between Pynchon and Faulkner; the references to menstruation, together with those to war, illuminate a thematic nexus. The two kinds of spilled blood meet in Faulkner's texts, as they do in Pynchon's, to highlight the connection between the execration of menstrual blood and the glorification of war. And both authors' works articulate that it is war that should be perceived as humanity's curse, not menstruation. Somewhere in our historical consciousness the terms got reversed, and the blame for the evils of the world shifted onto the bodies of women. While Pynchon's V., for instance, analyses this shift in terms of the demonization of his menstruating goddess-figure, V., Faulkner's Light in August illustrates it through, to borrow Richard Chase's words, an

extensive “gynecological demonology” (Chase 212).¹⁷

Dorothy Dinnerstein’s well-known study The Mermaid and the Minotaur investigates and interprets the origins and perpetuation of this kind of blame. Her thesis calls for a “broad project of restructuring our gender arrangements,” and a confrontation with “massive communal self-deception” (Dinnerstein xii, 9). Consequently, her vision is as apocalyptic as Pynchon’s and Faulkner’s; the prevailing male-female arrangements, she says, are becoming increasingly incompatible with “our survival on earth” (9). Masculine antagonism toward the feminine is inextricable from larger antagonisms. It is a kind of “neurotic patriarchal mechanism” against women—the sex perceived as the “controllable representatives of quasi-sentient Mother Nature” (270, 271). Because the world continues to fall under the mercy of the masculine impetus to force civilization upon nature (or to harness nature to the demands of civilization), women continue to be defined as “the enemy of civilization”: semi-monstrous, chaotic, irrational (225).¹⁸ A “fascinated abhorrence” thus characterizes the masculine perception of the female body (135).

For Dinnerstein, this ambivalence occurs as a result of woman’s maternal role. As the primary care giver, she fulfills a child’s bodily needs and secures his or her survival. With extensive reference to Freud and other theorists of human psychological development, Dinnerstein illustrates how the maternal body comes to represent carnality, vulnerability and mortality. A child is not only born, but also born into indebtedness and death. While there is perhaps an inevitable resentment of bodily vulnerability, patriarchal ideology ensures that women carry the burden of this resentment. “Uncontaminated humanness,” she continues, “is reserved for man;” the “charms and . . . humbling limitations” of the body are projected onto woman (133). *She* is inherently messy and shameful while *he* stands clear of the flesh.

The Mermaid and the Minotaur methodically pairs misogynist ideology with the maternal position into which women are forced. The book claims that, although it is women who give birth, their oppression is firmly rooted in the division of labour between the sexes and in the naturalization of gender categories. According to Dinnerstein, a movement toward male/female collaboration challenges both the paradigmatic division and

the ambivalence toward women:

When the child, once born, is as much the responsibility of man as of woman, the early vicissitudes of the flesh—our handling of which lays the basis for our later handling of mortality—will bear no special relation to gender. Both sides of the double facet that we are born mortal and born of woman will then change their meaning.
(149)

Once the destructive connection between mortality and maternity is no longer fused in the female body, the patriarchal order loses one of its strategic foundations.

Despite her discussion of female carnality and filth, Dinnerstein avoids the topic of menstruation, of the non-maternal female body. A blind spot in her argument, menstruation flushes out, so to speak, her claim that the human body is both natural and “unnatural.” According to anthropologist Chris Knight, the menstruating female body is a condition and precondition of culture itself.¹⁹ Thus, menstruation, as an undeniably natural occurrence of the female body, is also culturally defined; or, in menstruation, nature and culture cannot be distinguished from each other. Dinnerstein’s query about the prevalence of “myth-images of half-human beasts like the mermaid and the minotaur” is better explained by this fluid combination than by ambivalence toward the maternal body. At the very least, these two aspects of the female sex combine to clarify Dinnerstein’s association of femininity with monstrosity and mortality. In the name of transforming the suicidal patterns humanity has adopted, she calls for the open articulation of the “dark, silent layers of mental [and sexual] life” (3). Menstruation, as Chris Knight and other scholars of menstruation repeatedly say, forms one of these layers. Its burial is a form of repression inextricable from collective self-destruction. The “language of blood” challenges the patriarchal exploitation of the earth and its inhabitants through “a collective rhythm” which draws together male and female in mutual survival (Knight 37).

Critics of *Light in August* have disclosed or elucidated its “language of blood.” For instance, Joseph Urgo in “Menstrual Blood and ‘Nigger’ Blood: Joe Christmas and the Ideology of Sex and Race” argues that Faulkner’s text locates “a language of the body” in its attention to blood. His discussion both concentrates upon the image of the body as “a racial and sexual trap” and claims that Christmas subconsciously envies menstruation

(Urgo 396). According to Urgo, Christmas is caged in his body throughout the novel because he aggressively excludes “all knowledge and experience of the feminine” (391):

Joe Christmas’s exclusion from the ‘physical ceremony’ of menstruation defines him as a male, just as the inclusion of ‘nigger blood’ in his body defines him as nonwhite. But unlike the ‘smooth and superior shape’ of the female body, the blood in the male shape is trapped there, the ‘filth’ has no outlet. This fact makes Joe’s body into a cage, within which runs the secret, irremovable ‘filth’ of his existence. (395)

What Urgo ascertains in Light in August is a connection between menstruating and cleansing. Christmas, obsessed with and unable to purge his “black” blood, travels through life with a sense that his body betrays him. It is for this reason, Urgo remarks, that he also becomes preoccupied with Joanna’s menstruation and its cessation; her entrance into menopause “condemns her because it reminds him of his own secret, pent-up filth” (400). It is not until Percy Grimm releases his blood, as Joe releases Joanna’s by slicing her throat, that Christmas finds a sense of peace.

Yet, Christmas is not alone in his fixation upon menstrual blood. While Urgo’s study is the only one to date that centers specifically upon menstruation, the article does not demonstrate that menstruation is an obsession in the text. References and allusions to menstruation circulate around central and peripheral characters alike. Furthermore, the text’s attention to war, food, vomit, and death occurs within a symbolic economy of menstruation that gathers in the concomitant issues (in a Derridean sense) of responsibility and justice. Like Gravity’s Rainbow, Light in August indicates that survival, community, and indebtedness across the boundaries of race, sex, nationality and time depend upon a conceptual shift away from deadly systems and lifeless scripts. And like Knight’s Blood Relations, the text rewrites menstruation as an alternative language connected to communal survival. The synchrony of menstrual cycles, tied to larger cosmological rhythms, and into which men are invited, challenges the ideology of opposition and domination. Doc Hines’s persistent refrain, that God’s wrath is written in “womansinning and bitchery” (120), invites us to examine the hostility of his fanaticism, the concept of God’s discriminatory vengeance (against black people, against white women) and the bodily manifestation of this vengeance in women.

“What we have here,” remarks André Bleikasten about Light in August, “is patriarchy at its crudest and most savage” (135). This ruthless masculinity, to extend Bleikasten’s succinct observation, emerges in spokesmen who crudely express the natural filthiness of women. If white women are not forced into submission, according to the mentality of the likes of Hines and Grimm, they will act upon their vile natures and “take their pants down” to black men.²⁰ It is “womanfilth” combined with “blackevil and womanevil” as Hines repeatedly exclaims, that produce the “walking pollution” of miscegenated people (LA 364, 119). In the white patriarchal economy of purity and intactness, women are naturally defiled and grotesque. They are “cracked urns” which leak “something liquid, deathcolored, and foul” (178), and which make Joe Christmas vomit. Having internalized the sexist, racist ideology of his world, Christmas becomes another champion of the patriarchy Faulkner represents. He either finds himself vomiting at the mere thought of menstruation, or striking the white women who are indifferent to his “nigger blood”—to his own sense of contaminated identity.

Julia Kristeva opens her discussion of social identity in Powers of Horrors: An Essay on Abjection with reference to vomit. Nausea and vomiting, she says, establish the “I” or “myself” and push away that which must not be assimilated nor integrated. At the same time, though, the convulsions of vomit turn the “I” inside out, disturb the solid formation of “myself” (Kristeva 2-3). Knowledge of the self thus occurs at the borders of bodily waste, of those defiling substances (like excrement and vomit) which always encroach upon the self and accentuate its fragility. Vomit, then, signals the realm of abjection, of that which “simultaneously beseeches and pulverizes the subject” (5). There can never be one inaugural or final vomit; the subject continually encounters the beckoning and repellent borders. Vomit coincides with the troubled awareness of the sacred *and* sexual difference. It indicates the impossibility of the “clean and proper” self and imparts the persistence of difference (8).

Kristeva, moving from the subject of vomit into her definition of abjection, illustrates how abjection partakes of the sacred. Situated upon the borders of culture, the abject, like the sacred, is strange, composite, frightening: “As abjection, so the sacred,”

Kristeva remarks (17). She continues: “Abjection appears as a rite of defilement and pollution. . . . It takes on the form of the *exclusion* of a substance (nutritive or linked to sexuality), the execution of which coincides with the sacred since it sets it up” (17; Kristeva’s italics). Although the female body and the nourishing maternal body are “other” to the male subject, masculine hostility is a consequence, not of combining femininity with abjection, but of repudiating abjection, of splitting its composite nature in two. Once divided, that which is both desirable and different becomes instead a “radical evil that must be suppressed” (70). Filth, repugnance and shame become the foundations of “Religion, Morality, Law” (16).

Femininity, food and vomit, all evidence of bodily vulnerability, are juxtaposed to such patriarchal structures in *Light in August*. The dietitian’s “pinkwomansmelling” toothpaste at the orphanage, for instance, which makes Christmas throw up (and grow up) at the early age of five, becomes entangled in his mind with female sexuality and transgression. A second experience of nausea, due to the enticement of the “womanshenegro,” finds Christmas turning his convulsions into physical violence. Instead of throwing up, Joe strikes the girl repeatedly in an attempt to distance himself from the strangeness she introduces into his experience of the world (LA 157). And, when Bobbie informs him that she has her period, he both hits her and vomits. The helplessness he associates with women, the “victims of periodical filth,” gives rise to his own physiological weakness in a kind of vicarious purging (174). When he finds himself confronted with feminine realities, he himself becomes a victim of “periodical filth.”

Menstruation and vomit thus display corporeal independence from the mind’s control. In effect, such bodily events allude to the vulnerable places in the body politic. Having been indoctrinated by McEachern into the puritan adoration of “possessing, owning, ownership,” including self-possession, Christmas despises the body’s will (153). And he associates it with women:

She [in this case, his adoptive mother] would try to get herself between him and the punishment which, deserved or not, just or unjust, was impersonal, both the man the boy accepting it as a natural and inescapable fact until she, getting in the way, must give it an odor, an attenuation, an aftertaste. . . . It was the woman: that soft kindness which he believed himself doomed to be forever

victim of and which he hated worse than he did the hard and ruthless justice of men. (157-158)

If he can never know his race, he can at least be assured of his masculinity. He thus refuses to cry, he constantly suppresses his hunger, and at one point, he slaughters a sheep to buy himself immunity from menstruation. Plunging his hands into the sheep's "yet warm blood," Joe says to himself: "*All right. It is so, then. But not to me. Not in my life and my love*" (174).

Abjection, as Julia Kristeva explains it, is coextensive with social, sexual and symbolic order; the exclusion of filth sets up this order. But menstruation is an internal pollution, threatening sexual identity "from within" (Kristeva 71-77). It opposes the delineation between the pure and impure, between the filth on the outside of society and the cleanliness within. Kristeva explains:

[the] ritualization of defilement is accompanied by a strong concern for separating the sexes, and this means giving men rights over women. . . . The masculine, apparently victorious, confesses through its very relentlessness against the other, the feminine, that it is threatened by an asymmetrical, irrational, wily, uncontrollable power. (70)

The simultaneity of awe and repugnance toward menstrual blood emerges because "abjection and the sacred border each other" (84). Menstrual blood is as horrifying as the sacred; and, like the sacred, it forms a "semantic crossroads . . . where death and femininity, murder and procreation, cessation of life and vitality all come together" (96).

Kristeva's Powers of Horror delineates the intersections among food, vomit, blood and femininity. Food, she reminds us, "effects an initial division between man and God;" it is a dietary interdiction which man transgresses in the Garden (Kristeva 96). Of course, it is woman who offers the apple, and who is consequently cursed with monthly bleeding. In the Leviticus prohibitions, food, menstruation, maternity and sickness follow each other in a list of defilements which must be atoned through ritual purification and sacrifice. Kristeva drives home the point that Leviticus takes the defilement associated with food and attributes it "to women in general" (100). There is then a swift movement in Leviticus from the female body to the decaying body. While leprosy becomes linked to menstruation, "the mother's interior [is] associated with decay" (101-102). And all women

represent temptation and moral decay.

Although never directly stated, the society of Light in August undeniably inherits these assumptions and prohibitions. It is a society in which a “clean and proper” white patriarchy dictates the abominations of mixed blood, menstrual blood and maternal nourishment. Ultimately, food, blood and femininity culminate as an integrated theme in the chapters which introduce Joanna Burden. She feeds Joe her “woman’s muck,” articulates the “curse” of the black race, and foregrounds the text’s attention to menstruation (LA 224). She is, in Joe’s eyes, yet another embodiment of “that rotten richness ready to flow into putrefaction at a touch, like something growing in a swamp” (LA 247). In her own, she bears the burden of the past, sustaining the teleological belief that the black race will one day “bleach out” (234). Her house—the edifice of her ideology—resembles a womb on the verge of menstruation or fertilization; as Joe cynically notes, “the coming dark within the old walls was breaking down something and leaving it corrupt with waiting” (242). But neither menstruation nor pregnancy takes place; the cycle ends. Joanna moves into menopause and becomes prevented from participating in the “purification” of the black race. The ideology she inherits from her Calvinist predecessors (two of whom are named Calvin) concludes with her.

A new cycle begins with the birth of Lena’s baby on her property. Menstruation, pregnancy and menopause connect the two characters, and one ideological system gives way to another in a kind of rhythmic shift. The individual is inextricable from the collective. And menstruation underlies this collective. As part of the “moil and seethe” which Faulkner proclaims, it forms a symbolic alternative to the rigid purity of the masculine ethos. Menstruation belongs to the blood’s language, to blood’s “semantic crossroads,” and indicates a fluid identity beneath the static patterns represented in the novel. Menstrual blood, as it draws oppositions together, repudiates the discursive polarities that impose themselves upon those whose identities are both/and. Throughout the text, the South’s divisive ideology is made vulnerable by another way of knowing—one that is, in Darrel Abel’s words, part of “the continuous and the moving” (Abel 45).

This is the realm to which Lena belongs. The cycle of her pregnancy and menstruation shifts the cycle of vengeance and guilt which predominates in Light in

August. Lena may give birth to her son on the grounds of Joanna's house, but she refuses to name the child Joe. She thus resists the burden of the repetitive, closed cycle, and she refuses to repeat the past; the ominous death of Milly Hines in childbirth does not rematerialize as Lena goes into labour. Her child does not come to embody, as so many of the characters in the text do, the ghosts of the past. Lena and the child represent a different route: they move through the ghosts but do not remain suspended among them.

After giving birth, Lena leaves Jefferson. Hitting the road again, this time speaking in the plural "we," she moves along without knowing (or seeming to care) if she will ever find the father or give the child a paternal name. Lena is not, as the critical commonplace goes, a fecund earth goddess, nor does she represent a kind of "bisexual whole."²¹ Rather, she introduces another way of knowing and being. Embracing uncertainty and "hope unbelievable," she moves forward without a path (LA 418). The frightening "Player" or "Force," which seems to dictate the actions of those who think they know right from wrong in the novel, does not manipulate Lena. She also escapes domesticity, which is brutally portrayed in Light in August.²² The "durn men" who "dont even know [their] own limits for devilment" never bind her within their ring of influence (396). At times she says she seeks the father of her child, but her words are always difficult to pin down. Her "grave face," for instance, "either had nothing in it, or everything, all knowledge" (409). She seems to know that people, particularly men, prefer to view her as abandoned rather than free. "Do you know what I think?" asks the nameless narrator of the final chapter, "I think she was just traveling. I dont think she had any idea of finding whoever it was she was following" (480).

Lena's wandering is juxtaposed with Joe's entrapment. Their paths intersect through Hightower, who encounters each of them. And Faulkner reserves for him not just this singular position but also the truly epiphanic moment in the text. It is a moment surrounded by allusions to blood and menstruation. Hightower realizes, in his state of suspension between life and death, that "there are more things in heaven and earth too than truth. . . . More things indeed" (453). As sweat pours from him "like blood" (464), as "some ultimate dammed flood within him breaks and rushes away" (466), he articulates the

text's position on responsibility. Recalling his wife's death, he muses:

Perhaps in the moment when I revealed to her not only the depth of my hunger but the fact that never and never would she have any part in the assuaging of it; perhaps at that moment I became her seducer and her murderer, author and instrument of her shame and death. After all, there must be some things for which God cannot be accused by man and held responsible. There must be. (462)

The narrative ends, not only on this note of responsibility, but also on the problem of serving fanaticism. Here, the imagery which constructs Hightower's reverie is undeniably phallic:

It seems to him that he has seen it all the while: that that which is destroying the Church is not the outward groping of those within nor the inward groping of those without, but the professionals who control it and who have removed the bells from its steeples. He seems to see them, endless, without order, empty, symbolical, bleak, skyspined not with ecstasy or passion but in adjuration, threat and doom. . . . Like . . . sharpened stakes, against truth and against that peace in which to sin and be forgiven is the life of man. 'And I accepted that,' he thinks. 'I acquiesced. Nay, I did worse: I served it.' (461)

A menstrual economy of responsibility and interconnection is set against a phallic economy of ideological servitude. This contrast, drawn throughout the text, is here condensed in Hightower's moment of epiphanic knowledge.

Perhaps this epiphany resonates outward with a message about the South and America. If each is to mourn the "phantom of the old spilled blood" of the Civil War, each must refuse to attribute loss or victory to God's vengeance or will (450). Hightower's epiphany both invokes and unsettles the jeremiad language of promise and doom. And it constructs its message about human responsibility through accumulating images of menstruation. A cycle of renewal, which accommodates death, inheres in a different kind of spilled blood, the kind which does not, in fact, embody God's wrath. If the language of this blood--of this "apotheosis of . . . blood" (347)--is not heeded, America will remain on a direct route, lined with "sharpened stakes . . . against peace," toward more violence, more war.

III. "All the unsistered Eves since the Snake": Absalom, Absalom! and the Promise of Prehistory

But that did not matter . . . so long as the blood coursed—the blood, the immortal brief recent intransient blood.

(Absalom, Absalom! 237)

Responding to a question about Thomas Sutpen's demise in Absalom, Absalom!, Faulkner explained to his audience at the University of Virginia that "Sutpen . . . was going to take what he wanted because he was big enough and strong enough, and I think that people like that are destroyed sooner or later, because one has to belong to the human family, and to take a responsible part in the human family" (FU 81). This statement draws our attention not only to the exigency of responsibility repeated in his lectures and elaborated throughout Light in August but also to Faulkner's engagement with a specific motif or problematic in Absalom, Absalom!: the Darwinian thesis of evolution, domination and survival—of the "big enough and strong enough"—which was being debated and extended by the burgeoning field of anthropology in the early 1930s. Whereas Light in August positions its treatment of violence, blood and responsibility against a backdrop of severe Puritanism, Absalom, Absalom! places these subjects in dialogue with Darwinism, an equally hostile ideological setting. Although it seems that the flurry of interpretations of Faulkner's "Civil War novel," from the 30s onward, has left no critical stone unturned, the Darwinian rhetoric pervading the text remains in fact unexplored.

"Darwin's influence in American literature is vaguely assumed but largely unknown," Bert Bender states in the introduction to The Descent of Love: Darwin and the Theory of Sexual Selection in American Fiction, 1871-1926: "There is only a single, slim pamphlet on Darwin in American fiction" (1). An end-note following this claim mentions that "The only 'book' on Darwin in American fiction is Arthur E. Jones Jr.'s twenty-one-page Darwinism and Its Relationship to Realism and Naturalism in American Fiction, 1860-1900 (1950)" (370). Bender finds, for instance, that studies of American realism "do not mention Darwin at all," and that the work of the naturalists, without specific

reference to Darwin's texts, are generally discussed in terms of "social Darwinism" (1). While he makes no reference to Faulkner's novels, his study provides a detailed and convincing account of the impact of Darwinian thought on the American imagination and its paradoxically concomitant obscurity in American literary history. Offering an explanation for this ostensible oversight, Bender states: "Critics and historians of American literature seem to have preferred the view that Darwinian theory never really entered our literature in substantial ways. Natural and sexual selection pose grave threats to liberal ideology . . . to the ideal of democratic equality and to possible moral or social reform" (4).

An otherwise very thorough analysis of Darwin and criticism of American fiction, Bender's book, perhaps because it does not include a chapter on Faulkner, misses Gail Mortimer's 1986 article "Evolutionary Theory in Faulkner's Snopes Trilogy" and Berndt Ostendorf's 1983 contribution, "An Anthropological Approach to Yoknapatawpha," to the collection New Directions in Faulkner Studies. In her essay, Mortimer addresses the uproar in the South surrounding the Scopes ("Monkey") trial of 1925, as well as the Southerners' familiarity with Darwin's The Origin of the Species and The Descent of Man. She quotes from Fred Hobson's Serpent in Eden: H.L. Mencken and the South as an introduction to her argument:

in many ways the Dayton [Scopes] trial was a prototypic event, the single event that more than any other of the 1920s brought to the surface all the forces and tensions that had characterized the post-war South, the event that most forcefully dramatized the struggle between Southern provincialism and the modern, secular world; and, finally, the event that caused Southerners to face squarely the matter of the South and their own place in it. Virtually every thoughtful Southerner had some response to the occurrences at Dayton. (qtd in Mortimer 188)

Mortimer concludes that Faulkner would have known about both the Scopes trial and the issues which led to it, her contextualization and analysis of the Snopes novels confirming Faulkner's "pervasive imaginative fascination with evolutionary theory and its implications" (188). Animalistic, mutating survivors, the Snopeses are comical exaggerations of Darwinian concepts. As they "proliferate and take over Jefferson," they resemble a "species colonizing and driving less viable strains out of an environment"—and pose a definitive threat to the Southerners' aristocratic sense of inherited supremacy (190).

What emerges in the course of the trilogy is an “allegory of the survival of the fittest” (197). Ultimately, Mortimer contends, this allegory is disturbing and frightening; it appears to suggest a “horrifying image of mankind existing without precisely the human qualities that comprised so much of [Faulkner’s] own identity as a Southern gentleman” (198).

Ostendorf, taking a wider approach to Faulkner’s dialogue with anthropological theory, opens with this enticing assertion:

there is a similarity between the writing of anthropology and the writing of fiction, a similarity in the structure of desire, the logic of discovery, and the logic of demonstration. The established division of labor between anthropology and fiction, that is, between scientific and artistic knowledge about man, is due to an arbitrary separation and hence to a superficially separate socialization pattern of these identical twins of Western curiosity, a common parentage which led to a parallel development of the novel and of anthropology. (Ostendorf 94)

Literature and anthropology share the activity of interpretation, of proceeding from cultural assumptions and then opening them up to controversy. Faulkner’s texts, Ostendorf logically continues, reveal an antipathy toward the inability to ask questions and toward those characters who, acting in a “predetermined, mechanical fashion like robots or machines,” display the “sins” of static fundamentalism and ethnocentrism (103). The problems of knowing and of the urge to know, characteristic of Western anthropology, inform Faulkner’s approaches to history, culture and race. In an interesting twist, Ostendorf then remarks that the reader “becomes Faulkner’s anthropologist by . . . having to make sense of a strange and foreign world without the benefit or security of point of view” (106). Finally, turning our attention toward the coincidence of modernism with the rise of anthropology and ethnography, Ostendorf reminds us that we “are after all children of Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche, the troika in search of hidden motives” (111).

Darwin’s conspicuous absence from this roster occurs as a result of Ostendorf’s interpretive focus upon the ethnographic questions of cultural investigation. “My point,” he concludes, “is that Faulkner pursued these questions. . . . He dealt quite consciously with the chief epistemological problems of his day: how can we know and how can we put it into believable discourse?” (118). Only Mortimer directly connects Darwin’s work to

Faulkner's. Yet, even while she investigates the disturbing Darwinian challenge to Faulkner's view of the South, she neither discusses Absalom, Absalom! nor how Faulkner's engagement with Darwin extends beyond a pessimistic or "horrifying" image of the survival of the fittest. In Absalom, Absalom! Faulkner poises prehistory against historical inevitability and grapples with intricate concepts of the human past. In other words, the text not only confronts the notion of the past itself (of pastness) but also the moment at which the human past, and human consciousness, began. The sense of predetermination in Sutpen's ascendance with all that he represents is then set against the text's devotion to the "might-have-been." And this might-have-been, I will show, carries within it, "like a chemical formula," a promising concept of the might-be (AA 80).

Bender's persuasive explanation for the critical reluctance to view American literature in the context of Darwin's work appears to account for the failure of scholarship on Absalom, Absalom! to pick up where Mortimer and Ostendorf leave off. If early interpretations of the text avoided its Darwinian content, preferring instead to focus upon its biblical and mythological resonances, recent criticism has been swept into a vast conversation focusing on its treatment of history, historiography, gender and race. Although deeply entwined with each of these issues, the question of prehistory in Absalom, Absalom! has slipped into critical oblivion. Furthermore, despite the fact that Freud himself remarked upon Darwin's "*biological* blow to human narcissism" (qtd in Bender 3, Freud's italics), Freudian interpretations of Faulkner's work have commanded canonical status, and continue to do so. Freud's psychological blow (with his illumination of the unconscious) remains, it seems, more intriguing to Faulkner scholars than Darwin's theories.

Perhaps, as Bender suggests, we tend to accept Darwin's ideas and move on, collectively forgetting the resounding impact of his research and lexicon upon all branches of knowledge. Reminding us of this scientific and philosophical revolution, Bender cites an 1871 review of The Descent of Man:

Since the publication of 'The Origin of the Species' in 1859, no book of science has excited a keener interest than Mr. Darwin's new work. . . . In the drawing-room it is competing with the last new novel, and in the study it is troubling alike the man of science, the

moralist, and the theologian. On every side it is raising a storm of mingled wrath, wonder, and admiration. (qtd in Bender 3)

Like Faulkner's Sutpen, and with similar ferocity, Darwin seems to have come out of nowhere. Yet, as anthropologist Loren Eiseley illustrates in Darwin's Century, Darwin inherited both the work of the eighteenth-century natural scientists and over a century of research into the patterns of life and the search for the birthplace of humanity. When he hit the scene with The Origin of the Species in 1859, an "aroused and eager audience was considerably prepared for [his] revelations" (Eiseley 139). Eiseley explains, moreover, that Darwin proceeded from a scientific tradition which proclaimed evidence of God's hand in the natural order of things and which initiated a nineteenth-century "mania" to discover nature's "design" (177). Although Darwin removed the "need for a Master Craftsman," he similarly proposed a sophisticated teleological design of human perfection (175-176).

As a result, scientific theory and glimmers of biblical eschatology endlessly combine in Darwin's narratives of struggle and purpose in human existence. For instance, in The Descent of Man (1871), he writes:

The world, it has often been remarked, appears as if it had long been preparing for the advent of man: and this, in one sense is strictly true, for he owes his birth to a long line of progenitors. If any single link in this chain had never existed, man would not have been exactly what he now is. Unless we willfully close our eyes, we may, with our present knowledge, approximately recognize our parentage: nor need we feel ashamed of it. (Darwin 165)

Expanding his argument from this assertion, Darwin claims that humankind descended from the same primate stock and that the "races of man" should be classified under the same species. However, the white races and, particularly, white men "occupy the summit of the organic scale" (619). They are the civilized descendants of barbaric nations, the vestiges of which still persist in the "lower races." Racial amalgamation, moreover, should not degrade the former but elevate the latter to the standards "attained by him in knowledge, morals and religion"; the design driving human perfection proceeds through the best specimens of the white race (145).

The two strains of thought, biblical and evolutionary, consistently play off each other throughout Absalom, Absalom!, Faulkner's novel about Sutpen's "design"—a term

loaded with Darwinian connotations—and Sutpen’s position within what “Heaven has not seen fit to divulge” (AA 12). Following several decades of anthropological research in America, Absalom, Absalom! engages with the issues which anthropology investigated and defined: race, religion, competition, and sexual selection. The novel’s vision of racial amalgamation, ultimately distilled in Shreve’s final monologue,²³ mirrors the mandate of early American anthropology as the study of “human development . . . toward unity of all races and cultures” (Hinsley 246). As Curtis Hinsley explains in Savages and Scientists: The Smithsonian Institution and the Development of American Anthropology 1846-1940, the institution of anthropology founded its research upon theories of “a single world community on the highest cultural plane” and through condemnations of destructive American capitalism and racial intolerance (246). The “law” of humanity, claimed an 1899 article in American Anthropologist, entails the “convergence in brain and blood” (247). In 1934, two years before the publication of Absalom, Absalom!, the First International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences took place. It marked the culmination of anthropology’s professionalization and established a basically Darwinian *raison d’être*: “to add something to the notion of what man is, and what man does” (Vidyarthi 17). From “man’s place among the primates” and “racial differences” to “anthropological aspects of blood grouping” and “the menstrual cycle,” the sessions of the Congress tackled anthropology’s main questions.²⁴ Like many other novelists writing around the time of this event, Faulkner seized upon these questions and probed them in Absalom, Absalom!.

In his preface to The Descent of Love Bender, acknowledging the simplification here, assembles a list of words which should cue the reader of an American novel to its Darwinian language:

attraction, ornament, beauty, music, dance, expression, repression, emotions, unconscious, weakness, strength, vigor, dominance, submission, altruism, power, genius, vestige, ancestor, progenitor, arrested development, degenerate, primitive, superstition, higher and lower races, savage, barbaric, civilized. (xi Bender’s italics)

With Quentin’s opening impression of Rosa Coldfield, Absalom, Absalom! immediately reverberates with this lexicon. Rosa’s “arrested development,” her suspension in

childhood or early womanhood, furthermore, doubles the presence of the past in her voice. Sitting “bolt upright in the straight hard chair that was so tall for her that her legs hung straight and rigid . . . like children’s feet” (AA 3), she announces to Quentin:

Yes, fatality and curse on the South and on our family as though because some ancestor of ours had elected to establish his descent in a land primed for fatality and already cursed with it, even if it had not rather been our family, our father’s progenitors, who had incurred the curse long years before and had been coerced by Heaven into establishing itself in the land and the time already cursed. (14)

Charged with images and terminology derived from The Descent of Man, Rosa’s introductory jeremiad ushers us into a text that develops a clear tension between biblical and evolutionary rhetoric. As the subsequent narratives develop, the tension is held before us through the characters’ seemingly endless “amazement” and through exclamations like, “It’s just incredible. It just does not explain” (80). Echoing the early Puritan sermons’ grim premonitions of God’s wrath, Absalom, Absalom! raises the possibility that the Civil War is a divinely ordained punishment upon a wayward people. It also, and almost simultaneously, eliminates God’s hand, portraying the war as a violent moment in evolutionary history, as “a horrible and bloody mischancing of human affairs” (80). The Southerners are either cursed by God to lose the Civil War and become mixed with their black slaves, or they are caught in a longer evolutionary process, or they are both cursed and caught. Moving among the three propositions, the text knots Darwin’s language into Jeremiah’s.²⁵ Yet, by unfolding the story of Charles Bon, and by constructing the female characters around it, Absalom, Absalom! raises a fourth possibility: that neither Darwin’s theories nor biblical typology really matters. They only matter in so far as they sanction the ascendance of particular groups. The biblical elect and the fittest Darwinian survivors script their respective designs and then retrospectively prove their existence and validity. What matters, as Faulkner’s text reveals, is what is lost from, or left out of, these narratives: the might-have-been, the so-called mistakes in the design, that could have set history upon a different and more just course.

In Judith’s often quoted speech to Mrs. Compson, the question of what matters is haltingly set forth. Describing her impression that people are all hitched together on a

loom, all “trying to make a rug . . . to weave his own pattern into the rug,” she says:

and it cant matter, you know that, or the Ones that set up the loom would have arranged things a little better, and yet it must matter because you keep on trying or having to keep on trying and then all of a sudden it's all over and all you have left is a block of stone with scratches on it provided there was someone to remember to have the marble scratched and set up or had time to, and it rains on it and the sun shines on it and after a while they dont even remember the name and what the scratches were trying to tell, and it doesn't matter. And so maybe if you could go to someone . . . and give them . . . something, anything . . . at least it would be something just because it would have happened. (101)

This vision occurs as the antithesis of Sutpen's, and it rests upon her brief encounters with Charles Bon, the “minor tactical mistake” in Sutpen's design (216). Judith's words attempt to communicate the quality and worth of that which is momentary, transitory— which disappears but leaves a trace in the passages between people or by virtue of having existed at all.²⁶

Not enough for him to have simply “happened” or existed, Sutpen envisions himself as the originator and apotheosis of a divine plan. He desires an unending line of sons, “riven forever free from brutehood” (210). The text situates him within a Darwinian landscape and then, sounding the meaning of “matter,” casts his design as a battle between spirit and matter, between “the old infernal male principle” and “the virgin swamp” (252, 30). Sutpen's story is an enactment of Darwin's evolutionary thesis, an engagement with Darwin's ideology. He descends from the mountains, “perpendicularly through temperature and climate” (182) and into “civilization.” The mountains are a timeless place where Sutpen, his father and his siblings simply forage, eat, and sleep; the land below is marked by time, power and the “difference not only between white men and black ones, but . . . between white men and white men” (183). For Sutpen, it is also marked by the difference between something and nothing, worth and worthlessness, the realization of which he associates with being human. Those who live in apparent ignorance of this differentiation—black men and women, poor whites, animals—occupy the lowest level of existence and are reduced to a kind of fuel for his design.

According to the still-stunned narrators of his life story, Sutpen reinvents himself as a civilizing force. From his suppression of the Haitian revolt to his appearance in

Jefferson, he emerges as the hero of a brutal Darwinian narrative. With a “band of wild niggers like beasts half tamed to walk upright like men,” he drags his plantation out of a swamp (4). And he secures his “supremacy, domination” through physical combat, first in Haiti and then at Sutpen’s Hundred (21). Rosa recounts, for instance, the spectacle of Sutpen’s contests with his slaves:

Ellen seeing not the two black beasts she had expected to see but instead a white one and a black one, both naked to the waist and gouging at one another’s eyes as if their skins should not only have been the same color but should have been covered in fur too. (20)

As Albert Somit and Steven Peterson argue in Darwinism, Dominance and Democracy, battles for dominance, social stability and possessions exhibit the “shackles of our evolutionary past,” our primate genetic inheritance (7). It is because of this heritage, they say, that human societies are rife with inequality and totalitarianism; no matter how far humanity comes from its prehistoric characteristics, it will always bear the imprint of its original simian aggression. Their logic follows Darwin’s, whose Descent of Man unequivocally claims: “Man is the rival of other men; he delights in competition, and this leads to ambition which passes too easily into selfishness. These latter qualities seem to be his natural and unfortunate birthright” (Darwin 502). While man’s competitive nature keeps him bound to his origins, it also insures his evolutionary progress: the strongest men, or those with the best weapons, secure the optimum chances for “sexual selection” and superior offspring.

Faulkner, constructing Sutpen within this rhetoric of genetic determinism and patriarchal legitimacy, forms Sutpen’s obsession with “sexual selection” as an imperative of his design. Once he builds his plantation, Sutpen heads for town “to find a wife exactly as he would have gone to the Memphis market to buy livestock or slaves” (AA 31). In Rosa’s view, Ellen becomes nothing more than the “sepulcher [of] his name in female flesh” (107)—her Coldfield, sepulchral whiteness the guarantee of his descendants’ separation from, to borrow Darwin’s words, “the indelible stamp of [humanity’s] lowly origin”: animals and black people (Darwin 619). What proceeds from this plan is, of course, the exact opposite of Sutpen’s desired outcome. Faulkner turns against him the full force of Darwin’s nastiest theory, racial “reversion.”

Although in The Descent of Man Darwin sustains an argument about the minimal differences between the races, he also persistently sets non-white races lower down on an evolutionary scale of being. Eiseley's section on "Microcephali" clarifies Darwin's double-edged theory as a continuation and acknowledgment of Carl Vogt's propositions in Lectures on Man (1864). Here, Vogt attempts to close the link between "the Negro and the ape" by postulating theories about microcephali, or "born idiots," and racial reversion (Eiseley 268). First establishing that the "modern microcephalic idiot" is a form of arrested development in the "simian stage," Vogt then places "the skulls of a Negro, an idiot, and a chimpanzee together in order to show that the idiot 'holds in every respect an intermediate place between them'" (269). Vogt's thesis "was seriously received," Eiseley writes, "and Darwin devotes attention to it in The Descent of Man" (269). Thus, in a chapter entitled "Civilized Nations" Darwin laments: "If the various [evolutionary] checks . . . do not prevent the reckless, the vicious and the otherwise inferior members of society from increasing at a quicker rate than the better class of men, the nation will retrograde, as has too often occurred in the history of the world" (Darwin 140).

In the Darwinian thematics of Absalom, Absalom! Charles Bon's "little spot of negro blood" effects the corruption and reversion of Sutpen's evolutionary design (AA 247). Sutpen's lineage, as it descends through Charles and his "octoroon" wife, ultimately produces the "hulking slack-mouthed saddle-colored boy," Jim Bond—son of Charles Etienne and his "ape-like . . . charcoal companion" (173, 167). Instead of white and irreproachably human, Sutpen's genetic heritage endures as black and simian. If, in his eyes, the black race constitutes a reversion to the missing link between humanity and apes, then the presence of this race in his own descendants necessarily reflects the imagined link back upon him. To subscribe to a vision of purity is to be open to the possibility and pressure of its antithesis; to live by such an ideology is to die by it. Driving home this point, Faulkner not only creates Jim Bond, the negation or termination of white Sutpens, but he also situates the Civil War within this ideological setting.

According to Eric Sundquist, the "hysteria" surrounding miscegenation—an hysteria arguably compounded by theories of racial amalgamation and reversion²⁷ —

emerges in the text as a crucial factor in the national crisis of Civil War. In his chapter on Absalom, Absalom! in The House Divided, Sundquist investigates the history of this racist panic. He finds that miscegenation, not slavery, constituted the monstrous flaw in what was officially perceived as America's "grand design." Setting the parameters of his research and argument, he states:

Without slighting powerful political and economic explanations of both the Civil War and Jim Crow that may in the end be more factually convincing, it is not misleading to consider that, just as the war itself only came in progress to be a struggle for emancipation, so in the longer run and in retrospect, it came to be a struggle over the far-reaching, hopelessly complex and paradoxical issue of miscegenation, the one issue that visibly emblemized all others.
(98)

Almost incredibly, the division between North and South rested on a fundamental ideological consensus regarding the spread of miscegenation. Both sides, he illustrates, accused each other of the same evil: the perpetuation of, in the words of one of Lincoln's opponents, "the foul and horrible contamination and admixture with the blood of the negro" (109). While the North questioned how the South could "keep slaves as beasts and lovers alike," the South attacked the Northerners' "spirit of amalgamation" (98, 108).

For Sundquist, Absalom, Absalom! confronts the "trauma of the House Divided" through the "psychological violence" of miscegenation (95, 115). Constructing its narratives around severed kinship ties and shattered human relationships, the text implies that, like the nation itself, "bodies, psyches, characters" are torn apart by the ideology of racial purity (107). At the edges of the tragedy of the Civil War, for instance, lie the tragedies of Bon's and Clytie's mothers, two casualties of Sutpen's design.²⁸ The extent of their suffering and degradation remains open to a kind of endless, inadequate conjecture.²⁹ Virtually invisible within the structural concept of white humanity, these figures typify the "crisis of the consanguinity" which the novel attempts to communicate (114). Thus, the tragedy of Charles Bon involves his realization that he too means nothing to Sutpen. His desire to be recognized as Sutpen's son remains unfulfilled because it is precisely the recognition of kinship which miscegenation denies. Sundquist, highlighting the agony surrounding Charles Bon's story, remarks:

One can measure the achievement of Absalom, Absalom! no more clearly than by noting with what inspired passion, and without capitulating either to sentimentality or to bitterness, it works against the violent limitations such a situation placed on human love. (117)

Ultimately, Sundquist contends, the world the text presents to us is a “world of lost love,” a “might-have-been” buried within the South’s history of white supremacy, patriarchy and war (116).

Olga Vickery composes a similar argument. In The Novels of William Faulkner she demonstrates how the fear of miscegenation in Absalom, Absalom! becomes the “power to destroy love” (92). The necessity of blood-purity in Sutpen’s design sacrifices lives to an abstract concept and directly opposes the “claims of the wife and child” (97). The design, she says, is a “travesty of principles” and a betrayal of humanity (102). White women, black women and black men form the base of a rationalist structure that simmers with violence. Like Sundquist, Vickery secures a shift in perspective on the novel; she identifies the “mistake” which culminates in Jim Bond with the devastation, not only of the design, but also of “life and love” (102). A “drama of love” thus arises within the text, and it compels “both characters and readers alike” to reexamine Southern ideology and history (102).

Following Vickery and Sundquist, Richard Gray argues in The Life of William Faulkner that the text, casting “a cold eye on the entire notion of patriarchy,” asks us to “unearth the past in all its pastness and also in its ties, the umbilical cord, to the present” (214, 210). The “umbilical cord,” an image taken from one of Rosa’s monologues, is here the symbol of the necessary dialogue between past and present. It is a feminine symbol, and it recalls Judith’s conceptualization of the loom’s threads. Throughout Absalom, Absalom! these symbols run counter to Sutpen’s design. They form a language of thresholds and ties not only between past and present but also between nature and culture, masculine and feminine, black and white—those conceptual pairings which Sutpen attempts to cut apart. Gray states that the tale of Sutpen is a “tale of patriarchy,” of the masculine drive to “replace ‘nature’ with ‘culture,’ the ‘jungle’ with ‘civilization,’ not just for the present but for the foreseeable future” (212). Sutpen is “doomed to fail,” Gray contends, because he cannot assume “power over nature” (52). To put this idea another way, Sutpen

fails because he cannot extricate himself from nature, from its intrinsic ties to his design.

The design is formed by what it uses; it cannot perpetuate itself without, for instance, that which Sutpen associates with matter or nature: women and the problem of sexual reproduction. "I had a design," he says. "To accomplish it I should require money, a house, a plantation, slaves, a family—incidentally of course, a wife" (AA 212). A necessary evil, the creation of his descendants through a wife cuts his chances of sons and of purity in half. It also slows down his plans, consistently forcing him to wait, start over and wait again. Mixing their blood with his, and marked by cycles of fertility, women necessarily impede the linear energy of his design.³⁰ Their bodies can never be entirely subsumed into his plan; in fact, they subsume it, and alter its objectives. Pondering the rhythms of the female body and musing about Sutpen's repeated failure with each woman he uses, Quentin thinks at one point: "*The principal tune she prances to comes not from horn and fiddle and drum but from a clock and calendar*" (148). In the end, as Woodrow Shoble puts it, "Sutpen's fate is held in balance by a pregnant, fifteen year old girl" (Shoble 168).

Thus, although legend has it, neither Sutpen nor his progeny "abrupt" out of the "soundless Nothing" (4); they are born into the world and into history. When Sutpen explains that he believed he bought "immunity" from his first wife and son, Grandfather Compson hollers at him: "didn't the dread and fear of females which you must have drawn in with the primary mammalian milk teach you better?" (AA 213). Here, Grandfather Compson, reminding him of his first tie, of his first material necessity in the "primary mammalian milk," both returns Sutpen to an original bond and invokes the image of a suckling animal. He also appeals to Sutpen, man-to-man, so to speak, describing the "dread and fear of females" as an unavoidable consequence of being born and as a kind of contaminating side-effect of the milk for which there is no immunity. It is this dread and fear of contamination that lurk beneath Sutpen's impossible dream of sowing his sons out of "the fecundity of dragon's teeth" and the soil (48).³¹

But the soil itself is not an inert mass in Absalom, Absalom!. Like Pynchon's Earth in Gravity's Rainbow, it has a "mindbody" and a memory. In Quentin's estimation,

the tale Rosa tells him is one about the land's vengeance upon Sutpen: how "the land or the earth or whatever it was got tired of him at last and turned and destroyed him" (7). As Richard Gray reminds us, so much of Faulkner's work rests upon the belief that the earth, like a living entity, does not tolerate human injustice (Gray 51-52). For instance, in The Unvanquished, the narrator remarks:

[Uncle Buck and Uncle Buddy] believed that the land did not belong to people but that people belonged to the land and that the earth would permit them to live on and out of it and use it only so long as they behaved and that if they did not behave right, it would shake them off just like a dog getting rid of fleas. (qtd. in Gray 52)

In Absalom, Absalom! a simile also conceptualises the earth's sentience, but it is less amusing. Here, the land produces "crimson flowers . . . as if nature held a balance and kept a book and offered a recompense for the torn limbs and outraged hearts even if man did not" (AA 202). It is "manured with black blood," and gives rise to a history which envelops Sutpen and which, like the "*indomitable woman-blood*," thwarts Sutpen's plans, metaphorically pumps blood into what he believes are abstractions (202, 123). Even the "sheen" on the money made off the land is "not from gold but from blood" (202).

Throughout Absalom, Absalom!, blood constructs passageways between matter and spirit, past and present, black and white, cyclical forces and linear plots. It emerges in the narratives—the "sewer-gush of dreaming"—which do not sustain Sutpen's perspective and which usher in shadowy alternatives to his aggressive inevitability (132). Beneath the text's "crisis of consanguinity," to refer to Sundquist's point, a pervasive sanguinity runs through the various narratives. The past comes forward, for instance, through "the old blood" upon which Rosa appears to feed. As Quentin muses,

it is as though she were living on the actual blood itself like a vampire, not with insatiability, certainly not with voracity, but with that serene and idle splendor of flowers arrogating to herself, because it fills her veins also, nourishment from the old blood that crossed uncharted seas and continents and battled wilderness hardships and lurking circumstances and fatalities. (68)

Associating the ingestion or arrogation of blood with access to the voices of the dead, Quentin's words here allude to the *Nekuia* of Homer's Odyssey and link Rosa to Tiresias. Like Tiresias, replenished by the blood which Odysseus offers him and enticed to offer up

knowledge of past events, Rosa seems animated by the blood running through her narrative. In both the Odyssey and Absalom, Absalom!, it is blood which forms the medium of exchange between the living and the dead. The necessity of this exchange must then be sifted from Quentin's temptation to back away from it. Because the dialogue into which Rosa invites him demands a daunting step toward the brink of the Underworld, it frightens him; he perceives Rosa, "the small figure in black," not as a prophet but as a vampire (6).

The image of the vampire forges a link between the language of blood and the "dread and fear" of females. It combines the allusion to Odysseus's blood sacrifice with an allusion to menstrual blood. In the iconography of malevolent femininity, a woman's menstruating body makes her the kind of creature who bleeds without dying, who not only occupies an uncanny position between life and death, but who also periodically reverts to a bestial state. The unending need to replenish the blood lost to her menstrual cycle gives rise to her vampiric blood-lust. Located in the strange powers of menstruation and linked to sexual cravings, this blood-lust is contagious, a potentially degenerative condition in the male who encounters her.³²

In the darkness and the "dim coffin-smelling gloom" of Rosa's house--and confronted with an elderly woman who looks suspended at a much younger age--Quentin feels impotent to escape (AA 4). In his mind, Rosa lives off of the spilled blood of the Civil War, animating herself by remembering and telling, and by feeding off Quentin's listening. For Quentin, his position as listener is a terrible burden. It empties him out, until "his very body was an empty hall echoing with sonorous defeated names; he was not a being, an entity, he was a commonwealth" (9). He is lifted out of time and space, drained and then transfused by the blood of others. The image of the vampire he uses to describe Rosa folds back upon him, turning his life into a vicarious experience of death.

The promise inherent in Rosa's language of blood escapes him because he fears the desire and femininity with which it is intimately bound. If we know from The Sound and the Fury that Caddy's menstrual blood frightens and captivates Quentin, then Rosa's "trickling" voice and bodily engagement with the blood of the past add complicated levels

to what Quentin already sees as the disturbing phenomenon of female sexuality (AA 4). As John Irwin asserts, the connection between the two novels is of primary importance. In his canonical study, Doubling and Incest/ Repetition and Revenge, he delineates the “fluid” intertextuality, the “optimal fluidity,” between Absalom, Absalom! and The Sound and the Fury. “Of the many levels of meaning in Absalom,” Irwin argues, “the deepest level is to be found in the symbolic identification of incest and miscegenation and in the relationship of this symbolic identification both to Quentin Compson’s personal history in The Sound and the Fury and to the story that Quentin narrates in Absalom, Absalom!” (Irwin 27). Yet, Quentin brings from The Sound and the Fury to Absalom, Absalom! not only an incestuous desire, which materializes in his reconstruction of the events, but also an obsession with menstruation, which figures in the unremitting attention to blood in this reconstruction. Rosa initiates “that rapport of blood,” and Quentin, in spite of himself, extends it (AA 282). It gets under his skin, making him conscious of his own blood “driving through his veins, his arms and legs” (288). In a sense, as his body starts to shake and “jerk all over,” and as his “blood [runs] quick to cool,” it begins to speak through him (236).

Richard Gray remarks that a “fundamental and fundamentally ‘male’ narrative of union, division, alienation and conquest shines through all the different versions [of Sutpen’s story]: as if, somehow, this were the *ur*-text of history, the past as it has been constructed for us by the dominant (white, male) ideology” (Gray 211). What also shines through are the ways in which menstrual blood functions as a trope in opposition to Sutpen’s violent stratifications and linear energy; it involves the recurrence of “that female principle which existed, queenly and complete, in the hot equatorial groin of the world” (AA 92). A “complete” principle, it courses beneath the rationalist, patriarchal structures layered over it. The text cycles back into concepts of prehistory, twining this principle into the pervasive images drawn from the female body and revealing masculine law as an imposition upon “obscurity’s myriad components” (115). Menstruation emerges as a collective rhythm diffused through the narratives and evoked by the repetitive insistence of the word “blood.” At the strange border between nature and culture, a feminine economy of meaning obstructs Sutpen’s masculine, divisive design.

Menstrual blood also occurs as the antidote to the “*poisonous secret effluvium of lusting and hating and killing*”; it is the “balm” connected to the figure of the daughter—the “*daughter? daughter? daughter?*” in the (conjectured) lawyer’s ledger (237, 247). Judith, for instance, a character intimately associated with flowing blood and healing, utters the text’s vision of love and responsibility. She also asserts the bonds of blood by relating to Clytie as a sister and by urging Charles Etienne to “call me Aunt Judith” (169). Her words and actions blending together, she sews bandages for the wounded, bloody soldiers and sacrifices her life to nurse Charles Etienne. The depiction of her menstruating body creates a conceptual realm at once linked to and divided from the “deluded blood and flesh dressed in a martial glitter of brass and plumes, marching away to battle” (97):

Judith gone . . . into that transition stage between childhood and womanhood . . . that state where, though still visible, young girls appear as though seen through glass and where even the voice cannot reach them; where they exist (this the hoyden who could—and did—outrun and outclimb, and ride and fight both with and beside her brother) in a pearly lambence without shadows and themselves partaking of it; in nebulous suspension held, strange and unpredictable, even their very shapes fluid and delicate and without substance; not in themselves floating and seeking but merely waiting, parasitic and potent and serene, drawing to themselves without effort the post-genitive upon and about which to shape, flow into back, breast; bosom, flank, thigh. (52-53)

This extravagant, incantational description forms part of Mr. Compson’s narrative, and proffered to Quentin it echoes his speech concerning Caddy’s menstruation, her “delicate equilibrium of periodical filth,” in The Sound and the Fury. Like Caddy, Judith represents a process that neither Mr. Compson nor Quentin entirely comprehends and that runs against notions of permanence and finality. Transition, suspension and flow, the terms surrounding menstruation contrast those which give rise to war: regression, urgency and strife.

The figure of the daughter and the discourse of menstruation combine, furthermore, with the image of the hymen to which the text repeatedly returns. It is a contested image, associated with virginity’s “false quantity,” the “*thinning of the veil we call virginity*,” and with “*the arras-veil before what-is-to-be hangs docile*” (77, 118, 114). As the site of multiple meanings, it signifies the paradoxical presence of loss and absence,

as well as the barrier or threshold through which only blood can pass without a tear or “rending gash” (114). To return briefly to a claim made in my discussion of The Sound and the Fury, the concept of the hymen, as Derrida delineates it in “The Double Session,” and as Faulkner’s texts imply, places a theory of language at the site of menstruation.

In “The Double Session,” Derrida delineates the “logic of the hymen” as that which governs the relation among history, literature and truth. The hymen, as the figurative membrane between letters and between words, orders meaning while it takes no proper meaning to itself. It differs and defers, undermining “the assurance of mastery” in its polysemy and excess; as displacement, it brings the text alive in a dialogue between writing and truth (Derrida 230):

What is lifted, then, is not difference but the different, the differends, the decidable exteriority of differing terms. Thanks to the confusion and continuity of the hymen, and not in spite of it, a (pure and impure) difference inscribes itself without any decidable poles, without any independent, irreversible terms. (210)

As the confusion of difference, the hymen draws together desire and fulfillment, remembrance and perpetration. Creating a temporal and spatial suspension, it becomes the threshold “at the edge of being” (215).

The hymen, then, like Faulkner’s “umbilical cord” and language of blood, also communicates or signifies that which joins and disjoins the present to the past. In Derrida’s etymology the word originates in the Latin word *suere* (to sew):

Hymen might then mean a little stitch. . . . The same hypothesis, while sometimes contested, is put forth for *hymn*, which would thus not be a merely accidental anagram of *hymen* {*hymne/hymen*}. Both words would have a relation with *uphaino* (to weave, spin—the spider web—machinate), with *huphos* (textile, spider web, net, the text of a work—Longinus), and with *humnos* (a weave, later the weave of a song, by extension a wedding song or song of mourning). (213)

From hymen to hymn to mourning, the language that emerges out of the female body implies the possibility of healing, of mourning the past, and of sewing together falsely construed divisions.

In Absalom, Absalom! the figure of the menstruating daughter not only asserts humanity’s “communal blood” over the war’s “pouring blood” in the novel but also calls

up a different theory of humanity's origins (128, 65). When Rosa asks, "*had I not heired too from all the unsistered Eves since the snake?*" (115), she traces a female lineage to, in biblical doctrine, the first woman and the mother of humanity. But by referring also to the snake, she recalls not Eve's creation but her disobedience and curse. She relates herself to Eve outside the Garden, cursed and menstruating. The image of the snake, though, inflects menstruation with larger significance. Together with menstrual blood, it signifies cyclical renewal, knowledge of the sacred and ancient theories of the world's beginnings.³³ The snake's appearance in the bible accompanies a redefinition of the sacred under Western law; it enters the picture to precipitate woman's curse, destroy a cosmic order founded on the fluidity of blood, and place evil at the origin of human existence. In Helen Smith's words,

The Old Testament replaces the mythic understanding of menstruation as symbolic of an immortal goddess and her eternal cosmic order with a mythic understanding of menstruation as a curse of mortality that symbolizes women's lack of representation in the sacred. In a dualistic system where life and death are considered unrelated, menstruation loses its symbolic meaning of the cyclical flow of regeneration and only symbolizes the profane inertness of death. (Smith 197)

Rosa returns menstruation to its regenerative connotations. Appearing, as Quentin sees her, with all the "irrational fury of a shedding snake" (47), she fills her tale with approximations and negations that suggest the ways in which menstruation at once implies loss, promise and transformation. Rosa's is a narrative about possibility and the "might-have-been," suggesting to Quentin that "*Maybe nothing ever happens once and is finished. Maybe happen is never once but like ripples maybe on water after the pebble sinks, the ripples moving on, spreading, the pool attached by a narrow umbilical water-cord to the next pool which the first feeds, has fed, did feed*" (210). Quentin's sense of the vampiric ingestion of the dead's blood here shifts to a vision of umbilical transmission of sustenance between past and present. He takes Rosa's sanguineous language, as well as her snake-like image of the "*fierce rigid umbilical cord,*" into the fluid concepts of cyclical time and interconnection (112).

Placing his anthropological findings in opposition to Darwin's, Chris Knight

asserts in Blood Relations that the “competitive pursuit of short-term ‘selfish’ interests is emphatically not the only political logic of which we are or have been capable. . . . Life-enhancing collective agreements have been with us since the very inception of culture” (Knight 14-15).³⁴ These collective agreements, he says, arose out of women’s “menstrual self-identity.” Female solidarity and the synchronization of menstrual cycles initiated the move from nature to culture and preceded patriarchal ownership. The alliance through menstrual synchrony among the first human daughters and sisters controlled sexual availability, signaled “no” to would-be alpha males and established a sense of “collective responsibility” (14). “Early life was communist,” Knight explains (4). The “first contracts were signed in blood,” and human societies formed, not out of simian aggression, male dominance and the battle for females, but around “synchrony and togetherness” (4, 282-84).

In Absalom, Absalom! a very similar concept expresses itself in the depiction of Rosa, Clytie and Judith surviving the war:

And amicably, not as two white women and a negress, not as three negroes or three whites, not even as three women, but merely as three creatures who still possessed the need to eat but took no pleasure in it, the need to sleep but from no joy in weariness or regeneration, and in whom sex was some forgotten atrophy like the rudimentary gills we call the tonsils or the still-opposable thumbs for old climbing. . . .we grew and tended and harvested with our own hands the food we ate, made and worked that garden just as we cooked and ate the food which came out of it: with no distinction among the three of us of age or color. . . . It was as though we were one being, interchangeable and indiscriminate, which kept that garden growing, spun thread and wove the cloth we wore . . . --the three of us, three women. (AA 125)

While most Faulkner critics tend to view this scene as a feminist ideal, they do not establish its links to the text’s extended metaphors of human origins and allusions to menstrual blood. It is an ideal tuned to the concept of the “ancient immortal Lilith” (God’s first “mistake”) who entered the world “not at the age of one second but of twelve years”—the age, of course, in which menstruation becomes possible—and who returns through the women who do not conform to another’s design (159). Sustaining themselves as the world of men collapses into war, Clytie, Rosa and Judith lose the distinctions imposed upon them

and return to a state in which their sexuality and color, like “rudimentary gills,” have no market price. Their survival is contingent upon collective identity and synchronized activity. As Rosa states, “*the indomitable woman-blood ignores the man’s world in which the blood kinsman shows the courage or cowardice, the folly or lust or fear, for which his fellows praise or crucify him*” (123).

The text, in a proleptic gesture toward the image of the three women bound together, earlier delineates the ways in which men reconfigure the “woman-blood” to serve a masculine economic order. Long before the men split apart into the fraternal conflict of Civil war, the women were “unsistered” from each other, divided into dark whores and white virgins, and held hostage to these definitions:

‘Not whores. And not whores because of us, the thousand We—the thousand, the white men—made them, created and produced them; we even made the laws which declare that one eighth of a specified kind of blood shall outweigh seven eighths of another kind. . . . Because though men, white men, created her, God did not stop it. He planted the seed and brought her to flower—the white blood to give the shape and pigment of what the white man calls female beauty, to a female principle which existed, queenly and complete, in the hot and equatorial groin of the world long before that white one of ours came down from the trees and lost its hair and bleached out. . . . No: not whores.’ (91-92)

Here, speaking in defense of his “octoroon wife,” Charles Bon traces a concept of human origins through women and through the kind of female unity Rosa experiences when the war, in a sense, turns the clock back to a vision of what “might-have-been” (120). He implies that the so-called laws of competition and selection came into being only when men took over and turned women against each other—making of their “blood” an “economic matter like someone who insists upon installing a counter or a scales or a safe in a store or business” (93).

Rosa conjures the power of this blood, locating it in the specifically female event of menstruation. By recalling herself at the age of fourteen during “a summer of wisteria,” she alludes not only to the general age of a girl’s first period but also to a perennial image of menstruation, a flower. “*It was a pervading everywhere of wisteria,*” she stresses as she moves into her memories (115). She casts the scent over her narrative as the opening words of the novel cast it over the whole text: “There was a wisteria vine blooming for the

second time ... a twice-bloomed wisteria,” that makes the air “oversweet” (4). An image of menstruation, coinciding with Rosa’s fourteenth year (four times she says, “I was fourteen”), and recalling the honeysuckle that surrounds Caddy in The Sound and the Fury, becomes the substance of memory and a tangible sense of the past’s recurrence in the present. Associating the scent with “*the miasmal mass . . . of time [that knows] only how to recreate, renew,*” she turns to Quentin and asks:

‘Do you mark how the wisteria . . . distills and penetrates this room as though (light-unimpeded) by secret and attritive progress from mote to mote of obscurity’s myriad components? That is the substance of remembering—sense, sight, smell: the muscles with which we see and hear and feel—not mind, not thought.’ (115)

Reversing Sutpen’s assertion of mind over matter, Rosa affirms matter over mind. Matter (blood, bodies, or the earth) gives rise to meaning and memory; it cannot be placed outside of, nor in conflict with, mind. The two occur together, and the ideology that holds them apart involves the violent rending of a vital union.

Feminist critic Linda Kauffman declares that Rosa’s narrative is salvational, a “lament against loss” and a meditation upon love (Kauffman 652). She contends that Rosa communicates an “economy based on giving and loving rather than on hoarding;” and this economy contrasts that of the phallus, the logic of which Sutpen embraces (661).

Kauffman then situates Judith’s vision of the loom against the phallic logic of the ledger in the text. Yet, a larger economy of menstruation surrounds the loom, poisoning a menstrual semiotics of the female body against that of the phallus, the semiotics of the male. It is the older of the two, as Chris Knight insists, and it signified harmony with the land and cosmos before its ritual power was wrested away and replaced by patriarchal aggression.

The question of menstruation’s vast symbolization preceding that of the phallus matters because it overthrows theories of women’s natural subordination and exile from cultural initiatives. If humanity and human culture emerged out of the synchrony of menstrual cycles and the mythic symbolization surrounding menstruation, and not out of fierce masculine domination over territory and females, then humanity can reconfigure itself, can reestablish its cooperative rules. As René Girard remarks in Violence and the Sacred, Western thought has done us the disservice of “severing the cord that attached us

to the matrix of all mythic thought” (Girard 238). For Faulkner, this “matrix” is “*shod with the very damp and velvet silence of the womb*” (AA 116). The violent crisis of the Civil War, with the rivers of blood spilled because of it, gives rise to the urgency of reattaching that cord.

As Faulkner remarked to his class at the University of Virginia, Sutpen had to be destroyed. His throat slit by a heavily symbolic scythe, he is finally killed off or purged from the land. The motif of decapitation as castration (particularly of generals or warriors) is one which extends from Medusa in Greek mythology to Judith of the Old Testament. For Mary Jane Lupton, in Menstruation and Psychoanalysis, Medusa and Judith combine to offer a menstrual paradigm of sexuality, death and female power. The violent acts of decapitation surrounding them involve a “psychic shifting” from bleeding vagina to severed head (Lupton 138). When the biblical Judith decapitates Holofernes, she signals a vulnerable space in male military power. Opened up and bleeding, his male body comes to resemble the female’s. Although in Absalom, Absalom! it is a male character, Wash Jones, who decapitates Sutpen, he is both an image of Sutpen himself and the avenger of his insulted daughter. The “rending gash” about which Rosa speaks moves from the female body to Sutpen’s throat and, in an ironic act of vicarious menstruation, Sutpen bleeds to death. His head severed from his body, Sutpen is killed by a literal enaction of the conceptual division between mind and matter. It is a bloody division which catches up to him, and which the various narrative threads of the text attempt to close. Absalom, Absalom!, Richard Gray contends, “gravitates between jeremiad and nightmare,” recounting the “curse of the South” and the innocence lost (Gray 214). It also envisions the possibility of starting over. And, unlike a jeremiad, it eliminates the design of a Christian god and directly returns the concept of cyclical regeneration to its source in the female body.

¹ Throughout this chapter, I have reproduced Faulkner's contractions and possessives as they occur in his texts. All italics are Faulkner's, unless otherwise noted.

² Piero Camporesi, in The Juice of Life: The Symbolic and Magic Significance of Blood, quotes Pliny's writings on the contaminating effects of menstruation and "menstrual exhalations from the mouth" (115-117). Andréw Nikiforuk's The Fourth Horseman: A Short History of Epidemics explains that, according to early modern ideology, "men . . . had to be careful during the time of women's 'flowers' because menstruating women poisoned animals and stained mirrors" (32).

³ Derrida includes Sollers' letter in the original French: "le vice est plus près des cieux que le rêve, sacré—ca crée en cédant au rêve—en s'aidant au rêve—pas de cadeau non plus (présent) apparent—le fantôme blanc—procédant, pro—créant...L'I mène—/Le MIME (neutre) est un demi-moi opéré, infini borné dans son unique stalle pur de toute/ fiction, un demi-lieu et un demi-dieu—/retour des règles—/mime/milieu—moins/millier/ (qu'y le lit/qui le l'y) (lie)/ très tôt en dépôt: s'y taire/ lignes: phrases—points, que/con, sur—prise liée—/au temps cité, luxe du silence ferré: un si lance enqu'or—condiction [sic] d'hélice au regard/ feuilleté; dés lisses" (xxi).

Johnson writes of her hesitation to translate the letter: "There is one passage in the book that I have been sorely tempted not to tackle: it is a letter written by Philippe Sollers to Derrida between the two halves of the 'Double Session.' . . . To translate Sollers' letter, one must find an equivalent not for its words but for its *relation* to Mallarmé's *Mimique* (xix Johnson's italics).

⁴ Helen Smith's chapter on Christianity in The Female Questor: An Analysis of Gender Conflict in the Mythic Symbolism of Menstruation and the Quest for Knowledge also makes this argument.

⁵ There is an ancient, symbolic association between flowers and menstruation. See Lupton's Menstruation and Psychoanalysis and Laqueur's Making Sex.

⁶ David Williams makes a compelling point about the possibility of Quentin's initiation: "Mr. Compson's observations [about the "blood mysteries of the feminine"] constitute a sort of initiation rite for Quentin, like the adolescent ceremony in which Joe Christmas learns of menstruation and is sickened by it" (Williams 80).

⁷ This section on The Sound and the Fury is forthcoming in Mosaic.

⁸ See Gwynn and Blotner's introduction to Faulkner in the University. "Faulkner was a tricky man," they caution; he was "not above playing, however courteously, with his audience" (xi).

⁹ William Faulkner. "William Faulkner reads from As I Lay Dying, and others." Voices in Time. New York: Harper Audio, 1954.

¹⁰ See also Derrida's essay, "The Ends of Man" in Margins of Philosophy. The possible pun on "eve" is interesting in light of my argument that the cyclical economy of menstruation ("Eve's curse") opposes concepts of finality. Derrida writes: "Are we to understand the eve as the guard mounted around the house or as the awakening to the day that is coming, at whose eve we are? Is there an economy of the eve? Perhaps we are between these two eves, which are also two ends of man. But who, we?" (Margins 136).

¹¹ Eric Sundquist describes Faulkner's Mississippi as a "country within a country within a country; that is, a closed society still fierce in its isolation within the often closed society of the South itself" (Sundquist 66).

¹² Hood opens his second chapter with an explanation of this "curse": "In the politicized 'Table of Nations' in Genesis 10, Canaan, an offspring of Ham, one of Noah's three sons and primordial ancestor of Egypt and Ethiopia, is cursed by Noah to be the servant/slave of Ham's two brothers forever. This biblical legend of Ham as the ancestor of blacks and transmitter of the curse had particularly strong intellectual and political appeal in medieval Christendom and during the Renaissance. It was used to support European cultural claims of superiority over non-European cultures. It also had strong religious appeal for the same reason in the antebellum American South and to anthropology and Egyptology in their infancy" (59-60).

¹³ Sundquist cites two notorious books by Charles Carroll, The Negro A Beast (1900) and The Tempter of Eve (1902), in which Carroll argues "that Eve was seduced by an apelike Negro, not a serpent, and that the whole history of man's long fall from grace therefore derived from this original sin of bestial miscegenation" (Sundquist 80).

¹⁴ Faulkner twice calls the First World War "the hysteria," the mass fanaticism about which the returning soldiers feel ashamed (426). An ex-soldier remarks to Grimm that "if he had to do it again [a portentous remark about the imminent Second World War at the time of the novel's publication], he would fight this time on the German side and against France." When Grimm asks, "Against America too?" the soldier says: "if America's fool enough to help France out again" (426). This conversation, I would argue, compresses the text's position on war and on America's participation in it. Having been dragged into a conflict against another's enemy, the soldier appears to remark on the ridiculous lines drawn between people.

¹⁵ Grimm, Faulkner's proto-fascist, slices off Christmas's penis, and exclaims: "Now you'll let white women alone, even in hell" (439). About Grimm, Faulkner says: "what he was was a Nazi Storm Trooper, but then I'd never heard of one of them" (FU 41). He may not specifically have heard about Storm Troopers, but he seems to have captured the ideology underpinning the rise of fascism.

¹⁶ The sound of the wailing siren here forges a connection with the "screaming . . . across the sky" in Gravity's Rainbow.

¹⁷ My argument, though, does not take this "demonology" at face value. It is not something which Faulkner constructs, as Chase claims, but rather which he deconstructs.

¹⁸ Dinnerstein here refers to Freud's characterization of women.

¹⁹ See my chapter on Thomas Pynchon for a more extensive discussion of Knight's Blood Relations: Menstruation and the Origins of Culture.

²⁰ Here, I paraphrase Percy Grimm, who exclaims: "Jesus Christ! . . . Has every preacher and old maid in Jefferson taken their pants down to the yellowbellied son of a bitch?" (439).

²¹ See Bleikasten, who says Lena belongs to the "realm of immanence" (Bleikasten 276); Sundquist, who claims that she is "the great mother, the abiding earth, the patient and enduring force of life" (Sundquist 169); Richard Chase, who says, "she is a kind of earth goddess" (Chase 217). Judith Wittenberg's feminist discussion "The Women in Light in August" concludes with the strange notion of a "bisexual whole" (Wittenberg 121).

²² Mrs. McEachern, Mrs. Hines, Mrs. Hightower are all trapped and downtrodden. Judith Wittenberg's article lists the "general plight of women" in the novel, as well as their "brief but admirable attempts" at rebellion (Wittenberg 104-110).

²³ Forging a bond between the two races, invoking anthropological theory and taking a shot at Quentin's Southern sense of white supremacy, Shreve remarks: "I think that in time the Jim Bonds are going to conquer the Western hemisphere. Of course, it wont quite be in our time and of course as they spread toward the poles they will bleach out again like the rabbits and birds do, so they wont show up so sharp against the snow. But it will still be Jim Bond; and so in a few thousand years, I who regard you will also have sprung from the loins of African kings" (AA 303).

²⁴ See Lalita Vidyarthi's Rise of World Anthropology, which catalogues these sessions (21-22).

²⁵ Rosa's opening words about the South echo Jeremiah's prophecies. Jeremiah announces, for instance: "Then the Lord saith unto me, Out of the north an evil shall break forth upon all the inhabitants of the land" (Jeremiah 1:14).

²⁶ At one point in the novel Quentin thinks: "Nothing matters but breath, breathing, to know and to be alive" (168).

²⁷ Although Sundquist does not mention it, the racial hysteria which he describes coincides to the decade with the rise of American anthropology and the rapid dissemination of Darwin's theories. The decade which saw the emergence of a new branch of science and its classification of the races under one "species" also saw the emergence of books like White Supremacy and Negro Subordination, as well as pseudo-scientific theories meant to evict "the Negro altogether from the human species" (Sundquist 80).

²⁸ Sundquist convincingly maintains that Sutpen's design is, of course, a microcosmic version of the "founding fathers' grand 'design' for America itself" (102).

²⁹ While the first is taken as a prize in battle and then "set aside," the second is, as the text suggests, raped or coerced into sex. Diane Roberts's Faulkner and Southern Womanhood calls attention to this possibility regarding Clytie's mother. Roberts traces a discourse of rape in the text and refers to Sutpen as a rapist (Roberts 31). For instance, the constant allusions to tearing and to crashing doors imply, for Roberts, the sexual menace that Sutpen represents.

³⁰ This energy, arising in part out of his lost "innocence" and virginity ("I was still a virgin," he says of the early days of his design), is of a particularly phallic kind: "It was like that, he said, like an explosion . . . just a limitless flat plain with the severe shape of his intact innocence rising from it like a monument" (200, 192).

³¹ Sutpen's "ironic fecundity of dragon's teeth" constitutes an allusion to Cadmus, founder of Thebe's dynasty, who sowed his sons out of serpent's teeth.

³² See Bram Dijkstra's Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture. Dracula, Dijkstra reminds us, "feeds on the blood of young girls to grow young again, for the bestial past lives in the blood of woman" (343). Dijkstra explains, furthermore, that women were both assumed to be utterly subjected to their reproductive organs and close to animals on the evolutionary scale; and, like animals, they hungered for blood. With characteristic flair, Dijkstra states: "the hunger of the beast was in her loins, and the hunger of the beast was the hunger for blood" (334-342).

³³ Chris Knight catalogues the sources of this information throughout Blood Relations, showing that, since its inception, anthropology has documented the connections between menstruation and the symbol of the serpent in ancient cosmological systems all over the world. See my chapter on Thomas Pynchon in which I discuss the image of the serpent in Gravity's Rainbow.

³⁴ Here, I restate some of the main points of Knight's argument in order to place his research and conclusions in dialogue with Darwin's.

CHAPTER THREE: TONI MORRISON DAUGHTERS OF JERUSALEM

I. Pecola's Pharmacy: The Bluest Eye

Oh. Lordy! I know. I know what that is! . . . That's ministratin'.
(The Bluest Eye 27)

There's a stench in the air, which, from this distance underground, might be the smell
either of death or of spring—I hope of spring.
(Invisible Man 580)

“Over and over again,” writes Toni Morrison in the preface to Playing in the Dark, “I am amazed by the treasure trove that American literature is” (PD xiii). With its careful and erudite treatment of American fiction, and with poignant epigraphs from American poetry, Playing in the Dark blends this sense of amazement or admiration into an ironhanded analysis of the literature's racial ideology. In Morrison's estimation, canonical American literature is brilliant, but it is also shaped and defined by race. Combining these two points, she contends in fact that the pressures of race and racial conflict effectively produce the literature's brilliant intricacies and complex layers. The American canon's signature, unrelenting explorations of innocence and guilt, belonging and exile, purity and pollution circulate around a “dark, abiding, signing Africanist presence” coded within the narratives (5). With rhetorical intensity Morrison asks: “What . . . are Americans isolated from? What are Americans always so insistently innocent of?” (45).

Throughout Playing in the Dark Morrison demonstrates that an ardent process of differentiation takes place in the national literature, not only from the Old World across the ocean, as the critical commonplace goes, but also from the black population within the New. This “violently silenced” population emerges in the “typology of diabolism” that accompanies the American myth of Edenic innocence (44, 36). Thus, white American

identity assumes its complexion, its “whiteness,” against the “power of blackness” and configures itself as “not enslaved, but free; not repulsive, but desirable; not helpless, but licensed and powerful; not history-less, but historical; not damned, but innocent; not a blind accident of evolution, but a progressive fulfilment of destiny” (52). Morrison offers Absalom, Absalom! as a manifestation and illumination of this obsessive pairing:

Does Faulkner’s Absalom, Absalom!, after its protracted search for the telling African blood, leave us with just such an image of snow and the eradication of race? Not quite. Shreve sees himself as the inheritor of the blood of African kings; the snow apparently the wasteland of unmeaning, unfathomable whiteness. . . . Whiteness, alone [without the contrast of blackness], is mute, meaningless, unfathomable, pointless, frozen, veiled, curtained, dreaded, senseless, implacable. Or so our writers seem to say. (58-59)

Acknowledging that Faulkner’s work explores and unsettles this seemingly endless conceptual opposition between white and black, Morrison nonetheless draws attention to the fact that it only examines the destructive pressure of this equation upon the white or partly-white psyche. Black women and men remain at the periphery of Faulkner’s understanding of racist ideology, perhaps because Faulkner does not assume to fathom their experiences nor adopt their points of view. Part of Morrison’s project, as she says near the end of Playing in the Dark, involves returning to canonical texts and effecting a shift in perspective “from the racial object to the racial subject; from the described and imagined to the describers and imaginers” (90). The other part—that which her fiction takes up—involves giving voices and interior landscapes to those “described and imagined” figures that haunt American history and literature.

By drawing attention to the formulation and interdependence of white and black identity in the American literary imagination, Playing in the Dark does not necessitate a restricted or contracted understanding of American literature. On the contrary, Morrison argues that novels like Faulkner’s Absalom, Absalom! or Mark Twain’s Huckleberry Finn become “more beautifully complicated” once the implications of the textually embedded “Africanist presence” are brought to light (54). The problem lies with the stranglehold of “sentimental nostrums” upon such texts, which occlude discussions about race and manipulate the Africanist narratives into speculations about “fate and destiny” or “universal

codes of behavior” (53). Thus, at the same time that Morrison highlights the racial obsessions in American literature, she confirms her affinity with the tradition and her familiarity with its critical heritage. Like Playing in the Dark, her fiction also explores the motifs of canonical American literature in another sign of admiration for the tradition and out of the necessity to smash the stereotypical assumptions surrounding it. Morrison’s novels offer black characters who usher in themes like purity, exile and escape but who are not distorted into “allegorical fodder for the contemplation of Eden, expulsion, and the availability of grace” (66). As Jill Matus puts it, “If the African American writer’s responsibility is to assume the task of recovering [here quoting Morrison] the ‘presence and heartbeat of the black people’ in America, her novels take the task of recovery seriously, involving a reconstruction, revisioning and revisiting of the past” (Matus 2). Her novels also revisit the literary past.

Morrison’s first novel, The Bluest Eye, devising a thematic landscape of innocence and exile, places the protagonist Pecola Breedlove in the familiar, very American, position of castaway. One critic even views The Bluest Eye as an “inverted Walden,” arguing that Pecola negatively emblemizes Thoreau’s parables about solitude and conformity (Gravett 201). Both Morrison and Thoreau, Sharon Gravett maintains, focus upon the evils of submissiveness and materialism in an attempt, from two different angles, to “wake their neighbours up” (203). Although it seems like a stretch to view The Bluest Eye in light of Walden, Gravett offers some interesting points of comparison, particularly when she mentions the trope of planting in each text.¹ And—to complement Gravett’s argument—if Ellison’s whirlpool image (the “vacillating course toward and away from the democratic ideal”) in Invisible Man’s prologue is a nod toward Melville (Ellison xxi), then it is possible that Morrison’s allusion to “the beat of a drummer so distant” in The Bluest Eye constitutes one toward Thoreau (BE 204).² A substantial resemblance among the four texts emerges, furthermore, in their shared sense of urgency about a fractured, fraudulent American society; from Moby Dick and Walden to Invisible Man and The Bluest Eye, a narrative voice directly entreats the reader to reconsider and take responsibility for the principles, certainties and so-called necessities upon which America rests. Each narrator,

using the inclusive pronouns “we” and “us,” makes this imperative a matter of life and death.³ As the Invisible Man reminds his reader, “any principle that applies to you could apply to me. You’ll fail to see it even though death waits for both of us if you don’t” (Ellison 580).

A castaway, progressively isolated and ultimately displaced to a border area of American society, Morrison’s Pecola calls to mind characters like Ellison’s Invisible Man and, I would venture, Pynchon’s Oedipa Maas. In a sense, Pecola occurs as an extreme variation on their representative vulnerability, dislocation and invisibility. Each figure, to borrow Ellison’s words, steps “outside the narrow borders of what men call reality” but only Oedipa and the Invisible Man discover a realm of imaginative possibilities for America and its disinherited people (Ellison 576). Pecola, escaping reality altogether, moves into a kind of imprisoning insanity. Without the advantages of Oedipa’s race and the Invisible Man’s sex, and forced further down the social scale by her poverty and her age, Pecola becomes lost in her invisibility; she cannot “bear” it as Ellison’s hibernating protagonist learns to do. And, where Oedipa gradually sheds the layers or conventions of femininity, Pecola absorbs and is poisoned by them. She becomes, moreover, part of the wasteland on which Oedipa only verges:⁴

[Pecola moves] among all the waste and beauty of the world— which is what she herself was. All of our waste which we dumped on her and which she absorbed. And all our beauty, which was hers first and which she gave to us. All of us—all who knew her— felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her. We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness. (BE 205)

In Pecola’s case, innocence and isolation shift out from under the metaphoric cloak of Americanness and become an almost untenable condition bound up with being black and female. As Morrison explains in the novel’s Afterword, “I focused, therefore, on how something as grotesque as the demonization of an entire race could take root inside the most delicate member of society: a child; the most vulnerable member: a female” (BE 210).

The Bluest Eye, as its readers tend to concur, is an angry book and a vehement stand against the demonization of African Americans. For the authors of A World of Difference—a rigorous study of Morrison’s novels—even the gradually compressed words

and sentences of the “Dick and Jane” primer frame the narrative with a combative gesture and evoke the “action of a fist crushing its detested content” (Harding and Martin 156). The primer’s content—its representation of a white, affluent American family—is detestable in the context of The Bluest Eye not only because it insinuates a white standard of social organization into the minds of black children but also because it associates the family’s whiteness and beauty (through its repetitive imperative to “see” the illustrations) with happiness, affection and goodness. Emblematic of both the prevalence of white cultural ideals and the absence of positive images of black humanity, the primer constitutes an early assault upon the black self-image and engenders the kind of physical self-hatred which the novel explores and reproaches. It is perhaps not a coincidence that Pecola is reading when Cholly rapes her the second time. If it is the primer that she is reading at the time of the rape, then its outer position as the text’s frame becomes shifted to the inside of the story. This process mirrors the internalization of white cultural standards and pairs the distortion of the primer’s syntax with Pecola’s disintegration. Pecola’s act of reading a text that subtly deprecates her collides with Cholly’s act of rape: the two actions, combining to effect her dissolution, resemble each other in their intrinsic, penetrating degradation.

Jill Matus, in her recent study of trauma in Morrison’s novels, persuasively argues that The Bluest Eye represents and contrasts two main emotions, shame and anger, as it traces the kind of trauma that results from a persisting, damaging condition like racism.⁵ She explains that while shame engenders submission and vulnerability to degradation, anger generates the possibility of resistance and survival. By pairing the angry Claudia with the perpetually ashamed Pecola, the text explores how racial execration is either deflected or absorbed. Because a sense of anger sustains a distinction between outside and inside, Claudia is, for the most part, able to resist succumbing to the self-blame that a “culture of shame” produces (Matus 45). Referring to Claudia’s statement—“There is a sense of being in anger”—Matus shows how the novel endeavours to “reveal the difficulty in maintaining a strong ‘inside’ whether of self or community against the insidious pervasiveness of racial devaluations” (45). Thus, while Claudia, when confronted with subtle or overt racially-motivated mistreatment, experiences anger and directs it outward,

Pecola folds into herself. The narrative traces Pecola's movement from a "continually shamed and diminished self to the lost, traumatized and divided subject we see at the end of the novel" (39)

For Matus, The Bluest Eye "bears witness" to Pecola's suffering and traumatization. In so doing, it attempts to enlist the reader as "co-owner of the trauma," rather than as someone who simply pities Pecola and then forgets her (48). It also witnesses Claudia, as the tale's older, omniscient narrator, attempt to recapture her childhood sense of anger and to secure its legitimacy. Interrogating her motives and adjusting her memories, the older Claudia explores where she herself took a wrong turn into what she calls the "fraudulent love" of white culture and commodities (BE 23). Matus, viewing this process as the novel's most hopeful aspect, remarks:

Her closing litany of the accommodations and falsifications that she and others have perpetuated articulates an understanding both of why Pecola stepped into madness and the terms on which she, Claudia, survived. The honesty and self-scrutiny of the last paragraphs of the novel suggest a Claudia who can see without fraudulent accommodations, can shoulder responsibility without succumbing to the conformist culture of shame. (53)

In the litany about which Matus speaks, Claudia insists upon the pronoun "we" and extends her pronouncements outward: "we were not strong, only aggressive; . . . we were not compassionate, we were polite . . . we rearranged lies and called it truth, seeing in the new pattern of an old idea the Revelation and the Word" (BE 205). Surviving to tell the tale, Claudia transforms it into a parable about loss and accountability.

Consequently, The Bluest Eye becomes a kind of contemporary black jeremiad. Inflecting its delineation of racial self-hatred with the profound desperation and vexation that characterize the jeremiad tradition, the novel laments slavery's persistence in a different form. As the various aspects of Claudia's tale come together, they forge a lesson which at once exalts African Americans and condemns their submission to white America's standards of worth and beauty. With the consternation and conviction of a preacher, Claudia describes, for example, Pauline Breedlove's seduction by the silver screen: "There in the dark . . . she succumbed to her earlier dreams. Along with the idea of romantic love, she was introduced to another—physical beauty. Probably the most destructive ideas in the

history of human thought" (122). Her words echo the mood or tone of a jeremiad, repeatedly reprimanding the misguided assumptions of her people. They also borrow the sermons' imagery; The Bluest Eye's recurring symbolism of blighted flowers produces a twist on the Puritan self-portrayal as blessed "seeds" in American soil. For Claudia, America remains a wilderness, its soil "bad for certain kinds of flowers" (206).⁶

In his study Black Messiahs and Uncle Toms: Social and Literary Manipulations of a Religious Myth Wilson Jeremiah Moses coins the term "black jeremiad":

I use the term 'jeremiad' to describe the constant warnings issued by blacks to whites, concerning the judgment that was to come for the sin of slavery. Blacks ingeniously adapted their rhetoric to the jeremiadic tradition, which was one of the dominant forms of cultural expression in revivalistic ante-bellum America. (30-31)

Part of this clever adaptation involved playing on the belief that America, as a chosen nation, had a covenantal obligation to deal justly with *all* of its people. Moses explains that the jeremiad rhetoric gave blacks the opportunity to express themselves in the same terms as their Puritan counterparts: as a chosen people whose bondage resembled that of the ancient Hebrews in Egypt. In fact, as Moses remarks of the jeremiadic comparisons between English oppression and Egyptian slavery, "was not the bondage of blacks a better analogy?" (31).

The black jeremiads announced that American slavery, because it entailed the systematic dehumanization of an entire race, was worse than Egyptian slavery. For instance, David Walker's early nineteenth-century sermon on anti-miscegenation laws declared:

'It is not that I care about intermarriage with the whites. . . . I only made this extract [the example of the pharaoh permitting marriage between an Egyptian and a Hebrew] to show how much lower we are held, and how much more cruel we are treated by the Americans than were the children of Jacob by the Egyptians. . . . Have they not held us up as descending originally from the tribes of Monkeys or Orang-Outangs?' (qtd in Moses 40)

Borrowing the strident tones of the Puritan sermons, black jeremiads denounced the degradation of African Americans. Pitched to both black and white audiences, they condemned the treatment of blacks by whites as well as the servility of blacks themselves.

This servility, they repeatedly argued, was not a “natural” disposition of the race. As Edward Wilmot Blyden proclaimed in “Call of Providence to the Descendants of Africa in America” (1862), “We have been taught a cringing servility. We have been drilled into contentment with the most undignified circumstances” (51). And David Walker’s four-part jeremiad, Appeal (1829), asserted that the doctrines of white supremacy turned free blacks into “slaves without masters,” who betrayed each other and obstructed the flight from slavery (41). In Moses’s words, “Ignorance and treachery were almost synonymous in Walker’s vocabulary. He did not believe that a truly intelligent and knowledgeable person could work against the interests of his or her own race” (41). If the people could see through the fictions imposed upon them, they could come together and rid themselves of slavery.

Written in the 1960s, in the wake of the African-American fight for civil rights and a century after abolition of slavery, The Bluest Eye addresses the persistent situation of “slaves without masters.” Discussing the “reclamation of racial beauty in the sixties” in the novel’s Afterword, Morrison writes: “The assertion of racial beauty was not a reaction to the self-mocking, humorous critique of cultural/racial foibles common in all groups, but against the damaging internalization of assumptions of immutable inferiority originating in an outside gaze” (BE 210). Like Edward Blyden and David Walker, Morrison calls attention to the complex factors that create and perpetuate racial self-hatred. Her novel shares Walker’s conviction that blind faith in white standards and codes arises out of a combination of treachery and ignorance. Pecola, for instance, is not only condemned and crushed by an “outside gaze” but also betrayed by a community which aligns itself with the acceptance and security dictated by this gaze. The novel captures this treachery in the grim juxtaposition of the adored, white and plastic doll with the rejected, reviled or overlooked black child. Overhearing the adults gossip about Pecola’s pregnancy, Claudia and her sister detect the betrayal of the entire race in their words:

And I believe our sorrow was the more intense because nobody else seemed to share it. . . . We listened for the one who would say, ‘Poor little girl,’ or, ‘Poor baby,’ but there was only head-wagging where those words should have been. . . . More strongly than my fondness for Pecola, I felt a need for someone to want the black baby to live—just to counteract the universal love of white baby

dolls, Shirley Temples, and Maureen Peals. (190)

The jeremiadic voice of The Bluest Eye functions to bring this situation or predicament to light, repeatedly declaring that the valuation of white over black requires relentless endorsement. The subjection of African Americans to this system does not, as Claudia muses at one point, emanate from “a metaphysical condition” (17); it is linked, rather, to the absence of skepticism or contention. By questioning the “secret” or “the *Thing*” that produces worth and rank as correlatives of whiteness, the text exposes this absence, makes it painfully tangible and visible (74).⁷

Claudia’s tale asks how it is possible that the destruction of a plastic doll elicits more sorrow and outrage than the destruction of a black child and her baby. It poises the bemused gossip surrounding Pecola and the “baby everybody wanted dead” against the lamentation for the “blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll” (190, 20) which Claudia tears apart:

‘You-don’t-know-how-to-take-care-of-nothing. I never-had-a-baby-doll-in-my-whole-life-and-used-to-cry-my-eyes-out-for-them. Now-you-got-one-a-beautiful-one-and-you-tear-it-up-what’s-the-matter-with-you?’
How strong was their outrage. Tears threatened to erase the aloofness of their authority. The emotion of unfulfilled longing preened in their voices. (21)

If a white doll represents an ideal of beauty and worth, then a black child, Claudia gradually realizes, appears to represent something far from it. Her childhood experiences indicate how abstract concepts—like beauty, wealth, Hollywood love—inhere in and perpetuate the superiority of one race over another. As Rafael Perez-Torres writes in his essay on The Bluest Eye, “the novel . . . scrutinizes how white most often is considered not a racial category in the text (or in our society) but, rather, a nonrace, a norm, a universal standard. White in The Bluest Eye is not a race but an ideal” (Perez-Torres 24).⁸ The text then associates the pressure to emulate and fetishize the idealized race with the demand for a scapegoat who can secure, at the very least, the “line between the colored and the nigger” (BE 87). Like Pynchon’s V. and Faulkner’s Caddy, Morrison’s Pecola is forced to assume what her world refuses to acknowledge in itself: its own self-destructiveness and sense of deficiency. Thus Claudia grimly remarks: “Her simplicity

decorated us, her guilt sanctified us, her pain made us glow with health, her awkwardness made us think we had a sense of humor. . . . Even her waking dreams we used—to silence our own nightmares” (205). Furthermore, at the same time that Pecola’s ordeal broadly emblemizes black self-hatred within a white world, it also spotlights the historical, racist alignment of black women with illicit sexuality. For instance, in an effort to distance themselves from Pecola, the women in her community suggest that Pecola invited the assault:

‘Well, they ought to take her out of school.’
 ‘Ought to. She carry some of the blame.’
 ‘Oh, come on. She ain’t but twelve or so.’
 ‘Yeah. But you never know. How come she didn’t fight him?’
 (189)

These words subtly disclose the persistent standard of white womanhood against which black women find themselves defined—and because of which they spend their lives suffocating their “Funk”:

Wherever it erupts, this Funk, they wipe it away; where it crusts, they dissolve it; wherever it drips, flows, or clings, they find it and fight it until it dies. They fight this battle all the way to the grave. . . . They hold their behind in for fear of a sway too free; when they wear lipstick, they never cover the entire mouth for fear of lips too thick, and they worry, worry, worry about the edges of their hair. (83)⁹

Ultimately, Pecola becomes a kind of scapegoat of scapegoats, sacrificed to the stereotypical image of the black woman’s wild sexuality.

In Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Novelist,

Hazel Carby traces this stereotype to the codes of sexuality that consolidated around the figures of the slave and the mistress in the nineteenth century:

Black womanhood was polarized against white womanhood in the structure of the metaphoric system of female sexuality, particularly through the association of black women with overt sexuality and taboo sexual practices. . . . The links between black women and illicit sexuality that consolidated during the antebellum years had powerful ideological consequences for the next hundred and fifty years. (32)

Carby’s historical research addresses the myth that black slaves willingly submitted to sexual aggression and that their very ability to survive rape and degradation gave evidence

of an impure nature. "True heroines died," she caustically explains (34). If the cult of virginal purity demanded the repression and idealization of white female sexuality, then it also required a scapegoat to take on sexuality's corporeal manifestation and expression. This divisive ideology of womanhood found this scapegoat in the figure of the "negress," the image of the lascivious, beckoning and utterly physical black woman. The injurious impact of the "negress" upon black women persisted into the twentieth century and occurred as "the pressure to conform to the circumscribed limits of the ideology of true womanhood" (100). Working against this pressure, black women writers, as Carby explains, struggled (and continue to struggle) to expose the ways in which "reality was at odds with the image" (23).

The Bluest Eye both appeals to the circumstances that give rise to a scapegoat and sharply illustrates that the black community's distance from Pecola is merely a "fantasy of . . . strength" (205). The ideology of "true womanhood," to borrow Carby's terminology, splits apart the women in The Bluest Eye (as it does in Absalom, Absalom!), exiling the three prostitutes from the community, creating a hierarchy between light and dark-skinned black women, and setting up marriage as the only viably honest existence outside of virginity. In the eyes of the novel's "uplifted" women, Pecola is a "nasty black bitch" because her vulnerability and poverty reflects back upon them (92). The community splinters, stratifying itself according to the standards and echelons established by white America. And, a collective forgetting accompanies this fragmentation; the historical background of black subjugation to white rules slips away. Subtle yet pointed allusions to the Emancipation Proclamation, the underground railroad, the "backdoor," lynching, Jim Crow, and the diaspora all recall the seemingly-forgotten fact of slavery. Reaching back into her memories, Claudia thus envelops her story in a larger sense of the past.

The historical threads of Claudia's narrative also invoke a kind of Faulknerian "might-have-been" for her community and glimpse a way out of her gloomy conclusion, "it doesn't matter. It's too late" (206). The past holds some of the answers, but it does not carve one, singular path into the present. Although "it's too late" for Pecola, it is not for Claudia. Organizing her narrative around the seasons, and pulling past and present together, Claudia sets the pessimistic "it's too late" against cyclical rhythms. Conjuring her

childhood as a source of power, Claudia recalls that she and Frieda once “felt comfortable in our skins, enjoyed the news that our senses released to us, admired our dirt, cultivated our scars, and could not comprehend this unworthiness” (74). The gently parodic scene in which Frieda describes her experience at the hands of Mr. Henry reveals a time before destructive systems of thought invade the girls’ minds:

‘He touched me.’
 ‘Where?’
 ‘Here and here.’ She pointed to the tiny breasts that, like two fallen acorns, scattered a few faded rose leaves on her dress.
 . . .
 ‘Why are you crying?’
 ‘I don’t want to be *ruined!*’
 ‘What’s ruined?’
 ‘You know. Like Maginot Line. She’s ruined. Mama said so.’ The tears came back.
 An image of Frieda, big and fat, came to mind. Her thin legs swollen, her face surrounded by layers of rouged skin. I too begin to feel tears.
 ‘But, Frieda, you could exercise and not eat.’
 She shrugged. (BE 100-101)

The idea of being “*ruined!*” (Morrison’s italics) carries little significance in an abstract sense for Claudia and Frieda. It is meaningful to them only insofar as it is a tangible, physical reality. And, unlike the accepted conceptualization of it, the condition of being ruined as the girls see it is not irrevocable, not necessarily a line back over which one cannot cross. This redefinition of “ruined” in a way functions to unsettle the larger idea that events in the past irreparably destroy the promise of the present. The text combines loss and promise, and places them, moreover, in the figure of the girl and in what Claudia’s memory constructs as girlhood.

The Bluest Eye envisions girlhood as a time of possibility and flexibility, as a promising moment before or beyond externally imposed codes. It is a season of physical sensation and bodily exuberance in which stuff like blood, puke, snot and toe jam become fascinating objects of contemplation. Before the world of shame and vigorous self-control conscripts them, the girls view the products of their bodies as mysteriously “neat and nasty at the same time” (11). Cleanliness is “unimaginative” because a dirty body gives evidence of the day’s experiences (22). Without a doubt, The Bluest Eye persistently calls attention

to the scars, odors, slop, tears, dampness and bruises produced and incurred by the body. Each mark, scent and liquid partakes in the “flux and anticipation” which moves, invisibly, beneath the children’s skin— the “static and dread” of the “blackness” shaping their identity in white people’s eyes (49). From the girls’ points of view, they are not simply black and female, but figures of sense, sound, movement and rest.

Claudia’s description of the best Christmas present involves, for example the engagement of all her senses:

I did not want to have anything to own, or to possess any object. I wanted rather to feel something on Christmas day. The real question would have been, ‘Dear Claudia, what experience would you like on Christmas?’ I could have spoken up, ‘I want to sit on the low stool in Big Mama’s kitchen with my lap full of lilacs and listen to Big Papa play his violin for me alone.’ The lowness of the stool made for my body, the security and warmth of Big Mama’s kitchen, the smell of the lilacs, the sound of the music, and . . . the taste of a peach, perhaps, afterward. (22)

She recollects her girlhood as a time of “Becoming” and transformations (138). “We always responded to the change in weather,” she remarks, “the most minute shifts in time of day. Long before seeds were stirring, Frieda and I were scruffing and poking at the earth, swallowing air, drinking rain. . . .” (64). In her memory, even abstract emotions like love become palpable: “Love, thick and dark as Alaga syrup. . . . I could smell it— taste it” (12). As Susan Willis writes in “Eruptions of Funk: Historicizing Toni Morrison,” Claudia’s unrepressed childhood constitutes a “mode of existence prior to assimilation by bourgeois society. . . . The retrieval of sensuality allows an alternative social mode and historical period to be envisioned” (Willis 267-268).

The emphasis in The Bluest Eye upon the concept of “becoming” and the significance of sensation effects a reconceptualization of the body from a definable, simply functional totality to a kind of vibration or threshold. By locating this vision in the figure of the girl, the text raises an interesting comparison with A Thousand Plateaus. In this philosophical study or “effort to construct a smooth space of thought,” as translator Brian Massumi describes it, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari envision the body, not as an organism or organized system defined primarily by sexuality but as a smooth connection among intensities, becomings and flows (xiii). They announce, moreover, that “the girl” is

the first “Body without Organs”—the “circuit of intensities” beyond the duality of the sexes and energized by the possibilities inherent in “becoming-woman” (Deleuze and Guattari 157).¹⁰ In Chapter Six, they ask: “how do you make yourself a body without organs?” (150). The answer, unfolded throughout the subsequent four hundred pages, includes thinking in terms of plateaus, metamorphoses and “lines of flight.” The State, with all of its classifications and substrata, however, persistently works against this corporeal “nomadism.” And the first body it attempts to “rob” belongs to the girl:

The question is not, or not only, that of the organism, history, and the subject of enunciation that oppose masculine to feminine in the great dualism machines. The question is fundamentally that of the body—the body they *steal* from us in order to fabricate opposable organisms. The body is stolen first from the girl. . . . The girl’s becoming is stolen first, in order to impose a history, or prehistory, upon her. The boy’s turn comes next, but it is by using the girl as an example, by pointing to the girl as an object of his desire, that an opposed organism, a dominant history is fabricated for him too.
(276)

As a result, the promise inherent in “becoming-woman” is circumscribed; instead of entailing constant redefinition and a never-arriving limit, womanhood becomes a pole fixed in service of the dominant ideology.

In their criticism of this ideology, Deleuze and Guattari turn to the example of America and its history of racism. With characteristic boldness, they explain:

It is true that it has been said of blacks through the ages that ‘they don’t work, they don’t know what work is.’ It is true that they were forced to work, and to work more than anyone else, in terms of abstract quantity. It also seems to be true that the Indians had no understanding of, and were unsuited for any organization of work, even slavery: the Americans apparently imported so many blacks only because they could not use the Indians, who would rather die.
(491)

The so-called primitive societies of Indians and Africans are not “societies of sloth” but of nomadic possibilities in “smooth space” (491). According to Deleuze and Guattari, one of the “fundamental tasks of the State is to striate the space over which it reigns. . . . It is a vital concern of every State not only to vanquish nomadism but to control migrations . . . [and to] capture flows of all kinds” (385-386). Within the nomadic societies that intrinsically challenge the State, the female body represents the most threatening instance of

flow. It must be harnessed for the purposes of filiation and alliances. “Becoming-woman,” then, does not entail “imitating or assuming the female form, but emitting particles that enter the relation of movement and rest” (275). The “curse” associated with her sexuality can be translated into a kind of sorcery; and this sorcery in turn transforms alliances into assemblages “that are neither those of the family nor of religion nor of the State” (245-247).

According to Elizabeth Grosz in Volatile Bodies, Deleuze and Guattari’s theory of the body as a series of processes, substances and energies “may be of great value to feminists attempting to reconceive bodies outside the binary oppositions imposed on the body by the mind/body, nature/culture . . . oppositions. They provide an altogether different way of understanding the body in its connections with other bodies” (Grosz 164). Becoming-woman and the Body without Organs anticipate escape from the systems of oppositions that “privilege men at the expense of women”; as horizons of intensities and flows, they gesture toward a destructuring of both male and female sexuality (177). For Grosz, A Thousand Plateaus offers a powerfully reconfigured ontology, the value of which lies in the conceptualization of both the body and desire. Doing away with “lack” and the language of the phallus in which it occurs, Deleuze and Guattari assert that there is no rift between the conscious mind and the unconscious. Desire emerges as a “plane of consistency . . . a process of production without reference to any exterior agency, whether it be a lack that hollows it out or a pleasure that fills it” (Deleuze and Guattari 154). Consequently, the body, redefined as a “desiring machine,” eludes the implicitly masculine standard of identity and its corresponding value of unity or oneness.

In The Bluest Eye, a text which Morrison describes as “pressing for a female expressiveness,” Claudia’s narrative tries to dissolve the process of sedimentation that underwrites womanhood, particularly black womanhood (BE 215); it also extends a trope that does not uphold the implicitly hierarchical oppositions advanced “by the great dominations,” as Grosz puts it, of white to black, ideal to real, male to female (Grosz 170). Thus when Pecola gets her first period, menstruation enters the text to signal the throbbing potential, the undeniable flow, of a girl’s body. “Here was something important,” Claudia remarks, “that night, in bed, the three of us lay still. We were full of awe and respect for

Pecola" (BE 29, 32). Although Claudia, at nine years old, does not know what it means, she understands it in terms of something "real" and perhaps sacred: "Lying next to a real person who was really ministratin' was somehow sacred" (31). The menstruating Pecola, in bed with Claudia and Frieda, directly contrasts the "patently aggressive sleeping companion" of the plastic doll (20). While blood gushes from one, sawdust spills from the other. The opposition between menstrual blood and sawdust extends Claudia's experience of astonishment by the investment of abstract, fraudulent value in the doll and by the insignificance surrounding Pecola. Pecola's blood gives evidence of substance and of a kind of real value intrinsic to her body; it is something tangible, staining the white steps and Pecola's dress "brownish-red" and signalling her newly-acquired power to "have a baby" (27, 28). It connects Pecola with the black women who "had been young once" and whose life-cycle the text describes in terms of "cut umbilical cords" and "cleaned up . . . blood" (138-139).

Menstrual blood also establishes a link between Pecola and Maureen Peal, banishing race to the realm of abstractions and arbitrary divisions. Menstruation has nothing to do with skin color; it takes place in both the adored, light-skinned Maureen Peal and the reviled Pecola:

'Do you, yet?'
 'Yes.'" Pecola glanced at us.
 'So do I.' Maureen made no attempt to disguise her pride. 'Two months ago I started. My girl friend in Toledo, where we lived before, said when she started she was scared to death. Thought she had killed herself.' (70)

The experience of bleeding, of being "scared to death" and emerging out of it, becomes a shared event and a story passed from one girl to another. Although their knowledge of menstruation is limited, the girls offer each other whatever information they have. The lines of color and class momentarily disintegrate in a dialogue about menstruation. Bleeding and speaking provide a magical medium, healing the space between socially polarized children. Spared the predominant definition of menstruation as a filthy, shameful process, they correlate it with love, pride, "awe and respect" (32). With Frieda's exclamation, "'Oh. Lordy! I know. I know what that is! . . . That's ministratin'!" (27), the knowledge of it becomes endlessly exciting. The girls view it as a source of wisdom or

realm of knowing into which they all enter at some point in their lives. As Donna Wilshire writes about the link between menstruation and wisdom, “woman’s blood . . . concerns an information-gathering method that is opposite of conscious control, that is, with allowing, with letting-be—something women experience in the ‘periods’ that come on them and that has little or no parallel in the lives of men” (Wilshire 108).

In “The Uses of Myth, Image, and the Female Body in Re-Visioning Knowledge,” Wilshire proposes an epistemology of menstruation. She argues that “the myths tell an interesting story” of a time when women’s bodies provided the archetypes of knowledge and consciousness. Before the Western traditions of science and philosophy—“symbolized by Apollo”—split the mind from the body in the search for truth, “our myth-making ancestors” proceeded toward knowledge through the “minding body” (106, 92). The ancient female divinities, both in their menstrual and maternal aspects, represented “a way of seeing that acknowledged women as beings with innate powers of knowing to be reckoned with” (107). Blood was crucial to knowing about and calculating the cycles of life and kinship, both cosmic and human. In the ancient world, “women’s blood and women’s bodies were witnessed as knowing, as actually being connected to the most mysterious, cycling, life-giving powers of the cosmos. The first human calendars were lunar, and they unambiguously related women’s menstrual periods to the moon’s periods” (107).

This vast iconographic world may have been overthrown, but residues of it remained and carried over into new systems of belief and thought. For instance, as Wilshire claims, the severed and bleeding Gorgon’s head that hangs from the chest of Athena, Greek goddess of wisdom, occurs as a reminder that a bleeding woman once symbolized wisdom itself. Furthermore, a snake, ancient symbol of both oracular and menstrual powers, wraps itself around Athena’s legs (108). Wilshire continues:

Before a certain time in the myths female blood sanctified the soil, symbolized cosmic fertility and kinship. Then suddenly the stories no longer speak of sacred female womb-blood; suddenly the sacred genital blood of castrated males like Dionysus is spilled to renew the soil. . . . And the spill of woman’s wise sacred womb-blood? It and the Gorgon became the Curse. (108)

Exiling women from the realms of mind and reason, Western thinkers like Aristotle

developed extensive theories about menstruation and women's essentially material being. For Wilshire, the project of redeeming menstrual blood involves recalling its association with knowledge; a menstrual epistemology entails "allowing" a different kind of wisdom. In other words, the body itself yields and generates sources of information; knowledge is, as she puts it, "'down inside' (not just 'out there')" (108).

This process of privileging what is "out there" over the "down inside" occurs throughout The Bluest Eye, and the girls' correlation between menstruation and knowledge is almost as short-lived as the friendship between Maureen and Pecola. When girls become women in The Bluest Eye, they learn to exchange reverence for humiliation. It is "adjustment without improvement" (BE 23). The novel delineates black womanhood primarily as a state of self-loathing; the transition into womanhood accompanies the transition into dominant social codes. Defined by these codes, female bodies are no longer, as Morrison writes, "earthshaking depositories of information" but sources of disgust (214). For instance, emulating the white actresses of the silver screen—who, captured in the glow of the bright lights, are all surface and no substance—black women in the novel become obsessed with projecting a fabricated image of themselves. They pour themselves into a preestablished mold and learn "how to behave . . . how to get rid of the funkiness" (83). The loss of the past, of the context which makes sense of their lives, and of girlhood, all rob black women of the possibilities inherent in their physical presence in the world. Succumbing to notions of romantic love and to Christian spirituality (pictures of Jesus or the "doe-eyed Virgin Mary" hang on the walls of black people's homes), they repudiate bodily memories and sensations (48). The women learn to mask their odours with vanilla and violet water; they express shock for the kind of man who wants "a woman to smell like a woman" (13). And they feel particularly ashamed of the dampness "between [their] legs" (84). The "funk" they get rid of is the experience of liquidity, of existing as a kind of fluid extension of the world. While girlhood involves the processes of becoming and flowing, womanhood implies stiffness and solidity. As Claudia remarks about Pauline, "In equating physical beauty with virtue, she stripped her mind, bound it, and collected self-contempt by the heap. She forgot lust and simple caring for" (122).

Pauline recalls her own girlhood as a time when sexual pleasure felt like the stains

of berries: "I could feel that purple deep inside me. And that streak of green them june bugs made. . . . All of them colors was in me" (115). She takes these colors and invokes an ancient symbol of menstruation—the rainbow—to describe her orgasms. Every color in her mind's eye combine during sex and, as she says, "run sweet in me. . . . And it be a rainbow all inside" (131). Although as a woman Pauline gives herself over to the Christian God, she muses that she misses "that rainbow" (131). As Susan Willis writes, the "trickle and flow" of Pauline's orgasm is a "distant memory"; "At a sexual level, alienation is the denial of the body" (Willis 263, 266). Pauline grows up to embrace whiteness and loses the iridescence of the rainbow. Like the misanthropist Soaphead Church, whose story seems to emblematically distil or extend the novel's position against all that is abstract and intangible, she learns to abhor "flesh on flesh . . . [and] all the natural excretions and protections the body was capable of" (166). When she strikes Pecola for spilling berry juice and making a mess, Pauline gives evidence of the extent to which she is alienated from both her daughter and herself.

Menstruation nonetheless emerges in The Bluest Eye as a cyclical reminder of the body's passions and perceptions. Its recurrence every month signals a link between past and present. The "little-girl-gone-to-woman pants," as Claudia terms Pecola's blood-stained underwear, appears to capture the connection between the two phases of female sexuality (31). Blood holds them together in its liquid solution. Furthermore, through the image of a shifting maxi-pad, Claudia imagines pleasure revitalized for the black housewife who relinquishes the sensations of her body along with her virginity:

It moved gently between her legs as she walked. Gently, ever so gently. And then a slight and distinctly delicious sensation collected in her crotch. As the delight grew, she had to stop in the street, hold her thighs together to contain it. That must be what it is like, she thinks, but it never happens when he [her husband] is inside her. (85)

Her period occurs as a momentary union with her own body. When the text thus celebrates black womanhood, it conjures scent, sound and touch: "the odor of their armpits . . . a lovely musk. Their laughter . . . more touch than sound" (138). Old age becomes a season of looking back on "lust and lactation, tears and terror" (139). If, as Elizabeth Hayes maintains, the Persephone myth underwrites The Bluest Eye, then the text subtly

envisions cohesion among the figures of the daughter, mother, and crone.¹¹

Throughout The Bluest Eye, a prevailing message rings loud and clear: the bodies of African Americans were once violently stolen and enslaved, and, while the system of slavery may no longer exist, its racist ideology prevails. This ideology functions like a substance that seeps into and poisons the African American communities with self-hatred and amnesia. It “takes root,” as Morrison explains in the Afterword. The text then constructs Pecola as a kind of flower—and flow-er—whose growth and potential beauty stand little chance in American soil.¹² She sees herself at one point as a dandelion and at another finds herself mesmerized by “deep red flowers in [a] rug” (48, 89). Relating to the flowers, she feels “part of the world, and the world a part of her” (48). Yet, when Claudia and Frieda, who also celebrate Pecola as a flower, attempt to save her and her unborn child by planting marigolds and uttering a magic spell, they fail. “*It never occurred to either of us,*” Claudia states at the beginning of her tale, “*that the earth itself might have been unyielding. We had dropped our seeds in our own little plot of black dirt just as Pecola’s father had dropped his seeds in his own plot of black dirt. . . . The seeds shrivelled and died; her baby too*” (7 Morrison’s italics).

As girls, free for a moment of the codes the adult world obeys, Claudia and Frieda find themselves alone in their desire to have Pecola survive. Pecola’s chances may be slim, but they exist. If she resembles a flower, she is supple and will perhaps “bend into a complete circle, but not break” (97). The first one to menstruate, she is magical to them, and they believe that their own magic and marigold seeds will save her. Here, The Bluest Eye invokes the long tradition of aligning menstruating females with flowers, soil and magical charms. As Heinrich von Staden illustrates in his extraordinary article “Women and Dirt,” the “ascription of magical powers to menstruating women or to menstrual blood” consistently accompanies similar ascriptions to plants and dirt in a medical tradition that stems from ancient Greek and Roman thought (von Staden 14). Throughout the medical documents of the ancient world, flowers, soil and menstrual blood are said to have “considerable agricultural and medicinal power” (14). The same things that can poison or pollute can also heal and purify. Von Staden continues:

It should not be overlooked that some of the very words used of ritual purification from pollution—*katharsis*, *kathairo*, and their cognates—are used extensively as early as Hippocratic writings to refer to menstruation. . . . Women might have a special potential for ritual purity and hence, for example, for prophecy . . . but all these considerations suggest that they also have a constant susceptibility to impurity. (15)

From this point, von Staden traces the relationship among the laurel plant, women, prophecy and healing. Like the scapegoat, or *pharmakos*, the prophetess of ancient Greece both purifies and “entails susceptibility to impurity” (19). Her power lies in the homeopathic ability to draw impurities to herself. And, before uttering a prophecy, she “chews laurel or is fumigated with laurel” (19).

When Claudia and Frieda plant their seeds and “say the magic words,” they appear to conjure an ancient agricultural ritual and attempt to transmute Pecola from the scapegoat of their community into a figure of “miracle” (192). In the novel’s Afterword, Morrison writes: “The novel tried to hit a raw nerve of racial self-contempt, expose it, then soothe it not with narcotics but with language” (211). The story itself, with Pecola at its center, becomes a kind of drug, distilling menstruation and girlhood into tropes that provide the possibility of healing a community divided against itself. Pecola’s bleeding body, like Caddy Compson’s or Oedipa Maas’s, is a delicate emblem of a self in flux to which Claudia’s memories consistently return. In the process of recollection, Pecola transforms into a flower.

The flower is extended as an image of hope or as a kind of remedy. It constitutes a fragile gesture situated within circles and circles of destruction. At the same time that Pecola’s destruction is intimately related to the “destabilization of seasonal flora,” it is related to the Autumn of 1941 (214). Pecola’s desire for blue eyes, for “the bluest eyes,” ominously doubles the emulation of such features on another continent. Like Pynchon and Faulkner, Morrison sets her story in the larger devastation of a world at war:

the ‘fall’ of 1941, just before the declaration of war [for the United States], has a ‘closet innuendo. In the temperate zone where there is a season known as ‘fall’ during which one expects marigolds to be at their peak, in the months before the beginning of U.S. participation in World War II, something grim is about to be divulged. (213)

The promising blood of Pecola's body is set against the massive blood letting of the Second World War, and the ideology that destroys a little girl also tears apart the world. The flowers do not grow because something goes wrong on a cosmic scale. Ultimately, the jeremiadic admonishment embedded in Claudia's tale combines the betrayal of Pecola with the "fall" of the United States for involving and implicating itself in the treacherous violence of war. By invoking the double sense of the word "fall," Morrison draws upon biblical typology and addresses the myth of the American Eden. Pecola, a metaphoric marigold in "her tendril, sap green days," is destroyed in the garden of the New World (205); whatever so-called promises it holds are denied to her. And, as this garden transforms into what Deleuze and Guattari would call a "war machine," the destructiveness extends outward and the "fall" of America from its presumed innocence is marked in spilled blood.

II. The Gravel-Sprinkled and Flowering Voice of Song of Solomon

The earth is soggy with black people's blood.
(Song of Solomon 158)

I *am* black, but comely, O ye daughters of Jerusalem, as the tents of Ké-dar, as the curtains of Solomon.
(The Song of Solomon 1:5)

I would lead thee, *and* bring thee into my mother's house, *who* would instruct me: I would cause thee to drink of spiced wine of the juice of my pomegranate.
(The Song of Solomon 8:2)

Morrison's Song of Solomon, at once a genealogical quest and, as Marianne Hirsch puts it, a challenge to the "mythos of the patriarchal Oedipal family," unfolds the story of the Dead family and their ancestry (Hirsch 70). The key to the mystery of their heritage and bloodlines appears near the end of the novel in a children's song about "Jake the only son of Solomon" (§§ 303). This mystery asserts itself in the opening pages when, among falling velvet rose-petals, Pilate's "powerful contralto" delivers a verse that accompanies Milkman's imminent birth and the moment's strange array of events:

*O Sugarman done fly away
Sugarman done gone
Sugarman cut across the sky
Sugarman gone home. . . .* (6 Morrison's italics)

The song also closes the novel, or brings it full circle. Just before she bleeds to death, Pilate asks Milkman to sing "a little somethin for me" (336). Performing a riff on Pilate's song, Milkman shifts "sugarman" to "sugargirl" and places her in Solomon's legendary position. As blood bubbles from Pilate's mouth, a song recalling her lineage, voice and wisdom issues from Milkman's. Childbirth and death, past and present, legend and history converge in the melody that ushers both Milkman and Pilate into and out of life.

In A World of Difference Wendy Harding and Jacky Martin claim that the song is a "meta-narrative metaphor of the novel itself" (160). Both an individual and social form of expression, it blends together "singular experience and collective lore" (99). Like the

novel, it creates a communal voice. For Kimberly Benston, the song and its singers symbolize the “ensemble performance of black historicity” (Benston 102). Integrating what is known, remembered, discerned and suspected, the singers register and bequeath their African ancestry, history of slavery and struggle for freedom. Their voices keep alive the legends of Solomon and Jake who each, in their own way, challenged the shackles of slavery. In the absence of a written record for either event, the act of singing in Song of Solomon attests to the significance of oral histories and to the spoken or sung names that “bear witness” to the past (SS 330).

As Benston beautifully puts it, singing involves a “making present of the past” and of “the mother supposedly lost” to forgetfulness (Benston 105). Because the song of Solomon raises the question that Sweet poses to Milkman, ““who’d he leave behind?”” (SS 328), it equivocates the celebration of flight and the father’s ability to soar.

*Jake the only son of Solomon
Come booba yalle, come booba tambee
Whirled about and touched the sun
Come konka yalle, come konka tambee
...
O Solomon don't leave me here
Cotton balls to choke me
O Solomon don't leave me here
Bukra's arms to yoke me. (303)*

Not only do the lyrics commemorate Solomon and Jake, but they also recognize Ryna, Solomon’s abandoned wife, and Singing Bird, Jake’s wife who dies in childbirth. While the former woman emerges as the voice behind the refrain, “*O Solomon don’t leave me here,*” the latter emanates from Jake’s otherworldly cry and command, “Sing” (303). Milkman’s elated discovery that his ““great-granddaddy . . . sailed on off like a black eagle”” singles out one part of the story. His reiteration of the song’s last verse, “*Solomon done fly*” omits the preceding lines and distorts the meaning of the song; it makes the flying father more historically significant or relevant than the weeping mother and her children. Failing to realize that the song is as much about Ryna’s suffering and abandonment as it is about Solomon’s daring feat, Milkman incorporates a crudely misogynist (albeit idiomatic) and inadvertently pertinent adjective into his announcement that he belongs to “That tribe. That flyin motherfuckin tribe” (328). As Jill Matus writes of the trauma that exists on the

other side of celebration in Song of Solomon. "For every joyous escape, every transcendent flyer, there is a grounded wife and mother. . . . The quintessential 'blue note' in the Solomon myth is Ryna. . . . Ryna and her children [are] the price of Solomon's triumphant flight" (Matus 78).¹³

In the course of his search for gold—the "fetish of paternity," as Kimberly Benston reminds us—Milkman develops the desire to know his father's name. He also stumbles across the women tied to this genealogy. Benston argues that Milkman's quest diverges from the typically "Western phallogentric journey of maturation" in which women occur as obstacles and snares along the way; rather, it "writes through the odyssean idiom" and endorses, not the vanquishment of women, but "surrender" to them (Benston 95, 100).¹⁴ When Milkman shifts the object of his quest from gold to knowledge, he must then learn to listen, not only to the singing children but also to the women who, at every stage in his quest, provide him with clues to his past. Circe, for instance, discloses his grandfather's name, and Susan Byrd provides him with the names of his grandmother and great-grandmother. In Benston's words, the women offer information as a gift of "epiphanic historicity" (102). Moreover, both Circe and Susan Byrd secure interpretation as an indispensable extension of listening. When Milkman misunderstands Circe's narrative, she announces that he does not "listen to people"—"Your ear is on your head," she tells him, "but it is not connected to your brain" (§§ 247). She simultaneously illuminates his deficient capacity for sympathy and implies that her story contains more than straightforward information. Repeating the words "hear me," Circe exclaims:

'Do you hear me? She saw the work I did all her days and *died*, you hear me, *died* rather than live like me. Now what do you suppose she thought I was! If the way I lived and the work I did was so hateful to her she killed herself to keep from having to do it, and you think I stay on here because I loved her, then you have about as much sense as a fart!' (247)

Susan Byrd also inflects her tale with connotative possibilities. She first gives Milkman the accepted notion that Ryna and women like her "couldn't live without a particular man" (303). She then raises an alternative likelihood: "'But I always thought it was trying to take care of children by themselves, you know what I mean?'" (323). This speculation appears

to sink in; after Milkman decodes the song and discovers his paternal line, he pauses for a brief moment and reflects upon his mother's life:

His mother's quiet, crooked, apologetic smile. Her hopeless helplessness in the kitchen. The best years of her life, from age twenty to forty, had been celibate. . . . He hadn't thought much of it when she'd told him, but now it seemed to him that such sexual deprivation would affect her, hurt her in precisely the way it would affect and hurt him. . . . What might she have been like had her husband loved her? (300)

For the first time, Milkman sees his mother apart from her maternal role toward him and understands her life in relation to the severity of his father's rules.¹⁵ He realizes too that he conducts his own life according to the refrain, "I am not responsible" (277).

Jill Matus opens her analysis of Song of Solomon in her book on Morrison by claiming that the "loss of the father" occurs as a central concern of the novel. The quest motif, she says, "is specifically a quest to understand the father's trauma and the genealogy of the paternal line" (Matus 76). According to Matus, Song of Solomon is a novel about fathers and the "law of the father," in which women and mothers "serve, love, wait and suffer abuse or abandonment" (84). If we follow Matus's line of argument, we can interpret the novel in terms of a dialogue with the themes and concerns of the Old Testament. Certainly, Song of Solomon engages the recognizably Old Testament matters of patriarchal law, genealogy, and exile; it also raises and questions the concept of justice, particularly the kind of justice that functions through vengeance. The text places this delineation of justice, furthermore, in a strictly masculine realm. The all-male organization of the Seven Days, modelling itself in antithesis to the seven days of creation, focuses upon balancing "the numbers" of the living and the dead (§§ 155).

Although Matus locates a "narratorial judgment on the eye-for-an-eye policy" articulated by Guitar and the Seven Days, the text appears to lend Guitar's words a share of credibility. He says:

There is a society. It's made up of a few men who are willing to take some risks. . . . When a Negro child, Negro woman, or Negro man is killed by whites and nothing is done about it by *their* law and *their* courts, this society selects a similar victim at random. . . . It doesn't matter who did it. Each and every one of them could do it. So you get any one of them. There are no innocent white people,

because every one of them is a potential nigger-killer, if not an actual one. You think Hitler surprised them? . . . Hitler's the most natural white man in the world. (154-155)

In the absence of justice for African Americans, the Seven Days create their own. Guitar's frantic questions, "Where's the money, the state, the country to finance our justice? Do we have a court?" (160), undeniably strike a chord. His remark about the "potential nigger-killer" in white people pinpoints the failure of responsibility of white America to rectify or dispute the wrongs committed against black Americans. One of the objectives of the Seven Days involves forcing the possibility of responsibility. As Guitar says, "It's about trying to make a world where one day white people will think before they lynch" (160).

From a different perspective, Faulkner's Light in August, as I have argued, addresses the legitimized system of lynching and the failure on the part of whites to take responsibility for the racist world they inherit and perpetuate.¹⁶ But Faulkner's text never envisions the possibility of black vengeance. Instead, its white characters ultimately condemn themselves by ascribing to the belief that black people are "cursed" to suffer in America. Light in August raises the imperative that the exigency and enactment of justice lie with the dominant culture. And the text's conceptualization of justice, like Derrida's delineation of it as a "gift" of responsibility rather than a retributive measure, necessitates remembering the past and attempting to redress its wrongs. To heed "the rumbling of ghosts chained to ghosts" is to make room for justice as a "supplementary offering," as a "gift without restitution" extended to the future from the present and past (Specters 5, 25-26). Observing, as Derrida puts it, "a politics of . . . inheritance and of generations,"¹⁷ Light in August raises the ghosts of the Civil War in an attempt to establish a sense of responsibility for the inhuman system of slavery over which the war was fought. Although there are no black ghosts in Light in August, the text presents the conviction, to borrow Pilate's words, that the "dead you kill is yours" (SS 208). And, despite the fact that the white Southerners of Faulkner's world do not mourn the black dead, they remain haunted by a violent and unjust past. As Guitar announces to Milkman, "They [white people] know they are unnatural. Their writers and artists have been saying it for years. Telling them they are unnatural and depraved. . . . The disease they have is in their blood" (157).

In a world where justice seems beyond reach, Guitar is almost right to assert that “there are no innocent people” (159). However, although he communicates a tenable position on the necessity of justice, his logic collapses under its promotion of “Numbers. Balance. Ratio” (158). The inclusion of children in his murderous sweep, moreover, leaves no room for the innocent future they might represent or bring into being. In the end, the system Guitar advocates resembles the one to which Macon Dead subscribes. It relies upon weaponry and profits off war, accomplishing little more than the destruction of life and love.¹⁸ Guitar’s concept of justice simply imitates the horrific actions instituted by white ideology. His allusions to World War Two, Hitler and the concentration camps illuminate his own fanatical anger. When Guitar argues that he commits murder in the name of love—“what else but love?” he asks (223)—he confuses obsessive hatred with love. As Milkman muses at one point, “Guitar . . . had flipped, had ripped open and was spilling blood and foolishness instead of conversation” (165).

Song of Solomon, like Light in August, makes justice a matter of responsibility and generosity. Transferring the search for justice into the hands of black people, the text proposes Guitar’s version and then attempts to communicate justice as a gift of love and responsibility rather than as a method of getting even. Eventually, it is Pilate who becomes the text’s spokesperson for responsibility—for “blood-deep responsibilities” (180). The enactment of Pilate’s concept of responsibility involves the precedence of language and “conversation” over violence and retribution. For example, when Pilate wields a knife against the man who beats Reba, she places the possibility of, or responsibility for, violence in the man’s hands:

Now, I’m not going to kill you, honey. Don’t you worry none. Just be still a minute, the heart’s right here, but I’m not going to stick it in any deeper. . . . And if you’re real still, honey, I can get it back without no mistake. But before I do that, I thought we’d have a little talk. (93-94)

Here, the text does not disqualify the prospect of force, but it shows Pilate searching for an alternative. She appeals not to the villain’s sense of right or wrong but to the fact that she is a mother, “and you know how mamas are, don’t you? You got a mama, ain’t you?” (94). Establishing a bloodline, Pilate secures a compromise and a promise: the man

promises never to beat Reba again, and Pilate withdraws the knife.¹⁹ Pilate's action combines justice, responsibility and love and, although it involves the possibility of spilled blood, it principally rests upon communication. As such, it contrasts the methods of the Seven Days whose work is done in secrecy and who make their victims no concessions. "We just whisper to them," Guitar says, "'Your Day has come'" (158).

Setting love next to retributive dogma, the text draws upon the Old Testament book from which the novel arguably takes its title.²⁰ In the midst of the Old Testament's litany of the father's law and lineage, the Song of Solomon (or Song of Songs) emerges as a testimony to love. William Phipp's analysis of the Song concludes, for instance, with the words:

The most sensuous book in Scripture and in all the writings of antiquity is the Song of Songs. As a book of religion it is at least as sublime as a number of other biblical books. It tells of the joyfulness and constancy of genuine affection. It glorifies the bond that is sweeter than honey and stronger than a lion. The affirmation 'Love is strong as death' (8:6) is excelled only by the New Testament proclamation that love is even stronger than death. (Phipps 23)

The Song occurs as a brief respite among the Old Testament books' preoccupations with war, revenge and corruption;²¹ it speaks in terms of "we" and "us" and unfolds a quest for the beloved. Rich, sensual images of ointments, flowers and love, each intimately involved in healing and comfort, saturate the verses. The lovers' words, filled with devotion and longing, convey a sense of elation. In addition, women's voices pervade the Song. Phyllis Tribble explains:

Of the three speakers the woman is the most prominent. She opens and closes the entire Song, her voice dominant throughout. By this structural emphasis her equality and mutuality with the man is illuminated. . . . In the Song of Songs, accent upon the female is further increased by the presence of the daughters of Jerusalem. As a foil and complement to the lovers, this group aids the flow of the action. Women, then, are the principal creators of the poetry of eroticism. (Tribble 50)

Tribble also reminds us that the woman is never called a wife and that she is not committed to a maternal role. The Song never once speaks "to the issues of marriage and procreation" (66).

In The Female Questor, Helen Smith compares the Song's symbolic language with traditions and myths that view menstruation as a path to knowledge of the sacred: "The *Song* represents that part of Hebraic culture heavily influenced by its Canaanite, Egyptian and Mesopotamian neighbours in whose myths menstruation and sexuality are a part of a seeker's path to the sacred" (Smith 178).²² Given that the Song's woman is not necessarily celebrated as a wife and mother, it is plausible that she is adored as a woman who menstruates and whose menstrual blood gives evidence of vitality and eroticism rather than straightforward fertility. She resembles the eucharistic, menstruating goddesses like Ishtar and Charis when she offers her lover the "spiced wine of the juice of my pomegranate" (Song 8:2). Her pomegranate also recalls Persephone's distinctive fruit, the eating of which creates the cycles of the seasons and connotes Persephone's first menstruation. Providing evidence of pagan rites, the Song exalts feminine sexual maturation and experience. Furthermore, when Solomon states, "I have drunk my wine with my milk" (5:1), he alludes to the Sumerian myths in which, as Smith tells us, the drinking of wine symbolizes "either male or female sexual fluid, the female fluid in the . . . ceremonies being menstrual" (Smith 185).

Smith focuses upon the images of the fountain, gardens and flowers to support her claim that the Song continuously alludes to menstruation. Both the Old and the New Testaments use "fountain" as a euphemism for menstrual blood. Leviticus, for instance, includes the verse, "And if a man shall lie with a woman having her sickness, and shall uncover her nakedness; he hath discovered her fountain, and she hath uncovered the fountain of her blood" (Leviticus 20:18). A menstrual fountain also occurs in Mark (1:29): "the fountain of her blood was dried up."²³ In the Song of Solomon, however, the fountain emerges not as a euphemism but as an erotic metaphor. Smith writes:

The female voice yearns to have her 'enclosed fountain' released so that her beloved may enter her garden. The suggestion is that her menstrual aspect controls the timing of erotic pleasure as well as that of nature itself. Menstruation acts as the door that will open the depths of [the] garden to her beloved. (Smith 183)

The fountain's liquid feeds the flowers, and this feeding connects with the drinking and eating performed by Solomon and the woman, who is described as a lily of the valley.

While he “feedeth among the lilies,” she tastes the “sweet smelling myrrh” from his lips (Song 4:5, 5:12). Furthermore, the pomegranate juice she offers him comes from her garden—her “well of living waters” (4:15). “Solomon’s Song,” Smith claims, “suggests that menstruation represents a eucharistic connection with the sacred” (Smith 186).

When Milkman meets Pilate in Song of Solomon, he finds her making wine in a house that smells “like pine and fermenting fruit” (SS 39). Although Pilate lives in the rough neck of the woods, in the “‘Blood Bank’ . . . because blood flowed so freely there” (32), she leaves her door unlocked and entreats Milkman to “step right in” (39). Her first gesture of kindness toward Milkman occurs when she offers him an egg. Portraying Pilate as a figure of love and generosity, the text weaves images of wine, food and flowers around her.²⁴ It embeds her in the language of the Song of Solomon. When Pilate describes her brother—the man who deeply mistrusts her and who finds himself repulsed by her “sickening smell”—she emphasizes her gratitude toward him and maintains the bonds of blood. As a sister, she resembles the woman in the biblical Song: “How fair is thy love, my sister, *my spouse*” (Song 4:10). And, as a kind of eternal daughter (haunted by her father) she resembles figures like Persephone—even Faulkner’s Caddy Compson, Rosa Coldfield and Judith Sutpen.²⁵

Powerful figures or symbols of menstruation surround Pilate’s characterization. Not only is she a fluid composite of womanhood, she is also a snake, a witch, a “natural healer” (150) and a Voodoo woman.²⁶ Metamorphic and enchanting, she represents a different way of being in the world. Her absent navel suggests not that she is otherworldly but that, like a plant or flower, she emerges directly from the earth. Her veins flow with blood as well as “palm oil” (149).²⁷ Without a navel, and living in a house that seems to rise from the ground, Pilate is herself a kind of *axis mundi* and she conjures the cyclic self-sufficiency of the earth and its organic life.

In Herbarium Verbarium: The Discourse of Flowers, Claudette Sartillot opens with the assertion, “The traditional link between literature and botany . . . provides a context for examining so-called patriarchal or logocentric representations of the feminine and flowers and for redefining the accepted notion of literary organicism” (Sartillot 1). Invoking the

general association of femininity and flowers through the concept of “defloration,” and providing the examples of Persephone and Eurydice, Sartiliot claims that women and flowers belong to “a world of dissemination, difference and metamorphoses” (2). She proposes a botanical “model of dissemination,” through which language occurs as an “excess of syntax over semantics, a waste, a squandering of seeds (and semes) out of which meaning is eventually gathered” (18). In opposition to the patriarchal order of meaning, Sartiliot seeks to liberate women and flowers from “the surveillance of the sun, the One, and vision” (118). Neither exists simply to be seen. Reintroducing them to the vital domains of metamorphoses and the senses, Sartiliot seeks a “different way of apprehending, of understanding” (123). There are sensual modes of knowledge, existence and expression beyond the masculine realm of vision.

Sartiliot’s extraordinary book ranges through Greek mythology, Rilke’s poetry, and contemporary French philosophy. Drawing upon Derrida’s *Glas*, Sartiliot investigates the arbitrary association between flowers and their meaning and, in turn, links flowers to writing: the herbarium to the verbarium. She says that writing, like a meadow, is a “potentially dangerous place”—and like flowers, it reveals the “nonteleological relationship between signifier and signified” (85, 27). To further elucidate the relationship between the botanical and the linguistic, Sartiliot cites the “‘roots’ and ‘stems’ of words, the ‘flowers of rhetoric’” (34). And, bringing together linguistic metaphor and botanical metamorphosis, she writes: “Metaphor and metamorphosis are thus not disguises; on the contrary, they are what unveils the invisible truth that was always there but did not reveal itself. . . . They reveal the hidden presence of the other in the self” (59). This “hidden presence” is intimately tied to both the earth and death—to a kind of silent underworld that makes transformation and regeneration possible. In their process of metamorphosis, flowers emerge out of and return to the earth, equivocating the line between life and death. If the ancient myths of Demeter, Persephone, Hecate and Eurydice relate women to flowers, they also articulate a “feminine closeness” to death and to the earth (128).

According to Sartiliot, this “closeness” recalls women’s long-forgotten, mythic power. Turning to the work of H  l  ne Cixous, she expands this claim:

In order to understand this complex relationship between the mother

(earth), the daughter, the flower, and the fruit, we turn to Illa, a work in which Cixous rewrites the pre-Hellenic myth of Demeter and Persephone-Kore, the mother & the daughter, the earth & its seed [sic]. What interests Cixous about the myth of Demeter and Persephone is that it displays the kind of feminine closeness to the earth prior to the fall into the masculine world of vision. This rewriting also allows Cixous to concentrate on the attachment between the mother and daughter—usually left out of the masculine psychoanalytic and philosophic discourse—and more generally to reestablish the link between human beings and the outside world (of plants)—a link cut at least since Descartes. Against the myth of Oedipus, chosen by Freud, which privileges the father and the son and leads to concepts of separation, struggle, and death, the myth of Demeter and Persephone dramatizes feminine love and *jouissance* and the sensual connectedness of women. (128-129)

Sartiliot's analysis here gives rise to her assertion of a language of the female body, "which speaks of the earth, of love, of the mother" (135). It also speaks of the daughter, the "blood red" fruit of the "mother (earth)" (135, 7). This floral "model of signification" ultimately combines *savoir* with *savourer*, and reintroduces that which has been excluded from knowledge: women, the senses, the underworld and the unconscious (127).

The mother-daughter myth of Persephone and Demeter permeates Song of Solomon and expands the novel's floral and menstrual language. In Song of Solomon, this language is undeniably associated with women and femininity, and it provides an alternative to the codes that secure patriarchal law. Ruth's watermark, for instance, emerges as a trace of the flowers in her past. It reminds her "that she was alive somewhere, inside . . . because a thing she knew intimately was out there, outside herself" (§§ 11). A tangible memory of the presence of flowers, it is a comforting "balm" with a temperament of its own: "it behaved as though it were itself a plant and flourished into a huge suede-gray flower that throbbed like fever, and sighed like the shift of sand dunes" (13). The material possessions with which Macon surrounds and imprisons her do not replace nor occlude the mark that recalls her sense of belonging in the world. By contemplating the watermark, Ruth recovers a sense of herself within Macon's imposing rules. In a sense, the watermark materializes as the table's navel, throwing Ruth an invisible life-line to a realm of meaning outside Macon's control.²⁸

Throughout Song of Solomon, a masculine economy of control, accumulation and

capital is set against a feminine economy of transformation, expenditure and flowers. Each is additionally aligned with a different conception of flowing blood. While Guitar murders in the name of balancing white and black blood, Reba donates blood to the hospital “as often as they would let her” (95). And, while Macon Dead, preferring gold over his sister, repudiates blood kinship, Pilate attempts to sustain it. The text repeatedly questions why the valorizations of gold, violent bloodletting and masculinity consistently converge upon each other. As Lena asks and answers, “Where do you get the right to decide our lives? . . . I’ll tell you where. From that hog’s gut that hangs down between your legs” (215). Kimberly Benston remarks that Song of Solomon here “mocks . . . the Freudian trope of masculine mastery” in which the phallus and its concomitant fetish, gold, secure the domination of women by men (Benston 101). Perhaps, however, it accomplishes more than mockery. The privilege that surrounds the phallic “hog’s gut” also effects a dire and damaging separation from the language of the earth and blood. Morrison’s Song of Solomon articulates a complex philosophical approach to the crisis accompanying this scission—an approach which significantly compares with the one proposed by Jean-Joseph Goux in Symbolic Economies: After Marx and Freud.

Through a “principle of order,” Goux’s study traces the connection between Marxism and psychoanalysis in order to discover how “a single symbolic element” can accrue to itself uncontested, seemingly ahistorical value (Goux 23). Because, in Goux’s analysis, the two schools of thought both delineate the way in which a masculine standard subordinates other elements under its representational status, Goux argues that a shared discourse of sexual difference informs their methodologies. In other words, he unravels the historical concept of feminine matter within Marx’s and Freud’s respective arguments that gold and the phallus each triumphs as the universal equivalent of commodity and kinship organization. Gold, like the phallus, reflects the institution of the Father in its symbolized and idealized form; Father, phallus, money and language are inextricable from each other as the privileged legislators of the symbolic universe. He quotes Marx’s Capital—“it is with the human being as with the commodity” (14)—in order to show how both Marx and Freud claim that a process of mirroring the body of another underscores social organization: it brings the ego into existence as a separate entity and confers relative

value upon the commodity. As gold determines the exchange-value of a commodity, so the paternal metaphor anchors the ego. Both gold and the phallus then retreat from the system of organization, from the material body, and assume the ghost-like status of the desirable lost object. Each becomes the “common mirror to the world of part objects” (23). Absent as well as representative, gold and the phallus affirm a pattern of normalization which assumes a universal standard.

The “obliteration of history,” through which the universal principle becomes the uncontested standard of unity, is coextensive with the “erasure of its own material base” (33, 62). Turning to Aristotle, Goux then examines the “sexed” formulation of matter as feminine, form as masculine. The Aristotelian theory, in which procreative “generation” occurs as the imposition of a masculine soul and form upon feminine matter, provides an enduring justification of masculine supremacy over nature and the imposition of patrilineal genealogy upon kinship. What appears to be a system of nonsexed oppositions—such as technology to nature—has in fact sexed meanings that derive from a philosophical tradition deeply influenced by Aristotle. Capital is therefore symbolically valuable because it implies the father’s role, generating wealth from fertile but essentially passive matter and labour. And the standard of capital is gold, the interposing (phallic) mediator of exchange. Gold and the phallus are precious, Goux illustrates, because they are undeniably invested with characteristics attributed to masculinity.

When Goux turns to the symbolic order, he finds that it negates the maternal position and consigns it to a place outside meaning and value. According to psychoanalytic theory, the mother’s body is that which materializes the subject but it is the father’s word that brings about rebirth into the symbolic order. The etymological origins of the word mother in matter, material and matrix (womb) reveal the equation of femininity to matter, an equation which implies the presupposition, as Goux states, that “there is no such thing as a pure concept” (213). In contrast to feminine materialism, we have masculine idealism. By assuming the role of the sacrosanct artisan in reproduction, the father thus clears an ideological path for the phallus as “guarantor of eternity” (224). In the domain of the *logos spermaticos*, materiality is a kind of “amorphous negativity, associated with pain, corruption, contingency and death” (230). For Goux, the systematized control over nature

and the primacy of the symbolic over “inert” matter are inextricable from the domination of one sex over the other and from the exploitation of one class by another. “The relation between mother and offspring, under the father’s control,” he carefully argues, “is like that between worker and product under capitalist domination” (233). Capitalist ideology imposes itself upon a material base which it constructs as chaotic. Like the father within the nuclear structure, it oversees and potentially obfuscates what Goux terms “vital activity” (63).

The object of Goux’s analysis is to propose a dialectical engagement with Marxism and psychoanalysis, to repudiate their abstraction of linguistic signs from “historical and biological rootedness” (63). Goux returns to the terms of their arguments in order to move from the primacy of the phallus into a “dialectized reunion” of the two sexes within language and history (235). He agrees that there is a connection between mind and matter but he claims that the connection is based not upon opposition, contradiction and scission but upon matter’s ability to signify and to organize itself. By working within the terms of Marx’s and Freud’s methodologies, Goux hopes to effect a “repetition with difference”: symbolization, he aspires to illustrate, is matter’s offspring (238). The final chapter, “Sexual Difference and History,” develops his premise that the “negation of the negation” of the maternal permits a movement from mother to woman, a movement which “reabsorbs the symbolic scission” between the sexes and between the set of oppositions which follow from this rift (237, 242).

The dialectical process which Goux aspires to effect, then, is one which moves from the concept of mother nature to another kind of materiality. Through the acknowledged position of woman in social production and in history, heterogeneity and difference emerge to challenge the unifying value of the masculine standard. The reinclusion of femininity implies a new mode of historicity with a “different rhythm” (241). Once we foresee an end to production based upon abstract value, the negation of the maternal, which the phallic standard necessitates, is in turn negated. The negation of the negation of the maternal introduces a “luminous source of meaning” and repositions the feminine within history (244). Rather than the subsumption of one sex under the domain of the other, the recognition of sexual difference, is, according to Goux, that which

establishes connection rather than contradiction and supremacy.

While Goux does not clarify what constitutes this not-necessarily-maternal female position, his logic does give rise to the possibility of seeing menstruation as the biological and cultural event impelling feminine and economic resignification. Menstruation emerges as a signifier within the difference between the sexes when it is acknowledged, not as the sign of woman's castration, but as the stain upon phallic integrity. This recognition necessitates the conceptualization of menstruation as that which refuses to accrue or to seminate value in the manner of the universal equivalent: cyclical yet nonheliocentric, menstruation commands an economy which does not endlessly appreciate value. Menstrual blood may be the mark of a fertile system, but it also announces fertility's nonevent.

Furthermore, like the phallus and gold, which are precious because of their superfluity and involvement in the process of exchange, menstruation is also "the site of unproductive expenditure," of the kind of surplus or excess value required for a universal equivalent (28). However, menstrual blood signifies the leakage of the matrix upon which the phallus attempts to erect itself. Because its absence or presence is directly involved in material production and reproduction, it needs no abstract image in something like the phallus or gold. The "nonrepresentative organization," which Goux seeks, may be offered by menstruation, the mark of feminine matter's "vital activity" (63).

As Goux moves toward his proposition regarding the negation of the negation of the maternal position, he employs the terminology in which menstruation is constructed. He looks for a "cyclical" movement from mother to woman, for the "wound, gash, cut, stain" out of which meaning emerges, for the way metaphors "coagulate" around sexual definitions (237, 59, 221). He circles around images of blood without ever landing on the possibility it presents to his argument. Menstruation provides the conceptual connection with and disconnection from the maternal position that he needs. It is also rooted in the body--the "irreducible source of signifying innovations" that depart from the phallus (63).

In Goux's poststructuralist analysis, phallogocentrism and logocentrism are thoroughly interconnected. He states: "the *genesis of the concept* obeys a logic of substitution, and thus of exchange in the general sense" (41 Goux's italics). Drawing on Derrida's Of Grammatology, he delineates how logocentrism results from the primacy of

linguistic over nonlinguistic and iconic signs. This “*logocracy*” emerges as the “privileged, if not exclusive, vehicle for *the circulation of meaning*”—a circulation and assumption of value that mirror the monetary institution (43 Goux’s italics). Like capital, the logos and phallus regulate symbolic meaning. It is only by returning to the material base or the body that this meaning reverberates with nonverbal and “volatile” signs. It follows, then, that menstruation emerges as a way of knowing connected to the female body. If menstrual blood joins the phallus in the organization of kinship and cognizance, a doubleness occurs which denies the possibility of one, general equivalent. Here, we have not only a connection between the sexes (rather than the supremacy of one over the other) but also a way of challenging the social and linguistic codes of exploitation.

In Morrison’s Song of Solomon the paternal ghost—whose bones are confused with a sack of gold—both issues the command, “Sing,” and provides the insistent refrain, “You just can’t fly on off and leave a body” (SS 147).²⁹ An imperative to return to the body, the ghost’s refrain, crossing as it does from the spiritual into the material realm, effects a reconnection between the two. If the rift between the dead and the living—between the immaterial and the material realms they represent—can thus mend, then so can the scission between men and women. The blood that divides one from the other also joins them. It is the substance of kinship and it streams through all living bodies. Like a spoken or written name, blood marks the lines of ancestry and descent. While menstrual blood establishes a female body’s independence from a man’s, it clearly signals the possibility of maternal metamorphosis. In its temporary absence an umbilical cord forms, pumping sustenance into another body and into an approaching future.

Spilled from the bodies of African Americans, blood also soaks the earth: “the earth,” Guitar says, “is soggy with black people’s blood. And before us Indian blood” (157). Saturating the earth, blood becomes the substance of its history. The plant-like and floral rootedness that accompanies femininity in the text implies attachment both to the bloody ground and the dead. The flight that coincides with masculinity suggests, then, a severance from history and blood. Speaking on behalf of the dead, and calling out the mother’s name, the ghost asserts that “you just can’t” let this happen. His refrain, and its

emphatic word “just,” condenses the novel’s articulation of justice. Combining the ideal of justice with the material of history, it involves a Derridean sense of “infinite responsibility . . . beyond right and law” (*Specters* xi). Living justly, Morrison’s novel ultimately implies, entails remembering the female body buried in materiality and talking with ghosts—in other words, flying “without ever leaving the ground” (SS 336).

In order to grasp this notion, we must heed not only the ghost’s refrain but also the sound of Pilate’s “gravel-sprinkled” voice (35). When Milkman first hears Pilate speak, he finds that her voice makes him “think of pebbles. Little round pebbles that bumped up against each other” (40). In Pilate’s mouth, matter, the earth and a female voice combine in a matrix of meaning. Intimately connected with the earth, she is a descendant of the woman whose cries echo in Ryna’s gulch. She also collects rocks. Among all the women who guide Milkman on his quest, it is Pilate who gestures toward the most profound knowledge. Milkman’s epiphanic moment takes place, when, on the hunt, he realizes that the earth itself has a language:

It was all language. An extension of the click people made in their cheeks back home when they wanted a dog to follow them. No, it was not language; it was what there was before language. Before things were written down. Language in the time when men and animals did talk to one another, when a man could sit down with an ape and the two converse; when a tiger and a man could share the same tree, and each understood the other. . . . And he was hearing it in the Blue Ridge Mountains under a sweet gum tree. And if they could talk to animals, and the animals could talk to them, what didn’t they know about human beings? Or the earth itself, for that matter. . . . He tried to listen with his fingertips, to hear what, if anything, the earth had to say. (278-279)

This edenic vision becomes possible because of Pilate. A figural variation on Eve, Pilate does not cut off Milkman from communion with the earth; rather, she returns it to him.³⁰

According to Kimberly Benston, Pilate “could be a self-begotten substitute for all genealogical authorities” (Benston 101). For Linda Krumholz, she “exemplifies a . . . combination of self invention and responsibility” (Krumholz 556). As all of these, she embodies African-American history. Pilate’s explanation for conversing with her father’s ghost—“I was cut off early from people”—recalls the vicious separation of African people from their homeland (SS 141). Like her ancestors, she is compelled to reinvent herself and

start over. This concept of a regenerative second chance inheres in America's vision of itself as a New Jerusalem. In both the American and African-American traditions, the Old Testament's delineation of an exiled yet chosen nation provides the rationale for belonging to the land. Song of Solomon echoes and syncopates this rationale, pulling its language apart and reconfiguring it until throbs with blood. It sounds Guitar's version of law and rights; then, through the ghost's song and Pilate's voice, it "changes the rhythm" on us (39).

III. Getting to Red: Beloved and the Bloody Fragments of a Forgotten Cosmology

So she anticipated the questions by giving blood to the scraps her mother and grandmother had told her—and a heartbeat.

(Beloved 78)

He [the Specter of Set] knew that Moses wanted to find out how to circumvent the deathless snake who guards the temple at Koptos: Isis and Osiris' Temple. The Specter said he knew that Isis would succumb to a certain line because it was 'that time of the month.' He said that he would tell Moses what to do, but first Moses had to promise that he would restore the cult of Aton to Egypt.

(Mumbo Jumbo 178)

Seth: He was regarded above all as lord of the desert and appeared as the opponent of the vegetative god, Osiris. The latter was compared to the life-giving Nile, whilst the cruel sea was thought to be a manifestation of Seth. Seth's chthonic features contrasted with those of the sky god, Horus. It was through his breath that worms emerged from inside the earth; he was also the lord of metals, iron ore being called the 'bones of Seth.' . . . As lord of the desert, as a 'red' god [because of the color of the sand], Seth also became lord of all non-Egyptian lands.

(The Gods and Symbols of Ancient Egypt 109-110)

In her article on Song of Solomon, Joyce Middleton summarizes Plato's Phaedrus and reminds us that its inquiry rests upon the delineation of an Egyptian or African tale; Socrates sets the scene against writing by describing an argument between a king and the wily Egyptian god of writing, Thoth. In the course of the debate, the king associates speech with the preservation of memory and announces that Thoth's invention "will produce forgetfulness in the souls of those who have learned it" (Middleton 19). Establishing this as Plato's position, Middleton then moves into a brief history of Western literacy and states: "we can see the Phaedrus unfold: as literacy advances, the art of memory wanes. But in contrast, we also see that the tenacity of the oral tradition in African American culture reveals, *as any oral culture would*, characteristic features of the art of memory in its literary tradition" (22 Middleton's italics). With reference to the interplay in Morrison's novel between African oral traditions and the Western world's emphasis upon

literacy, she concludes:

A lingering irony found in Plato's argument against writing is that his criticisms are preserved only because he wrote them. Toni Morrison creates her own work in the center of that irony. Merging Greek, biblical and African American oral traditions in Song of Solomon, Morrison brings orality and literacy face to face and throws significant cultural conflicts into relief. (36)

The novel also moves out of this confrontation, urging us to think "hieroglyphically" and to embrace the "auditory, associative, oral memory" in written symbols (25).

Although Middleton does not mention it, Song of Solomon cleverly incorporates the figure of Thoth and presents writing as a double-edged power. As the "Black Birdman," Thoth is the prototype of the novel's flying Africans.³¹ His gift of writing, encompassing treachery and survival, constitutes both the record of the law that disinherits African Americans and the substance of Pilate's geography book. "I loved the geography part," Pilate remarks. "Learning about that made me want to read" (SS 141). Furthermore, Thoth's attributes emerge in the characterization of Pilate. Along with her book and rocks, Pilate retains a spool of black thread—and summons Thoth's abilities to sew and to mend rifts.³² Like Thoth, Pilate can also concoct potions and converse with the dead. Consequently, while Pilate bears the name of the biblical "Christ-kill[er]" (SS 19), she gestures toward the Isis-Osiris cosmology in which Thoth occurs as a healer, alchemist and, in Derrida's description of him, god of the "*coincidentia oppositorum*" (Dissemination 93). As Morrison remarks on the names in Song of Solomon, "I used biblical names to show the impact of the Bible on the lives of black people . . . and some pre-Christian names to give the sense of a mixture of cosmologies" (qtd in Freeman 120). In Pilate, this cosmological mixture ensures a passageway between countless opposing realms.

The cosmology formed around Isis, Osiris and Thoth reappears in Beloved and permits meaning to ascend out of pervasive meaninglessness, suffering and evil. As a myth about gathering the pieces of a dismembered beloved, it underwrites the fragmentary nature of Beloved; it also sustains the text's double gesture of preserving and consolidating the shards of narrative and memory. Broken up and scattered throughout the text's recurring images of torn fabric, psyches and bodies, the myth pervades Beloved's attention

to trauma and recovery and proposes the possibility that a painful shattering can give rise to a new world. Like Sethe's mother tongue, the cosmological vision of Isis and Osiris is both a half-understood "code" and a "message . . . there all along" in the text (BD 62). It constitutes a larger sense of the African past which, along with the nightmare of American slavery, must be rescued from oblivion and restored to cultural memory.

A novel thematically structured by processes of dismemberment and "rememory," Beloved invokes the actions of Seth, who tears things apart, and Thoth, who puts them back together. They are figures of schemes and plots which challenge the permanence of existing orders. Along with Isis and Osiris, Thoth and Seth partake in the myth of cyclical creation and destruction connected to the dangerous and replenishing flood-waters of the Nile. The myth is African and it precedes the Egyptian dynasties with which it is usually associated. By naming her protagonist Sethe, Morrison appears to invoke or conjure these ancient dark-skinned gods. She aligns her perspective, moreover, with the bad god in the legend—the one who wields a knife and whose actions against Osiris are often described as treachery. With his sister, Nephtys, Seth is a figure of night and darkness. He finds an ally in Thoth, a god of the moon, to launch his attack on Osiris, a god of the sun. While Thoth participates in the war against Osiris, he records the stories of both sides. Perhaps he is the god whom Amy questions when she interprets Sethe's wounded back as a tree and muses, "What God have in mind, I wonder" (79). Hidden within Sethe's dark and torn skin is the story, or family tree, of her ancestors and their gods.

The legend and lineage of these gods includes Nout, a sky and resurrection goddess, and Ra, the sun god before Osiris. Banned by Ra from access to a day on the calendar on which she could conceive or give birth, Nout implores Thoth for help. When Thoth supplements the calendar with five days, Nout produces Seth, Isis, Nephtys and Osiris. Deriving his power from the sun, Osiris succeeds Ra and becomes king. And, as the sun rises and falls, so does Osiris. In the twenty-eighth year of his reign, during a full moon, Osiris is ambushed and killed by Seth and Thoth.³³ Although Isis retrieves his body from the Nile, Seth seizes it and dismembers it into fourteen parts: one for each day of the waning moon. He then scatters the pieces to the winds. As the legend's cycle nears

its completion, Isis searches for the fragments of Osiris. When she locates them, she celebrates a funeral at the site of each fragment and creates, as Cooke tells us, “‘Tombs of Osiris’ all over Egypt” (13). In a dream, Isis gathers the pieces of Osiris, mates with him and awakens to give birth to his successor, Horus.

Like his father before him, Horus finds himself challenged by Seth. During the battle that ensues between them, Thoth arrives to heal both gods’ wounds. Then, switching sides on Seth, Thoth returns his allegiance to Osiris’s line. On the twenty-eighth day of this battle, Horus succeeds in fettering Seth in chains. The sun god reascends to power. When Horus and Seth eventually reconcile, according to some of the accounts, Horus takes the land surrounding the Nile, while Seth rules the desert and its “barbaric peoples” (Lurker 66). Always crossing between opposing realms, Thoth remains a figure of non-identity who works for and against Osiris’s dynasty.

“The Egyptian great myth,” writes Andrew Lang, “turns on the antagonism of Osiris and Set [sic], and the persistence of the blood-feud between Set and the kindred of Osiris” (qtd in Cooke 118). It also turns on a lunar cycle: Osiris’s twenty-eight year reign expresses a lunar month; his dismemberment begins with the waning moon; each of his bodily fragments represents one day of this lunar phase; and, Osiris’s crown is sometimes represented as a full moon within a crescent.³⁴ Moreover, his sister Isis is a goddess of the moon. Cooke, questioning the accounts which align her with the dawn, argues that Isis represents the sun’s corresponding, lunar phenomenon. She cannot be the dawn, he says, because the “dawn does not travel, as Isis, in search of the sun” (44). Isis comes forward when Osiris disappears. She is associated with darkness and mourning. Thus, during the Autumnal equinox, her priests mourn the receding daylight, the shrinking tides of the Nile and the increasingly lifeless vegetation. At the Spring equinox, the time of the year when Isis discovers Osiris, they celebrate the reunion of the moon and sun (25-29).

In the broken world of Beloved, Paul D asks resounding questions of Stamp Paid:

‘Tell me something, Stamp.’ Paul D’s eyes were rheumy. ‘Tell me this one thing. How much is a nigger supposed to take? Tell me. How much?’

‘All he can,’ said Stamp Paid. ‘All he can.’

‘Why? Why? Why? Why? Why?’ (BD 235)

Locked in a sense of time consistently invaded by the past, Paul D expresses the loss of a future; repeating the question “why,” he spins his wheels in an eternal and relentlessly confusing present. Sethe similarly remains insulated in present time. “To Sethe,” the narrator explains, “the future was a matter of keeping the past at bay” (42). The inability to envision a way out, for both Sethe and Paul D, undoubtedly reflects an enduring and effective manifestation of slavery’s control. Just as the machinery of slavery shackles and defines the bodies of African Americans, so its unremitting ideological climate binds their psyches. “It is always now,” Beloved says in her monologue (210). With crushed or circumscribed imaginations, the slaves and ex-slaves in Beloved either cannot or dare not speculate upon what the future might offer—neither for themselves nor their descendants. From Sethe’s perspective, “The ‘better life’ she believed she and Denver were living was simply not that other one” (42). As Jill Matus points out, “the trauma of Sethe . . . is not represented through her inability to remember;” rather, it emerges as an insatiable, ever-expanding memory of past events (Matus 104). Her mind thus held hostage, Sethe refuses to fathom the future just as she refuses to notice color, particularly the color red.³⁵

Beloved infers that the past must be reconfigured in a way that gives rise to a vision of the future. Only then can the bloody moment in Sethe’s history become part of, to borrow Mircea Eliade’s term, a “blood-drenched cosmogony” which accommodates suffering and destruction (Sacred 51). The text introduces myth into history, distorting history’s temporal movement and reconfiguring its conceptual borders. For Matus, the text’s chronological disruption imparts the nature of traumatic experience. As a “disease of time,” trauma disrupts linearity and causes the past to consistently replay itself in the present:

The narrative enacts a circling or repetition around the traumatic event [of Beloved’s death]. In this way it accords significantly with psychoanalytic accounts of traumatic repetitions—‘unavailable to the consciousness but intruding repeatedly on sight.’ (Matus 112)

Yet, because cosmological patterns also refute and subsume linearity, Beloved suggests that the experience of trauma opens onto an experience of mythical time.³⁶ Senseless repetition then transforms into a regenerative movement that looks forward as well as

backward. As Mircea Eliade illustrates in The Myth of the Eternal Return, mythical examples or celestial archetypes provide the rites by which a chaotic experience can be interpreted and survived. “Profane things,” he says, “lack models” and offer no consolation for suffering (Eternal 28).

This is not to imply that the novel’s incorporation of a cosmological myth exonerates the devastations of history; rather, the myth offers a means of moving beyond them. Returning the vanquished in history’s ledger to a sense of connection between nature and culture, it creates a position from which to begin again according to a different code. In Beloved, Sethe’s action of killing her daughter occurs in response to “schoolteacher,” the figure who deploys the Fugitive Slave Bill and who divides “her human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right” (BD 193). He is, as Mae Henderson illustrates, a kind of ethnologist, cultural historian and taxonomist, “concerned with matters of materiality and empiricism” (Henderson 70). As one who divides, dismembers and records, schoolteacher defines knowledge and history as “the struggle between culture and nature” (70). He inscribes this struggle and distinction, moreover, in the ink that Sethe makes for him. Opposing everything that schoolteacher stands for, Beloved effects a reconnection between the terms he divides. The text thus models Sethe on the historical figure, Margaret Garner, and the Egyptian god, Seth, engendering a rite of passage from history to myth.³⁷

According to April Lidinsky, Beloved reformulates history’s straight line into a rhythmic current through collective memory and hope. As a postmodern novel, Lidinsky argues, Beloved delineates history as a continual process, “necessarily contradictory, fragmented and full of gaps” (Lidinsky 193). It is in these gaps that a “postmodern spirituality” asserts itself: Beloved clears a space for a spiritual language to emerge, not from presence of the Word, but from the body’s ecstatic experiences (195). When Baby Suggs calls the community into the Clearing, she shows them that their bodies are repositories of grace. Metaphorically breaking their bodies into parts—as the slave owners do in their ledgers—she recodes the fragments from objects of contempt into components of love:

'In this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don't love your eyes; they'd just as soon pick em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my people they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty.' (BD 88)

For Lidinsky, Baby Suggs' words and her initiation of a "call and response" envision a horizontal redirection of "slavery's 'vertical' flow of power" (194).

Turning to the example of the chain gang, Lidinsky explains that it too functions on a horizontal axis of possibility. The men, separated by the chain links, transform "the very device that keeps them partitioned into a mechanism for collective agency" (203). Listening to the "body's alternative knowledges," they discover a communal language beneath the eyes of the guards (203); and through horizontal tugs along the chain, they are able to escape. "They talked through the chain," the narrator writes, "like Sam Morse and, Great God, they all came up" (BD 110). Thus, the power that splits the men apart gives rise to an alternative connection. It is a connection based not on the individualism of the slave-owner's world, but communal salvation: "The chain that held them would save all or none" (110).

Like the Morse code and the manipulation of the chain, the myth of Isis and Osiris resonates—and horizontally unfolds—in the fragments of *BeLoved* as an ancient, collective form of knowledge. In a sense, the reader gathers it by moving through the text's repeating images of tearing and healing: from the allusions to scattered slave families—"we scattered," Baby Suggs says—to the descriptions of the headless and feetless bodies that hang in plantation trees (BD 143). Between the fragments of such horrifying instances, a larger sense of an historical context emerges. When Sethe recalls the way in which schoolteacher's questions "tore up Sixo. Tore him up for all time" (37), and when Sixo remarks that the Thirty-Mile Woman "gathers" him, the novel conjures the process delineated in the Egyptian myth (37, 272). Sethe also finds herself healed "in sections" upon her arrival at Baby Sugg's house (93). To heal is symbolically to gather, and *BeLoved* extends this process to the reader. As Sethe does for Halle when she goes into the Clearing to mourn him, the novel offers "some fixing ceremony" to commemorate the

shattered past and mark its existence (BD 87).

Beloved also enacts the ritual of *sparagmos* implied in the Osiris legend and emphasizes that certain spaces and absences cannot be filled. Insisting, for instance, upon phrases that might otherwise be joined, the novel opens with the words, “124 was spiteful. Full of a baby’s venom” (BD 3). Separated by a period instead of a comma, the two phrases sustain a gap and force the reader across it; they simultaneously frame Beloved’s horrific world and split it open. Barbara Freeman argues that the novel’s opening, in fact, “calls into question the mere possibility of containment” (Freeman 123). She writes:

the sentences do to the reader what the house does to those who seek to inhabit it: just as the narrative frame is meant to be ‘incomprehensible,’ so Sethe and Denver live in a house that, disrupted by a ‘baby’s venom,’ is full of an incomprehensible presence it cannot contain. (23)

Supporting this claim, she quotes Morrison on Beloved’s alienating introduction: “The reader is snatched, yanked. . . . I want it as the first stroke of the shared experience that might be possible between the reader and the novel’s population. Snatched just as the slaves were from one place to another” (qtd in Freeman 123). For Freeman, the fragmentary nature of the first sentences inaugurates the reader’s proximity to the “personal and political trauma” delineated throughout the novel (124).

This combined experience of trauma reasserts itself in the character of Beloved. She materializes from the past and recalls Sethe’s individual experiences as well as the suffering spread throughout the African-American communities. At once the ghost of Sethe’s murdered daughter, a lost young woman, and a survivor of the Middle Passage, Beloved emerges as a shattered figure tenuously held together by her journey toward Sethe:

we are all trying to leave our bodies behind the man on my face
has done it it is hard to make yourself die forever you sleep
short and then return in the beginning we could vomit now we
do not now we cannot . . . I see her face which is mine it is the
face that was going to smile at me in the place where we crouched
(210-212 Morrison’s spacing)

Utterly alienated and torn apart, she wonders if she “could wake up one day and find herself in pieces” (BD 133). Her strange, broken English not only suggests that her slashed throat distorts her words but also that she speaks on behalf of the people with bits

in their mouths or chokers and ropes around their necks. From Freeman's perspective, *Beloved's* traumatized language "combines the experience of death with that of the Middle Passage" (Freeman 132).

Addressing the process of mourning in *Beloved*, Freeman compares Isis with Morrison; like Isis, who sets out to grieve Osiris and memorialize his shattered body, Morrison confronts the scattered dead of the Middle Passage. "To know where a beloved body lies," Freeman writes, "is perhaps one condition of its remembrance" (Freeman 110). She argues that Isis—whose inscription in a temple reads, "I am all that is, that was, and that will be, and no mortal has lifted my veil"—gives rise to "thoughts of the ineffable [and] attests to a capacity for limitless attachment even in the face of traumatic loss" (111). Establishing a similarity between the sublime and the traumatic, Freeman argues that each simultaneously drives and disables representation:

As trauma does, the sublime occasions a crisis of representation such that what is lost can never be found whole or in one place. It is recoverable only as a series of disconnected fragments—a search for the pieces of a dismembered or, in Morrison's words, "disremembered" body. Isis' quest for Osiris' body stages the scene of writing as a search for what language witnesses but cannot say. (111)

Faced with the overwhelming challenge of locating Osiris's fragments, Isis does not relinquish the attempt to locate and symbolically preserve them: she gives "limit and definition" to that which seems inaccessible (118). Similarly, Morrison insists on confronting an "unspeakable" trauma. Following Isis, who resurrects the dead in symbolic form, Morrison enacts the necessity of constructing a "passage to the unsymbolizable" (131). In *Beloved* she mourns the innumerable dead dispersed along the ocean floor. As Freeman explains, "*Beloved* functions as a hitherto absent burial ground, a monument occupying the site of an unmarked grave" (147).

While Freeman builds a compelling, exquisite argument that links Isis's story to *Beloved*, she leaves open the significance of the lunar cosmology that surrounds Isis. If Isis represents the feminine sublime, she also represents a cosmic order.³⁸ A goddess of the moon associated with bleeding, she plays a vital role in the Egyptian symbolic universe. The confusion (of which Cooke speaks) regarding her association with the dawn appears to

be explained by the belief the moon bleeds when it gives birth to the day. The sun god announces: "I broke forth from the egg, I oozed out of her essence, / I escaped in her blood. I am master of the redness" (qtd in Smith 165).³⁹ Isis's command over blood and regeneration resembles the Canaanite goddess's, whose menstrual economy of symbols underwrites the biblical Song. In fact, Isis's lament for Osiris seems to establish her as a predecessor of the sister in the Song of Songs. In The Golden Bough, James Frazer translates her lament:

'Come to thy house . . . thou who hast no foes. O fair youth, come to thy house, that thou mayest see me. I am thy sister, whom thou lovest. . . . Come to thy sister, come to thy wife, to thy wife, thou whose heart stands still.' (Frazer 425)

Like Cooke, Frazer establishes that the myth and festivals of Isis and Osiris honor the moon. Again, it is Helen Smith who emphasizes the connections among Isis, the moon and menstruation. Along with the Song of Solomon, the legend of Isis recalls a powerful cosmology in which symbols of menstruation forge a passage to sacred knowledge. In Smith's words, "Not only did the members of the cult of Isis consider her to be the representation of cosmic order, menstruation symbolized her knowledge of transformation and regeneration" (Smith 170).

A quest-figure, Isis moves through the realms of sky and earth. Because her major symbol, the *thet*, accompanies all burial rituals, she alone has the power to mourn Osiris. As Helen Smith explains, the *thet* represents "the union of the knowledge of the Heavens, earth and the Other World" (Smith 167). Without the *thet*, Osiris cannot be translated to the Other World. In The Gods and Symbols of Ancient Egypt, the symbol is described as the "Blood of Isis":

The blood of Isis is similar in many ways to the the knot worn by gods. . . . In the Book of the Dead the sign was addressed with the words, 'O, blood of Isis.' It was placed with the deceased in the tomb and was supposed to be made of a red, semi-precious stone. The blood of Isis was often combined with the dyed pillar, especially in the decoration of temple walls, beds and sarcophagi. When combined, the two symbols alluded, via Isis and Osiris, to the unity of opposing world forces with that to the unconquerable nature of life. (Lurker 72)

The *thet* also resembles the *ankh*, the Egyptian hieroglyphic sign of life. As Lurker

illustrates, the *thet* appears to be the *ankh* with its transverse arms folded downward. According to physicians Gruhn and Kazer in The Hormonal Regulation of the Menstrual Cycle, the *ankh* is unequivocally a uterine symbol (4). Bearing her inverted *ankh*, Isis is a goddess of blood who secures the connection between life and death.

According to Freeman, Beloved's Sethe performs Isis' rites. "Sethe," she says, "reenacts Isis's role and function: like Isis, Sethe laments the dead's passing and lays them to rest" (Freeman 135). While this argument is undeniably forceful, it does not address Sethe's role in the death of Beloved nor the function of Sethe's namesake in the novel. Morrison's Sethe appears to combine the roles of Isis and Seth—and turns blood-letting into a formidable power. When she cuts Beloved's throat, she seizes the power to change the course of events and refuses to remain the material upon which events unfold according to another's plan. Aligned with the god who dismembers, whose violent action precedes renewal, Sethe fights before she mourns. Her daughter may be the figure who lies in pieces and whose history must be mourned, but it is schoolteacher who represents Osiris's power and whose world must be fought: he is the one whom Sethe confronts and attacks by placing Beloved out of his reach.⁴⁰

The god of dark and bloody ways, Seth is necessary to renewal and transformation, to the end of one cycle and the beginning of another. By shifting the perspective on Seth's treacherous actions, Morrison's text embraces the one often denounced in accounts of the legend. As Beloved explores the crisis of a mother who murders her own child, it places the violence within a larger historical and mythical framework.⁴¹ Taking the side of the god of the desert, it lines up the African-American slaves under his domain. In other words, Beloved questions the glorification of Osiris, god of cultivated land, and considers Seth's motives for killing Osiris. From the perspective of those forced to cultivate the land, Seth provides the prototype of rebellion. When Morrison's Sethe kills Beloved, she sends Beloved to "the other side" and disconnects her from the cultivated land that requires her life-blood on this side (203).

Referring to the death of Osiris at the hands of the red god, Seth, Cooke asks: "why in the *twenty-eighth year*?" (31 Cooke's italics). He finds that the answer lies with

the Nile and the lunar cycles of its tides. But why does the Nile require such a complex, bloody legend? The events surrounding Osiris' murder—the blood-letting and the duration of Osiris' reign—also appear to express a cosmic archetype of menstruation and regeneration. We know from the myth, moreover, that the one fragment Isis cannot locate among Osiris's scattered remains is his penis. She builds a sepulchre to mark its absence and symbolic presence. In her dream, it becomes a phallus. While Helen Smith does not mention this aspect of the myth, her assertion that Isis's menstrual blood constitutes an active principle sheds light on its role in the transformation of Osiris's lost penis into a phallus. The menstrual goddess re-members her consort and sets a new cycle into motion. She allows Osiris to pass in pieces into the Other World and to reemerge symbolically whole, as Horus, from her body. Mourning, memory and menstruation all function as the power to make the absent present in a form that is at once duplicated and different. Preceding and disputing the later ideological connection between menstrual blood and inert matter, the myth implies that menstruation is a dynamic event involving the animation of the dormant male seed.⁴² As one of the hymns to Isis states, “thou bringest the sun from rising unto setting, and all the gods are glad; . . . thou didst make the power of women equal to that of men” (qtd in Smith 169).

The myth's delineation of the clash and reunion between the sun and the moon captures a cosmology and its fertility rituals; it also links vivid symbols surrounding menstruation to the acts of rebellion and transformation. To recapitulate the synergy between Seth and Isis: under a full moon, Seth spills Osiris's blood and kills him; as the moon wanes, Isis offers her blood and regenerates Osiris. The myth establishes, therefore, that one fluid sign, in step with the moon, combines death and renewal. Situating Beloved's murder within a symbolic economy of menstruation, Morrison's text implies this conceptual nexus. When Sethe spills Beloved's blood in the twenty-eighth day of her freedom, following the “travel of one whole moon,” she defies the authority of one regime and looks forward to something beyond it (BD 95). The murder she commits becomes a kind of regenerative bleeding: it marks in blood Sethe's refusal to become a “piece of property that reproduced itself without cost” (228). Thrice repeating that she is free for

twenty-eight days before Beloved's blood streams down the front of her dress, the text stresses that Sethe escapes a system of enforced motherhood by seizing the ancient powers of blood and bleeding.

Moreover, her monologue—her unspoken testimony to Beloved—articulates her desire to be a daughter:

My plan was to take us all to the other side where my own ma'am is. . . . She'd had the bit in her mouth so many times she smiled, and I never saw her own smile. I wonder what they was doing when they was caught. Running, you think? No. Not that. Because she was my ma'am and nobody's ma'am would run off and leave her daughter, would she? Would she, now? Leave her in the yard with a one-armed woman? Even if she hadn't been able to suckle the daughter for more than a week or two and had to turn her over to another woman's tit that never had enough for all. (203)

Sethe's anguish thus lies not only with her loss of her daughter but also with the loss of knowing what it means to be a daughter. "You came right on back like a good girl," she says to Beloved, "like a daughter which is what I wanted to be and would have been if my ma'am had been able to get out of the rice long enough before they hanged her and let me be one" (203). Sally Keenan, analyzing the fluids in *Beloved*, writes that the text's attention to blood and milk unfolds the "metonymic relation between the bodies of mothers and daughters;" the two fluids offer a discourse of "motherhood-sisterhood-daughterhood, a discourse the institution of slavery would ignore or deny" (Keenan 61, 71). To take this assertion further, the institution not only denies the connections among women, it severs and scatters them. Cutting Beloved's throat, Sethe turns the capacity to sever against the slave owners and sets a process of reconnection into motion. When Beloved comes back, she releases Sethe's memories of her mother and of herself as a daughter. The narrator explains: "Something she had forgotten . . . seeped into a slit in her mind. . . 'Telling you. I am telling you, small girl Sethe,' and she did that. She told Sethe that her mother and Nan were together from the sea. Both were taken up many times by the crew. 'She threw them all away but you. . . . You she gave the name of the black man'" (BD 62). Through Beloved's death and return, Sethe literally and metaphorically opens her own bloodlines.

While both Beloved and Sethe represent, in Charles Scruggs' words, "all the abandoned and separated daughters of the diaspora" (Scruggs 202), Denver represents a

reconnected future. A figure of survival who swallows Beloved's blood "right along with [Sethe's] milk," she is "charmed" and she instantly recognizes her sister (205). However, while she welcomes the past into the present, she also makes sure that it surrenders to the future. It is Denver who has "to step off the edge of the world and die" in order to save her mother (239). Moreover, by repeatedly desiring to hear the story of her birth retold, she positions her birth as a crucial moment against Beloved's death. Denver herself takes the tale's fragments and gives "blood to the scraps" (78). In the process of transformation, the story becomes about two women: one pregnant and black, the other menstruating and white. Together, the two women bring Denver into the world, the daughter who represents, as Sally Keenan puts it, a "pulling into the future" (Keenan 74).

With Amy's words, "I been bleeding for four years but I ain't having nobody's baby," the text further defines menstruation as a source of power (83). Amy's bleeding body signifies a state of freedom outside another's control. Drawn toward "carmine velvet," she realizes a connection between the color of her blood and her future:

'I want me some velvet. . . . velvet is like the world was just born. Clean and new and so smooth. The velvet I seen was brown, but in Boston they got all colors. Carmine. That means red but when you talk about velvet you got to say 'carmine.'" (33)

She focuses on a vision of red velvet and removes herself from Mr. Buddy's "right evil hand" (79). Although ideologically separated from Sethe by skin color, Amy makes an empathetic connection with Sethe's female body, physical pain and need to run. Leaking milk, Sethe heads toward Beloved out of a sense of identification with her loss; leaking blood, Amy identifies with Sethe's predicament. Focusing on two aspects of female sexuality, the text unites them in one impulse toward escape and renewal. Together, Sethe and Amy secure Denver's chance at life. "In the end," writes Ashraf Rushdy, "Beloved is not the most important character in Morrison's revisionist strategy. That character is Denver, the other daughter . . . and site of hope in [the] novel" (Rushdy 145).

Yet, Beloved's appearance allows this hope to materialize. Although she is the daughter who pulls toward the past, she propels Denver into the future. She also returns the color red to Sethe's black and white world:

Now I know why Baby Suggs pondered color her last years. . . . I

don't believe she wanted to get to red and I understand why because me and Beloved outdid ourselves with it. Matter of fact, that and her pinkish headstone was the last color I recall. Now I'll be on the lookout. (BD 201)

A highly symbolic color, red is painfully necessary to contemplate. It gestures at once toward birth and death, a beating heart and torn skin. It is the color of the “undulating” pool of light that soaks Sethe’s house with “a wave of grief” (9), and it announces Beloved’s presence. Red also pervades the novel’s attention to memory. When Stamp Paid realizes, for instance, that Beloved haunts Sethe, he remembers the “blood spill in her backyard,” Baby Suggs’ “heart that pumped out love,” and the red ribbon that reminds him of the smell of “human blood cooked in a lynch fire” (179-181). Stamp has to move through these memories in order to get to the hope that lies beyond his question—“Nothing left for us but pour out our own blood?” (179)—and to the responsibility that accompanies it. Furthermore, red is the shade of the heart Beloved releases from Paul D’s tobacco tin:

She moved closer with a footfall he didn't hear and he didn't hear the whisper that the flakes of rust made either as they fell away from the seams of his tobacco tin. So when the lid gave way he didn't know it. What he knew was that when he reached the inside part he was saying, 'Red heart. Red heart,' over and over again. Softly and then so loud it woke Denver, then Paul D himself. 'Red heart. Red heart. Red heart.' (117)

As Isis does for Osiris, so Beloved does for Paul D: in a dream, she locates his missing piece, takes him to some “ocean-deep place,” and lets him reemerge (264). In turn, with a reconstituted “life hunger,” Paul D gives Sethe back to herself (264).

Before he returns to Sethe and to “some kind of tomorrow,” Paul D needs to confront a final memory: that of the Civil War. It is the event that tears apart America and leaves more dead people in Paul D’s path “than living ones” (269). The war also marks the end of slavery and the beginning of freedom. Recalling how he once worked to pull the “Confederate wounded away from the Confederate dead,” Paul D also remembers feeling pity “for what he imagined were the sons of the guards in Alfred, Georgia” (268). Here, hatred—even the right to it—shifts to make space for compassion. It becomes the emotion that might permit Paul D to love the land which enslaved him and then smashed into pieces around him:

He could not help being astonished by the beauty of this land that was not his. He hid in its breast, fingered its earth for food, clung to its banks to lap water and tried not to love it. On nights when the sky was personal, weak with the weight of its own stars, he made himself not love it. (268)

The Civil War appears to make possible a new relationship to the land, if only for a moment. With the prospect of crossing back over the ocean never mentioned nor implied, the tomorrow Paul hopes for with Sethe has to unfold in America.

¹ The two texts share the conviction that, in Thoreau's words, "the finest quality of our nature, like the bloom on fruits, can be preserved only by the most delicate handling. Yet we do not treat ourselves nor one another thus tenderly" (qtd in Gravett 203).

² This is the image of Pecola alone, among the trash, and "walking up and down, up and down, her head jerking to the beat of a drummer so distant only she could hear" (204). It seems to offer a parodic, unhappy rendition of Thoreau's dictum, "If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away" (Thoreau 168). The image of the whirlpool occurs several times in *Moby Dick*. See, for instance, "The Mast-Head" chapter on the vortices of Ishmael's identity.

³ Barbara Johnson, tackling the pronoun (or "shifter") "we" in her "Response" to Henry Louis Gates' "Canon Formation," helps to clarify this point. She writes: "The pronoun 'we' has historically proven to be the most empowering and shiftest shifter of them all. It is through the 'we' that discourses of false universality are created. With its cognitive indeterminacy and its performative authority, it is both problematic and unavoidable for the discourses of political opposition. For this structure of the stressed subject with an indeterminate predicate may well be the structure necessary for empowerment without essentialism. At the same time, it is an empowerment always in danger of presuming too much. But, then, can there be empowerment without presumption?" (43)

⁴ This is not to say that Morrison intentionally echoes Pynchon but that, like Pynchon, she sets her protagonist against abstract standards of femininity and describes her through concepts of waste and promise.

⁵ Here Matus draws from Laura Brown's definition of trauma as not only an overwhelming, extraordinary event but also a continual condition which turns people into "walking wounded" (47). Matus writes: "By defining trauma as the extraordinary, Brown argues, we delude ourselves into believing that ordinary life is safe and manageable. But ordinary life is hardly safe for incest victims or victims of rape and molestation" (47). See Laura Brown's "Not Outside the Range: One Feminist Perspective on Psychic Trauma," in C. Caruth, Ed. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1996.

⁶ The jeremiads Bercovitch quotes in his *American Jeremiad* often reveal this plant and flower imagery. John Cotton announces, for example: "God plants us when he gives us roote in Christ" (Bercovitch 8). Cotton also quotes from the Second Book of Samuel: "I wil [sic] appoint a place for my people Israel, and wil plant it" (40). In other sermons, America is the "garden of the Lord"; "*rejoycing and blossoming as a Rose*" (112, 71 italics in original). Writing about the Puritans in *In the American Grain*, William Carlos Williams picks up on this tropology. "They were seeds," he says, "a fiery concentrate of great virtues—dwarfed"; "seeds of Elizabethan vigor . . . tight tied littleness" (Williams 113, 111).

⁷ See also Lynn Scott's "Beauty, Virtue and Disciplinary Power: A Foucauldian Reading of Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye," which aligns Morrison's analysis of racism with Foucault's analysis of the link between power and knowledge. Scott argues that The Bluest Eye "exposes a power that classifies and subjugates bodies, that produces different subjectivities within its discourse, and that is disseminated by a normalizing gaze" (Scott 21).

⁸ Michele Wallace, in "Modernism, Postmodernism and the Problem of the Visual in Afro-American Culture," refers to a study performed in the early 50s which attempted to assess the self-esteem of black children. The study, she explains, "found, among other things, that black children . . . preferred white dolls to black dolls" (Wallace 39). Wallace continues: "Of course, poverty and powerlessness feed a child's perception of what it means to have black skin, but this process is much more complex than a direct correlation could encompass. Rather, it is society's always already operative evaluation of images, further inscribed by skin color (dark or light, white or black or yellow or red) that would most affect a child's opinion of race. Not only the presence of 'negative' black images, as well as movie and television images, but the absence of black images in mass media in general is the crucial dynamic never accounted for" (39-40). Wallace cites The Bluest Eye as a text which addresses the "power of the image" (40).

⁹ Kobena Mercer's, "Black Hair/Style Politics" describes black hair as the "visible stigma of blackness" in a world which takes whiteness as the measure of beauty and human worth (Mercer 249).

¹⁰ Their concept of "becoming-woman" involves a kind of therapeutic contamination of "phallographic" identities; becoming-woman "is the first quantum, or molecular segment, with the becomings-animal that link up with it coming next" (279).

¹¹ Helen Smith's section on the Eleusinian Mysteries states that a "new school of interpretation suggests these mysteries are based upon a young woman's search for knowledge at the time of the menarch" (Smith 142). Persephone's descent into the underworld is a "symbolic reenactment of menstrual seclusion" (148). Furthermore, "Persephone remains tied to her mother through blood lines—the blood of family and the cyclical menstrual blood that transforms the seasons" (146). For Elizabeth Hayes, in Images of Persephone: Feminist Readings in Western Literature, The Bluest Eye attempts to inspire the kind of resistance which Persephone and Demeter employ against Hades, god of the dead; theirs is a "political tactic of refusal" implied in The Bluest Eye and set against the lethal submission to white, patriarchal America (170).

¹² There is also the visual (and possibly aural) pun, flow-er, in flower

¹³ Recent critics of the novel tend to concur that flight and transcendence do not develop into entirely positive depictions or conceptions of heroism in the novel. For example, James Hall questions “historical restrictions that . . . generate the yearning to fly” (Hall 71). Wahneema Lubiano reminds us that Milkman’s final leap “occurs over Pilate’s body . . . [and] disrupts any optimistically simple reading of Milkman’s action as one of untroubled transcendence” (Lubiano 112). Similarly, Linda Krumholz writes that the flight constitutes an escape from commitment and that women become “the sustenance and ground from which men leap” (Krumholz 111).

¹⁴ Similarly, Marianne Hirsch explains that “the novel’s project is to work through this dominance of the paternal and to confront paternal affiliations” (Hirsch 73).

¹⁵ Linda Krumholz considers the shifting meanings of Milkman’s name and maternal connections as he progresses through his quest: “In Part One the meaning of Milkman’s name seems evident. Milkman Dead is a pampered mama’s boy, suckled too long, and the inheritor of a dead heritage, a culture dispersed and useless, in which murder is the only solution. . . . But in Part Two, after Milkman and the reader gain an African-American spiritual and cultural framework for understanding, we can reinterpret his name with greater complexity. Don’t we discover that a connection to the dead, to one’s ancestors, is the essence of a vital cultural heritage? Aren’t we led to believe that men must also recognize their role as nurturers, as ‘mothers’ supplying their ‘milk’ to future generations? Didn’t Moses deliver his people from slavery into the land of milk and honey? Isn’t a milkman also, in a more whimsical sense, a ‘deliverer’?” (Krumholz 557-558)

¹⁶ As soon as the sheriff learns that Joe Christmas is “black,” he launches a man-hunt, the result of which is Christmas’s castration at the lynching hands of Percy Grimm.

¹⁷ See my chapter on Light in August and the introduction to Specters of Marx (xix).

¹⁸ “The war was good for Macon Dead,” the narrator remarks about W.W.II. (63).

¹⁹ According to Derrida, justice arises out of a promise to the future: “a promise of some future to come” (Specters 73). Possibility and promise belong, moreover, in the “realm of undecidability” (75). The promise of justice does not inhere in the concept of “design.” Rather, justice must be “summoned” in the “memory of hope” (65-75).

²⁰ The critics who discuss the element of song in Morrison’s novel surprisingly do not make reference to the biblical text, the language and imagery of which pervades Song of Solomon.

²¹ In the Book of Isaiah, the book immediately following the Song, the prophet declares: “Ah sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, a seed of evildoers, children that are corrupters: they have forsaken the Lord. . . . And the daughter of Zion is left as a cottage in a vineyard . . . as a besieged city” (1:4, 8).

22 Smith finds that, in the book of Kings, Solomon himself builds “‘high places’ to worship the Canaanite goddess” (181).

23 Smith provides both this quotation and the one from Leviticus (183).

24 Blood is deeply associated with wine, women and flowers in the novel. Milkman at one point “pictur[es] a spurt of wine-red blood;” Ruth’s tulips have “bloody red heads;” Magdalena and First Corinthians sew roses out of “blood-red squares of velvet,” and Hagar’s wine-stained fingers look “bloodstained in the lessening light” (113, 195, 11, 49).

25 Certainly, Macon resembles Jason in The Sound and the Fury. Like Jason, he pores over his accounting books, feels violently enraged by his sister, and tries to steal from her. Macon Dead’s father—who “tore a farm out of a wilderness” and died protecting it—calls to mind Thomas Sutpen (SS 293).

26 In The Wise Wound, Penelope Shuttle and Peter Redgrove write that Voodoo involves “possession and prophecy by wise ancestors” as well as blood rituals (Shuttle and Redgrove 214). “The menstruating woman in Voodoo,” they say, is a particular figure of “magical power . . . metamorphoses and animal possessions” (214-215).

27 The narrator remarks: “true to the palm oil that flowed in her veins, she never had a visitor to whom she did not offer food” (149). We also know that she bleeds to death.

28 The watermark would then constitute the third allusion to the ghostly presence of navels in the novel. It emerges along with Pilate’s absent navel and with the character of Circe, who, in Greek mythology, is “often identified as Omphale of Lydia, goddess of the omphalos or umbilicus, whose sacred navel stone marked the center of the world” (Adell 67).

29 For Kimberly Benston, the ghost’s words constitute Pilate’s “directive to embrace the other through performance, to bind herself to them with the powers of enchantment” (Benston 105). Benston continues: “Milkman finds that beneath the command lies the name of the mother, supposedly lost both to the past’s violence and to the equally violent efforts to forget the past. Understood dialectically, rather than diametrically, these connotations of the word ‘Sing’ imbricate the self’s performance and the mother’s language, delivering Pilate and Milkman from the father’s ghost, allowing *his* burial at last as the singular authoritative voice of desire and law” (105 Benston’s italics).

30 In Judeo-Christian iconography, Eve often does not have a navel because she was not born.

31 Ishmael Reed in Mumbo Jumbo describes Thoth this way (Reed 188). Tracing the significance of the Book of Thoth in Reed's novel, Henry Louis Gates asserts that Reed inverts Plato's equation of blackness with absence (and absence of meaning). Gates remarks near the end of his argument: "It is not too much to say that Mumbo Jumbo is one grand signifying riff on the Phaedrus" (Gates 315). Perhaps so too is Song of Solomon.

32 In Dissemination, Derrida writes that in the course of the war between Seth and Osiris, Thoth "sews up their wounds and heals them of their mutilation" (Dissemination 90). In The Gods and Symbols of Ancient Egypt, Thoth is described as the "protector of scribes . . . [and] helper of the dead" (Lurker 121). Arguably the novel's Thoth-figure in female form, Pilate is a wine-maker and shape-shifter who carries her written name like an amulet.

33 As Harold Cooke writes in his book on Osiris, "the moon . . . was full when Osiris was murdered by [Seth]" (Cooke 15). Cooke also explains that Plutarch, from whom he derives much of his research, refers to a celebration called the "entrance of Osiris into the moon" (31).

34 Cooke catalogues these, and other, lunar elements of the Osiris legend (68-69).

35 This inability to see color is, in Matus's words, "a traumatic commemoration" of the one event she refuses to remember: "as the blood drained from her daughter's body, so the color drains from Sethe's subsequent world" (109).

36 Addressing the materialization of a ghost from the past in Sethe's world, Sharon Holland and Michael Awkward assert, for instance, that Beloved challenges us "to remake a Western cosmology that draws a line between living and dead. . . . [It] seeks to depict a cosmology dissimilar to the often dichotomous Western binary one" (Holland and Awkward 49-50).

37 See Angelita Reyes' "Using History as Artifact to Situate Beloved's Unknown Woman: Margaret Garner" for a comprehensive account the historical figure behind Sethe. Reyes states: "Morrison . . . re-creates Garner's story out of literary inspiration as one to pass on, to tell to others, and as one to *pass* on, to give up and bury. The double entendre is an important device to discuss because it is part of Beloved's terminal refrain. As Paul D finally says, 'Sethe . . . me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow'" (Reyes 78).

38 Freeman defines the feminine sublime as the symbolic possession of the unrepresentable whole through its fragments. This possession also involves the relinquishment of mastering what cannot be entirely known.

39 Smith takes this quotation from R.T. Clark's Myth and Symbol in Ancient Egypt, in which Clark explains: "The rosy hue of the dawn sky, whether on the first morning or every day, is the blood emitted by Hathor or Isis—the names are interchangeable—when she bears her son" (qtd in Smith 165).

40 When the scene appears to reassert itself near the end of the novel, Sethe heads with her ice pick toward the man “coming into her yard” (BD 262).

41 Approaching the ethical dilemma evoked by Sethe’s action, Carolyn Denard illustrates how “Sethe has to pay” for the murder; “Even though she is glad to have saved her daughter from slavery, her grief and guilt nearly destroy her as she seeks forgiveness” (Denard 45, 46). Denard asserts that while Morrison’s novel delineates the historical circumstances of the murder, these circumstances do not entirely justify it on an ethical level: “Slavery gets none of them [neither the community nor Sethe] off the hook, and they must answer to themselves and their community before they finally achieve forgiveness and are able to move forward” (44).

42 Osiris’s scattered body and Isis’s regenerative actions also symbolize the annual cycle of new crops from the seeds of the old ones.

CONCLUSION

A pattern on a napkin dipped in blood.
(William Butler Yeats, "Veronica's Napkin")

What we call the beginning is often the end
And to make an end is to make a beginning.
(T.S. Eliot, "Little Gidding")

Karen Houppert's The Curse: Confronting the Last Unmentionable Taboo
(Summer 1999)--hot off the press as I completed the last chapter of this dissertation--
argues that a "culture of concealment" continues to surround menstruation as we enter the
twenty-first century. In her Introduction, Houppert writes:

Nobody spends time thinking about periods. Research on Americans' attitudes toward menstruation is very hard to come by. Periods are not a popular dissertation topic. Prestige and altruism rarely drive scientists to seek new cures for cramps. The U.S. government, which only recently recognized the importance of studying women's health issues by creating the National Institute of Health's Office of Women's Health, mostly limits its analysis of menstruation to one question: Does it render women unfit for combat? (5 Houppert's italics)

According to Houppert, we have yet to escape the prevailing taboo that marks menstruation as a shameful and dirty event. Referring to tampon advertisements, surveys of negative attitudes toward menstruation, and the recent "science" of PMS studies, she illustrates how this taboo gives rise to dangerous misinformation and distorted perceptions of the female body. It also encloses the experience of menstruation in silence, euphemisms and the practice of "menstrual etiquette." Armed with "sanitary protection," women discreetly and quietly endure that time of the month. As Houppert rhetorically asks, "What does it mean for a girl, a woman, to say simply, 'This happens to me' and for society to say, 'No it doesn't.' Not in movies. Not in books. Not in conversations" (9).

As my dissertation demonstrates, the study of American literature unwittingly

contributes to the assumption that menstruation is “not in books.” Despite its often obvious manifestation in canonical texts, menstruation remains almost entirely unheeded and unaddressed. While dozens of articles exist on the phallic imagery in Faulkner’s novels, and while no study fails to indicate the biological twin of Pynchon’s Rocket, none attempts to answer why the word “blood” occurs on almost every page of Absalom, Absalom!, or what possible meanings Stanley Koteks holds for The Crying of Lot 49. In Playing in the Dark, Morrison asserts that blood is a “pervasive fetish” in American literature. She writes: “black blood, white blood, the purity of blood, the purity of white female sexuality, the pollution of African blood and sex. Fetishization is a strategy often used to assert the categorical absolutism of civilization and savagery” (PD 68). In her fiction, she draws on the symbolic possibilities that menstruation offers to confront the ideological obsession with blood purity. Her texts are as bloody as Faulkner’s and Pynchon’s, and they address similar issues about bleeding and violence. Analyses of her novels, however, tend to focus upon the representation of the maternal body, leaving the menstrual body unspoken.

The critical silence on the subject of menstruation and blood in the frequently studied novels by Pynchon, Faulkner and Morrison gives evidence of the far-reaching effects of our “culture of containment.” Menstruation persists in its invisibility; it is there in the texts but we are not trained to see it—or we are subtly trained not to see it. Like Oedipa Maas, who begins to glimpse signs of the Tristero everywhere once she stumbles upon its existence, we have to become “sensitive” to a code that has always been right before our eyes. In fact, as a code connected not only to sight but also to scent, touch, metamorphoses and “other frequencies,” it has continually encircled us with its information.

In The Curse: A Cultural History of Menstruation, a forerunner of Houppert’s study, Janice Delaney, Mary Jane Lupton and Emily Toth open their chapter “Menstrual Imagery in Myth and Poetry” with the assertion: “Usually, the unmentionable is not mentioned. . . . Literary critics have either been unconscious or uninterested in the possible menstrual significance of myths and poems” (186). They trace references to menstruation in poetry, prose and drama by American, Irish, English and French writers, and make an especially convincing case for the appearance of menstrual symbols in the work of Yeats

and Baudelaire. Referring to the predominance of the moon in A Vision, they illustrate that Yeats constructs an elaborate mythos around lunar and menstrual cycles. His poetry, moreover, and particularly the poems in The Winding Stair and Other Poems, employs a full range of menstruation images: “The various napkin, blood, mire, oil, and stain images running through Yeats’s poetry—literally hundreds—are bound together by the overwhelming presence of the moon” (195). When The Curse’s authors turn to Baudelaire, they find that the flower occurs as a predominant symbol in his poetry. “We have noticed,” they add, “a snake or an odor or a ruined flower or a secretion on almost every page” of Les Fleurs du Mal (191). In their chapter on fiction, they offer brief discussions of Dorris Lessing, John Fowles, Maxine Hong Kingston and Sylvia Plath, to name only a few. Like Shuttle and Redgrove’s The Wise Wound, The Curse constitutes one of the first comprehensive studies of menstruation, its symbols, history and cultural significance. Published two years apart, in 1978 and 1976 respectively, they raise a necessary question: “Which is it, blessing or curse?” (Shuttle and Redgrove 13). From prehistory onward, as the studies show, menstruation has signified both.

The aim of my dissertation has not been to claim that a symbolic economy of menstruation functions exclusively in American literary texts. I maintain, however, that menstruation appears to be a particular and particularly complex preoccupation in this body of literature. It is a preoccupation that arguably arises out of the nation’s Puritan tradition, its myth of the promised land and its white population’s obsession with the purity of its blood and bloodlines. It tends to coincide, moreover, with a motif of lost possibilities—of the “might-have-been”—for a nation built on violence and war. From the conquest of native populations and the enslavement of Africans, to the Vietnam War (the war that frames, for instance, Morrison’s Sula), America, the land that promised a second chance at innocence, has been spilling blood for centuries. I have argued that its bloody history haunts the fiction of Thomas Pynchon, William Faulkner and Toni Morrison; engaging a language of menstruation, these writers summon the past and attempt to move beyond it. I hope to open up future discussions of writers who, I believe, make similar gestures toward the myth of America and the blood that accompanies it: Emily Dickinson, Edgar Allen Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Stephen Crane.

Because this dissertation alludes to the conquest of America, it also looks forward to analyses of Native American writers and their responses to the myth imposed upon their land. A recently published article by Chadwick Allen in *American Literature* (March 1999), titled "Blood (and) Memory," illuminates the trope of "blood memory" in Native American texts and discusses the "one drop" rule in nineteenth-century legislation of "Indian" status. Investigating the Native writers' approaches to the subject of Indian blood, Allen writes:

In the works of many American Indian writers produced during the contemporary American Indian renaissance, the issue of blood quantum or degree of Indian blood is a site of personal and social conflict, opening upon their pages as painful wounds inextricably personal—'Are you a real Indian?'—and political—'How much Indian blood do you have?' Perhaps paradoxically, in many of these works blood quantum is also a source of potential power. . . . Blood memory names both the process and the product of situating oneself within a particular American Indian family's or nation's 'racial memory.' (98)

Writers like Scott Momaday, Gerald Vizenor, Joy Harjo and Linda Hogan confront the pernicious question of blood purity and turn it into a trope for recuperating Indian identity. Blood forms a sustaining link between knowledge of the past and hope for the future. Despite the suggestive title of his article, Allen makes no mention of menstruation. His research and argument, however, raise the possibility of seeing a connection among menstrual blood, blood purity and the blood of memory.

On a final note, I have attempted to show that menstruation functions as a trope intimately related to a concept of responsibility and to interconnection across the divisive ideologies of race and sex. I have not wished to propose a dominant ideological position for the menstrual cycle. In the words of Simone de Beauvoir on the possibility of a kind of menstrual sovereignty, "It would be ridiculous and absurd, it would be like constructing a counter-penis" (qtd in Lupton 6). However, I disagree with Karen Houppert's statement that texts like *The Wise Wound* are "steeped in quaint 1970s rhetoric" (Houppert 218). Like Jean-Joseph Goux, René Girard, Chris Knight, Julia Kristeva, Dorothy Dinnerstein, as well as the novelists I study here, the authors of *The Curse* and *The Wise Wound* seek a way out of the violent systems that overpower our world. If Chris Knight is right in asserting that "collective responsibility has been with us since the very inception of

culture,” then the rhetoric surrounding menstruation may return us to the possibilities inherent in synchronized activity and in the connections between nature and culture (14).

This desire for a return to a new beginning underwrites the Puritan vision of America. The Puritans were on to something, but they mixed it up with a notion of being cursed and, in Williams’ words, they “lost all direction” (80). Taking on the tradition of the puritan jeremiads and, in Morrison’s case, the black jeremiads, Pynchon, Faulkner and Morrison look to America and attempt to right its wrongs by addressing the meaning of a bloody curse and by exposing the ideological foundations of violent blood-letting. Richard Gray states in the conclusion to his analysis of Absalom, Absalom!—a statement which, I believe, applies to each of the novels I studied here—that to read properly, “is to know what knowing the past entails, but also to know that such knowing is never ended: that we are not doomed but, on the contrary, challenged to think and think again every time we open the book” (225). The process of thinking about the past, asking what went wrong, and where to begin again, does not doom us to a repetitive, meaningless practice; rather, it binds us to a regenerative cycle in which knowledge pulses to the rhythms of transformation.

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