

**Faulkner Unplugged:
Abortopoesis and *The Wild Palms***

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It was a collapsing of the entire body.

1

A current style of performance in the popular music world is for the artist to present himself "unplugged." The term refers to new and to renewed acts by such veteran rock and roll artists as Paul McCartney, who unplugged his electric guitar in a tremendously successful acoustic tour a few years ago. Recordings followed, and unplugged productions became the rage. In addition to McCartney, other rock and rollers have unplugged themselves for public consumption. Pulling the plug aborts the power source, leaving the artist without electrical amplification in a medium that defines itself by electricity. Nonetheless, for many older performers, unplugging the power source represents a means of regaining influence in the music world: Rod Stewart, Neil Young, and Aerosmith, for example, had fallen from the public arena until their return via the unplugged route. Rock and roll performers who became superstars in the 1960s and 1970s *because* they "plugged in" to (and largely defined) electrical music are now returning to prominence because they are unplugging themselves from that same source. McCartney, with The Beatles, set the standard for amplified rock and roll music, moving from his left-handed electric bass guitar to various synthetic creations, all plugged into endless sources of electrified power. Now, thirty years after the electrical revolution in popular music, the old rockers return unplugged, claim-

ing renewed musical relevance through a kind of abdication of surge.

There are clear gains to be had in the masculine act of negating the source of original vitality. However, similar avenues of renewed potency are not open to female artists. The phenomenon of "unplugged" performances has been claimed almost exclusively by males and there are very few veteran female artists who have overtly presented themselves "unplugged." The fact that there is something vaguely ludicrous in the thought of *Bonnie Raitt: Unplugged*, or *Linda Ronstadt: Unplugged*, indicates that there is something particularly male about this phenomenon, and that women are not readily able to participate. Electrified rock and roll has been, traditionally, a male phenomenon, with women operating at the margins. To continue the surge terminology, it may be that female artists are not perceived as being plugged in to begin with. Sexism in popular music has marked the industry from its inception. The female artist without tremendous power is more likely recognized as the *norm* in feminine popular music, with plugged-in acts (such as Janis Joplin's) seen as clear departures. Gender distinctions in rock and roll music are thus brought to the fore in the current phenomenon of unplugged performances. The unplugged female artist is either a redundancy or, even worse, signals the death of the female artist. After all, *k.d.lang: unplugged* would simply disappear. Perhaps a woman cannot unplug a power source to which the culture finds her in dubious connection.¹

The "unplugged" movement in popular music represents a cultural moment in which the asymmetrical status of the genders can be delineated. What is the qualitative difference between unplugging a male artist and unplugging his female counterpart? When male artists unplug themselves they implicitly claim that the authority of their performance is enhanced by, but not dependent upon, their power source. Unplugged, the artist seems to speak directly to us, aging rock and rollers that we may be. To have had such potency (The Beatles in Shea Sta-

dium, four young men surrounded by such electrical amplification) and then to unplug it: what greater act of intimacy and strength can there be? Do we not remember how it was, how close we felt to Paul McCartney thirty years ago? I can almost imagine the fan's plea to an "unplugged" McCartney: "We cant help it. It's not us now. That's why: don't you see? I want it to be us again, quick, quick. We have so little time. In twenty years I cant anymore and in fifty years we'll both be dead.'"²

Quoted here, of course, is Charlotte Rittenmeyer's plea to her lover, Harry Wilbourne, concerning her planned abortion. Charlotte and Harry, in *The Wild Palms*, attempt to unplug themselves and their social performances from traditional sources of gendered power (Harry from his career, Charlotte from her children) so that it will "be us again," the two lovers, alone. Harry's cultural potency is based upon his being plugged into medical school. When he quits, he must rely on his resources without professional legitimacy. He manages to do this well enough. The conventional source of female power flows from the ability to give birth, so Charlotte's attempt to unplug herself is more dangerous than a simple abdication of social power. *Harry Wilbourne: Unplugged* is a renegade doctor, an abortionist; but *Charlotte Rittenmeyer: Unplugged* is a nonentity, a corpse.

What Harry and Charlotte want above all else is to be disengaged from the sources of power that, initially, have assured their destinies. For Harry, this means quitting school and assuming an identity based not on a medical degree but on his learned and discovered talents. Charlotte, on the other hand, is compelled to abjure motherhood and construct an identity centered not on procreation but upon the cessation of maternity. Her final claim to the right of abortion proposes that female power be based not only in motherhood, being plugged in to certain biological determinants, but also in the antithesis of creation, in the act of unplugging the power source itself. Charlotte's liberation, then, is an assault on an entire system of patriarchy that is dependent upon the equation of femininity

with maternity. In her traditional definition, the woman is designed to receive what the male produces. Constructed as absence, female sexuality, on such Freudian terms, cannot withstand the willful abdication of what is already understood as an endowed vulnerability. Unplugging Charlotte produces a double negative: the removal of absence. The act, in Faulkner's imagination, is an invitation to disaster, a primal flooding, an overdetermination of consequences. Harry's liberation is a simple walk away from middle-class rewards, with no corresponding loss in his socially defined maleness. Unplugged, Harry is liberated both socially and sexually; but when he tries to unplug Charlotte, he must confront the "tremendous silence which roared down upon him like a wave, a sea" (307). The unplugged man signals life and vitality, but the unplugged woman invites death: she is suicidal.

The Wild Palms provides a useful frame through which to explore the idea of becoming "unplugged" from culturally determined power. The novel's central act of abortion might be cast as *Female: Unplugged*, or the disengaging of the female from the mother. Through abortion the female claims that her potency lies not only in creation but also in a sort of Faulknerian uncreation. And just as the pop artist cannot become "unplugged" unless his musical influence has already based itself upon being plugged in (we can't have James Taylor unplugged), so too does abortion only become a power issue if maternity and pregnancy have been established as primal sources of female potency. Judith Wilt calls contemporary abortion consciousness "the Armageddon of the maternal instinct" because in it she senses "the last days, not of maternity, but of maternity as instinct." Through the choice of abortion, maternity becomes a matter of consciousness, no longer an exclusively natural function.³ The abortion debate at the end of the twentieth century is a power struggle among women that revolves around the question of where, exactly, female potency originates. When the man is unplugged, a nostalgia for lost power in turn provides him a new source of vitality. When the woman is unplugged, it

is not nostalgia that emerges but a kind of natural disaster. A man may give up the signs of his masculinity and become an unplugged male phenomenon, like Harry Wilbourne, who knows that Charlotte is "a better man than I am" (133). He can even dream of lying "passively on his back," achieving the "peace with which a middleaged eunuch might look back upon the dead time before his alteration" (34). But the unplugged female finds no such serenity. Charlotte, unplugged during her abortion, senses "more than just a slackening of joints and muscles," but "a collapsing of the entire body as undammed water collapses" (306). Harry, unplugged, is at peace; he is a "eunuch," a negation of physical masculinity, yes, but also the embodiment of a kind of postsexual tranquility. Charlotte unplugged is "a collapsing," a catastrophic disintegration of both self and, given the consequences, of the social order she has created with Harry. *The Wild Palms* might thus be read as Faulkner's interrogation of the discordant sexual bases of male and female social and cultural autonomy.

The novelty of the unplugged male performer in the 1990s is an emblem of a general trend among men to willingly abdicate traditional sources of power. However, as projected in *The Wild Palms*, the ability of a man to unplug himself from his own masculinity indicates no real loss of cultural dominance, but quite the opposite.⁴ When Harry quits medical school to become Charlotte's lover, his masculinity is not reduced, his actions are no affront to nature or to his middle-class "obligations." In fact, both he and Charlotte and the force of the narrative itself argue against any such idea of bourgeois commitment. The only obligation Harry has is to be Charlotte's lover, a particular kind of male fantasy,⁵ but also the reversal of a conventional wifely function. Harry is unplugged from any customary masculine duties. Charlotte pulls the plug, as we know, and tries to get Harry to do the same for her. But in Faulkner's imagination (and in ours, too, as a culture that has not achieved consensus on the source of female power) the woman cannot be unplugged without letting loose "the boom

of seas" and "the roar of water" that accompany Charlotte's death (315).⁶

2

Abortion, abortion, abortion. Like the oldentime *Be Light*, the current *Be Still*. Do the creators truly possess the will to destroy? The modernist has unplugged God and turned to her own creative powers. *Creativity*. We worship this in ourselves. We canonize those with creative genius, those who create and in turn enthrall our critical creativities. *Genius*. Surely William Faulkner was one. Study him. How did he do it? *Study him*. Where did he get it? *Study him*. Where did it come from? *Abortion, abortion, abortion.* Wouldn't we like to go through Faulkner's garbage can. What did this man throw away, the stuff our books are made of? We sing the old Beatles' song: "Hey, Bungalow Bill: What did you kill, Bungalow Bill?"

3

The Wild Palms is comprised of a series of narrative abortions. Every time the text stops and goes either to "Old Man" or to "Wild Palms" a textual abortion occurs, a stop-narrative of Faulkner unplugged. Minrose Gwin aligns these narrative incisions with menstrual images: "the novel flows sequentially until the reader's desire for the story reaches a point of fullness, beyond which it cannot go without flooding." In Gwin's view this accounts for the centrality of the Mississippi River, as each abrupt interruption in the narrative flow is like a "bend" in the stream.⁷ Gwin's interpretation is perfectly valid, but there is more than one way to deal with fullness. I don't think that *The Wild Palms* celebrates or even valorizes female fecundity. On the contrary, I see the novel as one in which creation is inverted, so that creativity expands to encompass its own cessation. The novel wants to know what it is like to be unplugged from the

very essence of one's being, to put a stop to the bends and flows of narrative and physical creation.

Certain images are emblematic: Charlotte in her beach chair, the convict in his jail cell, Harry by himself, grieving. We confront these people at points where their own creativity or resourcefulness has left them, ultimately, alone. From the perspective of gender, *The Wild Palms* does suggest a gulf between man and woman that may flood into passion (as Gwin implies); it also suggests that all intergender experience is subject to abortion, to sudden collapse, because each and every one of us is captive to our own sexuality. Abortion, in Faulkner's hands, encompasses gender interaction; it can also stand for the impasse of postfeminist stoppage itself, one of those Faulknerian doors, or barriers, that we cannot pass. The public debate over abortion has crippled the feminist movement in the United States, dividing women, diverting political energies from civil rights. Faulkner draws attention to violent cessation, to impasse, and to the perplexing violations of body and psychic space that are made continually by the Other. When Charlotte discusses her pregnancy with Harry she says that "they hurt too much." Harry at first mistakes her meaning, thinking "they" are her children: "He was about to say, 'But this will be ours,' when he realised that this was it, this was exactly it" (217). Charlotte means it hurts too much to be plugged in.

The continuity of bodies, from mother to child, denies the autonomy of the female self, and the "hurt" that Charlotte seeks to abort is the pain of this intrusive, unwelcome qualification of her own independence. Charlotte has abandoned everything in her past to assure the complete autonomy of an unplugged self, to create herself and her destiny anew. When she becomes pregnant, she is threatened with the return of her former self, Mother Charlotte. It takes Harry some time, but he eventually realizes what the pregnancy means to this woman. Harry shares Charlotte's desire to be unplugged, and to have the creative freedom of self-renewal and self-construction. But rather than oppose the unborn, Harry initially envies it, thinking about the

"wombs into which human beings fled before something of suffering but mostly of terror . . . to become as embryos for a time . . . then to be born again, to emerge renewed" (299). A large portion of our current conception of freedom hinges upon the idea of social construction, of choices, of freely engaged selves. Abortion stares back in negation. Is creative liberty, the freedom to create self and voice, made greater or diminished when adjoined by the freedom to destroy?

The narrative line in *The Wild Palms* is nonlinear; it is abortive. Neither "Wild Palms" nor "Old Man," the twin narratives of Faulkner's text, ever comes to term. The reader is continually wrenched away from one fictional conception and one set of expectations to another setting and another realm of experience. The narrative in *The Wild Palms* is an eternally aborting phenomenon, and it has the potential of repeating itself *ad infinitum, ad abortus*. An abortion, moreover, declares an end not only to an embryo, a potential child, but also aborts a mother and a father, potentialities contained as well within the womb. As readers of *The Wild Palms*, our attention, our expectation of textual fruition, is continually aborted. Many readers have responded (as did editors at Signet⁸) with their own elimination of one or the other of the narratives, reading "Wild Palms" or "Old Man" right through, aborting the other entirely without compunction, even discarding the title Faulkner had given the book initially.⁹

If one begins to create, what is the responsibility to complete that creation? Readers of *The Wild Palms* have often complained, explicitly or implicitly, about Faulkner's series of narrative abortions. Early critics (such as Irving Howe¹⁰ and Joseph Moldenhauer¹¹) provided charts and guides to prove the inner logic of the disparate narratives. Thomas McHaney's book-length study of the novel tracks down narrative connections, thematic linkages ("Both the tall convict and the lovers want to evade the realities of life"), and establishes once and for all the holism of the text.¹² Faulkner, of course, claimed the right to provide the story of "Wild Palms" with the counterpoint of "Old

Man."¹³ But what is the relation between the creation of Harry and Charlotte and the necessity, or the right, to abort that story with "contrapuntal" action? If the romantic tale of the runaway lovers were not so thoroughly discredited by the botched abortion, Faulkner's method of narrative counterpoint would be, simply, a clever experiment. However, Faulkner's contrapuntal measures are mirrored by the measures taken by the lovers in their attempt to counter Charlotte's pregnancy. Critical measures taken to assure the continuities between the disparate narratives are attempts to naturalize Faulkner's style, to prove that this is, after all, a novel. While the abortion is, in fact, successful (there will be no pregnancy), it comes at the price of Charlotte's own life. And where critical interventions are successful (there will be no separation of these two narratives), it comes at the price of some critical integrity. After all, no matter how many parallels in theme and image we can find, these two stories still have nothing to do with each other. Confronting the novel as a novel, I suggest, means grappling with abortion as narrative contingency. Even though the text makes abortion a deadly business, in other words, its greater significance lies in the dramatic projection of a world in which abortion is a moral dilemma. At one time the power to create held human beings in awe; now it is the power to eliminate life before birth that stops us in our tracks.

Gwin is right: "Charlotte Rittenmeyer bleeds into these pages the unresolvable pleasure and terror of the flooding of self. In the end, Charlotte's *I* floats away like flotsam. We are left to read its indecipherable traces in the dark stain of her woman's blood."¹⁴ But the stain left behind is not entirely indecipherable. Harry can read it, seeing in it the clear choice between memory and eternal obliteration. The community can read also, condemning Harry to prison. No doubt the tall convict reads it as well: his " 'women, - - -t! ' " epigraph is one way to decipher the Other. In Charlotte Rittenmeyer's blood, and in her discarded pregnancy, we must read what we mean by self, by *I*, by full subjectivity. When Charlotte becomes pregnant, Harry is

aborted as son and empowered as the creator, as father. Aborting that pregnancy, on the other hand, protects the autonomous Harry from qualification. Harry's "botched abortion" puts an end to the pregnancy, to Charlotte, and to his own self as father.

Philosophers and social scientists who have contemplated abortion as an epistemological issue have come to important conclusions which illuminate Faulkner's novel. According to Kristin Luker, "*the debate about abortion is a debate about personhood,*" including the person of the man and woman. Thus, the political debate over abortion concerns whether "*personhood is a 'natural,' inborn, and inherited right, rather than a social, contingent, and assigned right.*"¹⁵ Luker, a social scientist, posits that "pro-life" people find abortion abhorrent because it means that life may be assigned value according to social worth, and that "social worth" may be decided by those in positions of social or economic dominance. On the other hand, "pro-choice" people see the refusal to assume control over human destiny as a kind of cowardice, a failure of will. But the issue will not divide so neatly.

If "pro-choice" people stand for free will, they also have the desire to protect the past, to construct history according to freely made choices in the present. If, in the eyes of choice, nothing is "meant to be," then nothing that has transpired has done so without human intervention. Far from being irresponsible or "anti-life," then, pro-choice people find life itself wrought with human decisions and emotional consequences. On the other hand, "pro-life" people believe in a far more providential, or guided universe, and so they have a logical desire to protect the future from murderous interference, to stand guard over immortality and to assure God of their continued belief. Far from being simpleminded "breeders," pro-life people seek to protect the person from willful destruction. It seems no coincidence that theories of a socially constructed self and sexuality, and especially the rise of gender-based studies, should accompany this era of abortion debate in the United States. The

assertive confidence of self-construction is shadowed by the darker question of self-demolition.

Legal philosophy often casts abortion as a privacy issue, leaving aside the social scientist's question of personhood and the literary question of self. Frances Kamm's argument concerning the right of self-defense bears direct relevance to Charlotte's own words about wanting to be alone with Harry. "You have no special obligation to permit your body to be used," according to Kamm, when "an attachment is forced on you."¹⁶ Hence, the right of abortion is akin to the right to defend oneself from unwelcome intrusion. A person must admit that there are limits to what the body can be made to bear, according to Kamm, and the determination of those limits ought to be made by the body in question. Kamm introduces another conundrum into an understanding of abortion that will clarify Faulkner's narrative. The pro-life position, which bases its rhetoric on self-control and willed, physical destiny, hinges upon this issue of limitations. Judith Wilt captures this point when she argues that "the pro-life world-view, so apparently narrow and rigid in practice, so gender structured and hierarchical, prides itself on a philosophical vision of limitlessness—a vision that all possibility may be actuality; while the pro-choice world-view, so multivalent and uncoercive in practice, so committed to the relaxation and crossing of gender and other boundaries, founds itself (pride is not quite the word) on a philosophical vision of human limits—a vision of oscillating losses and gains."¹⁷

Faulkner's novel cannot be reduced to a dialectic on abortion politics, however. This is because the novel is about abortion more thoroughly and more comprehensively than a simple litmus test would reveal.¹⁸ *The Wild Palms* raises abortion to the level of narrative trope; it assumes that aborting pregnancy is something human beings can do, and asks what this capacity means in terms of personhood, gender, and human creativity. Abortion imagery plays a central role throughout the novel, even if we leave aside the two surgical abortions that Harry performs. Technically, *The Wild Palms* contains both its name-

sake, "Wild Palms," and another narrative, "Old Man," existing in a relation of mother-text to embryo. Whether one has the "right" to abort "Old Man" or "Wild Palms" from *The Wild Palms* raises questions about the integrity of the novel that parallel debates over the rights of women and their unborn children. Beyond this question of structure, the novel is permeated by abortion imagery.

Harry's story begins on his birthday, the recognition and celebration of which he nearly forgoes until he is convinced by his roommate to attend a party, where he meets Charlotte. Had Harry aborted his birthday celebration, none of this would have happened. In order to run away with Charlotte, Harry aborts his medical school internship only a few months before finishing it, or taking it to term. As such, he is a non-doctor, an aborted med-school graduate, with no rights to a job, a career, or to a life as a legitimate doctor. He can, as he says, become an abortionist. The first time that Harry and Charlotte plan to have sex together their lovemaking is aborted because it does not meet Charlotte's romantic expectations. Her language echoes the familiar terminology of abortion: " 'Not like this, Harry. Not back alleys' " (46).

Abortion imagery follows Harry and Charlotte as they attempt to run away together. On the train, still hesitating before leaving with Harry, Charlotte decides to talk to her husband, Rat. She says she must do this in order to "finish" her relationship with him. The terminology, again, casts the deed as an abortion. " 'It's not finished,' " she tells Harry. " 'It will have to be cut' " (59). The "monthly" letters sent back to Charlotte's husband are meant to assure him that Harry has not aborted Charlotte, that she is still being taken care of and may eventually emerge once again in her husband's life. The one time she and Harry don't write (when they "miss" their monthly obligation), detectives come and Harry loses his job. He loses his job because his employer finds out that as a doctor he does not really exist, that Harry is an abortion.

The peaceful, edenic existence that Harry and Charlotte

enjoy after Bradley leaves them alone is also broken by abortion allusions. Charlotte calls Harry "Adam," and he assures her that "they had always been alone" (109). After Bradley leaves, Charlotte swims naked every morning while Harry lies in bed "existing in a drowsy and foetuslike state, passive and almost un sentient in the womb of solitude and peace. . . . Then one day something happened to him" (110). What happens is Time. Harry realizes that they will soon run out of food; it is time to come to terms, so to speak, with their predicament. Harry thinks of his relationship with Charlotte and their life together in birth imagery. Before birth " 'you are never alone' " because " 'you are secure and companioned in a myriad and inextricable anonymity.' " It is after birth that " 'you are going to be alone,' " Harry says. And as he tells McCord, " 'you can bear just so much solitude and still live' " (138). According to this logic, abortion returns the embryo to a community that pre- and postdates life itself. Alone together, Harry and Charlotte exist in a womb of self-sufficiency. They are aborted by Time itself, a sort of romantic miscarriage.

Finally, in the realm of the contrapuntal, the tall convict is suddenly removed from the society of prisoners into the world in which he is both alone and a free man. He is born into the world of civil freedoms as he rides the flood where a literal birth takes place. He is then sent back into the foetal-state of the "unborn" or "unfree" prison population. The reappearance of the tall convict is troubling because he is already technically (or, bureaucratically) dead. The guard has reported that " 'the body of the prisoner was no longer in his possession' " (330), that he had, in a sense, aborted the prisoner. Like an embryo that will not be extinguished, the tall convict forces the Warden to declare him in violation of the law, extending his term, forcing him back into the prison-womb.

The list could well continue and be brought to completion, but it can also stop here. Others have noted the "foetal and maternal images"¹⁹ that saturate the novel, and have pointed out the way that "the birth metaphor limits narrative possibilities for

Charlotte."²⁰ Janet Carey Eldred cites "still life" imagery in the novel, and points out that critics have largely avoided the centrality of Charlotte's abortion, or have seen it as "unnatural, immoral, unethical, in short, not fit subject matter" for fiction.²¹ Recently, Gary Harrington has seen the abortion as emblematic of artistic and personal failure: Harry's professional decline ("hack-work as a doctor") and Charlotte's "attempt to escape the cost in suffering involved in being a parent."²² But we are dealing here with characters in a novel, not real people (although Faulkner reminds us of a collective fantasy: "*It should be the books, the people in the books inventing and reading about us*" [52; italics in original]). As such, Charlotte's guilt or innocence is not, finally, as important as the way that Faulkner projects the idea of abortion, the narrative means by which he incorporates it into his aesthetics, and the way that those aesthetics, in turn, speak to our own confusion, as a culture, on this matter.

In *The Wild Palms*, abortion is a trope of human existence, one possible response to immanent meaning. Barbara Johnson has asked, "How might the plot of human subjectivity be reconceived (so to speak) if pregnancy rather than autonomy is what raises the question of deliberateness?"²³ The question is a good one to put to *The Wild Palms*, since its conception of human subjectivity is tied inextricably to "all pregnant and female life" (153). Johnson finds "encoded into male poetic conventions" the substitution of creativity for the literal act of giving birth. If "male writing" has been cast as "by nature procreative," Johnson provocatively suspects the implication that "female writing is somehow by nature infanticidal."²⁴ In *The Wild Palms*, the artistry of Charlotte is under scrutiny, and both she and Harry are, at alternate times, productive in their respective crafts. Gail Mortimer points out as well that it is only when "Charlotte's role as a mother threatens to reassert itself" that her relationship to Harry (and her artistry) falls apart. To Mortimer, the pregnancy and Harry's reaction to it "symbolizes the boundary confusion that is the ultimate threat from

women."²⁵ This reading is sensible especially if we consider the logic by which Charlotte is destroyed. She wishes to be alone with Harry and attempts to stop her pregnancy in order to secure that isolation. She also wishes to capture, in her art, the quality of " 'motion, the speed' " (100) rather than the moving image itself. Her abortion stops her own life as well as that of the embryo inside her, returning Charlotte to the dimension of potentiality along with the unborn, a place of "boundary confusion" where her art is certainly aligned with infanticide, and suicide. As a woman unplugged, disengaged from the known source of her being, there is no place for Charlotte on earth.

It can only be this subconscious realization, the alignment of her creativity with aborted lives and with her own death, that inspires in Charlotte a truly novel term for the feminine experience of sexual intercourse: bitching. To "bitch" is to complain as only a woman can complain. There is no male counterpoint to this term. When she bitches, a woman faces the prospect of hysteria, of becoming unplugged. To "bitch" is to protest with female vigor and in excess of civility. Against what does Charlotte bitch when she bitches with Harry? Heterosexual lovemaking may be a kind of Faulknerian No to death, with Charlotte bitching against her own mortality and the suicidal predicament of female creativity. She says she likes to bitch, and by the evidence in the text, she speaks truthfully. " 'I like bitching, and making things with my hands' " (88). If both of Charlotte's favorite acts are potentially creative, the products of either her hands or her bitching can be aborted. Nonetheless, neither bitching nor making things grants autonomy to the subject; on the contrary, both court danger, not stemming from the acts themselves, but from the painful processes of pregnancy and artistry. Both also stem from desire, and for this Charlotte's term is most appropriate. She bitches against the natural fact that the object of her desire is also the source of her eventual obliteration. Harry kills her, but only after she talks him into risking it. " 'We've done this lots of ways but not with knives, have we?' " (221). She bitches; he botches.

Karen Ramsay Johnson has argued that, throughout his fiction, Faulkner transgresses "traditional male and female sex roles" and "rejects stable categories of self-definition to participate in the re-creative process of narration." As a result, sexual deviance, or departure, signals creativity in much of Faulkner's apocryphal world. Hence Charlotte Rittenmeyer, who "stubbornly refuses to fit any category," also "cannot give up her femaleness," and so she is trapped. "For Charlotte, as for other of Faulkner's female rebels, there is no room"²⁶ Duvall echoes and expands upon the threat to "traditional gender distinctions" represented by "Charlotte's quest for subjectivity."²⁷ Charlotte's desire for autonomy will not be compromised by pregnancy or by motherhood. Moreover, Charlotte bitches against the equation of her body and its desires with the loss of subjectivity. She seeks, in a sense, to stop the inevitability of that loss by aborting it every time it appears. " 'I dont think that's too much to be permitted to like, to want to have and keep,' " she tells Harry. (88). If such desires signal a deviant creativity, Charlotte is constructing, in *The Wild Palms*, an alternative femininity; but she ends up martyring herself to that alternative. And as martyr, any feminine alternative represented by Charlotte Rittenmeyer is aborted.

"While on the surface it is the embryo's fate that seems to be at stake," Kristin Luker writes, "the abortion debate is actually about the meanings of women's lives."²⁸ Critics have attempted to assign meaning to Charlotte's character, given the choices she makes. We may agree that "the plot punishes Charlotte's individualism,"²⁹ or that "both lovers are to blame for what happens,"³⁰ but either way, we have the trope of abortion surging through the text. Both Charlotte and Harry attempt to become unplugged from their time and place—Harry from his career as a doctor, Charlotte from her artistic calling and the call of her husband and daughters. Harry articulates the danger involved: " 'You are born submerged in anonymous lockstep with the teeming anonymous myriads of your time and generation; you get out of step once, falter once, and you are trampled

to death" (54). To Harry the "death" here is figurative. He has killed his chances to become a doctor. Abortion is an abstract issue for males, involving the beginning of life, the power to create and to destroy. But for Charlotte, as portrayed in *The Wild Palms*, it is the very source of her creative vitality that hinges upon her abortion.

4

"None of us are androgynous" (129), quips Harry, a sentiment that might serve as the golden rule in gender studies. Much in the way that "Wild Palms" stands separate from and yet entwined with "Old Man," female and male cannot be collapsed as texts or as genders, although the prospects for intertextual linkages are endless. Placing the parallel narratives together results in interpretations that may be aborted or allowed to mature. In any case, the novel is, as the saying goes, "very pregnant" with critical possibilities. The way the convict sees his pregnant companion is the way I see the novel as a whole, substituting the text for the woman's body: "When he looked upon the swelling and unmanageable body before him it seemed to him that it was not the woman at all but rather a separate demanding threatening inert yet living mass of which both he and she were equally victims" (154). We become the victims of this novel when we see that it compels us to recognize the Age of Abortion as one in which we must confront the implications of our quest for creative freedom, individual license, and autonomy.

There is much in *The Wild Palms* to suggest that gender itself, as a critical category, represents an analytical incongruity. McHaney has commented on how "almost everyone is depicted in androgynous terms" in the novel, suggesting "the oneness of life beneath the apparent diversity of individuality."³¹ Duvall even says we should reverse Harry's quip and recognize that the novel presents a case in which "all of us are androgynous."³² But in the intellectual climate of the present age, "oneness" and

"androgyny" simply don't pay as well as diversity and the study of gender difference. Ours is an individualist culture, in which differentiated existence is prized highly and what we have in common simply is not very interesting. The "androgynous couple,"³³ Charlotte and Harry, are an affront to everyone. Again, Harry sees the danger he is entering: "So I am afraid," he confesses to McCord. "Because They are smart, shrewd, They will have to be; if They were to let us beat Them, it would be like unchecked murder and robbery" (140). Faulkner's scarlet letter stands for Abortion, and beating Them means achieving a state of unplugged self-sufficiency and clean perfection.

No conventionally moral interpretation will suffice for this novel. It is not pro-life and it is not pro-choice; Charlotte and Harry are neither good nor evil; the convict is neither victim nor culprit. *The Wild Palms* is *Faulkner: Unplugged*, and abortion is its chief symbol of the age. In Faulkner's hands, the issue incorporates far more than rights and freedoms; but also in Faulkner's hands, it all comes down, finally, to women's lives. Abortion represents the deadend of modern individualism as much as the death of the maternal instinct. To be unplugged from the cultural significance of her body means that Charlotte must be prepared to die for the abdication of her maternal powers.³⁴

Pro-choice contemporaries are often appalled when abortion demonstrations turn violent, seeing a contradiction in pro-life activists who will kill to stop abortions. Faulkner's novel makes clear that this is, indeed, a life and death issue, and it is not only the life of the embryo that is at stake. Men have already died for the freedoms Harry takes for granted: the freedom to walk away from a job, the freedom to run away with another man's wife (and in his case, be provided an insurance policy for it). For males, the freedom to become "unplugged" may indicate that men are not quite so divided amongst themselves over the meaning of their bodies in the public realm.³⁵ Women, however, have yet to completely negotiate the terms of their own

physical freedom. Charlotte takes all the risks in *The Wild Palms*. The abortion performed on her body is only the most dramatic example of the danger in which she places herself when she gets out of step, falters once and is "trampled to death." Harry unplugged is a free man. Charlotte unplugged is a dead woman, leaving Harry convicted of complicity in the botched attempt at her liberation. The act of unplugging, like the act of abortion itself, may signal the exhaustion of modernist freedoms. We would all like to be Unplugged: no complicity in power relations, nothing but our self and what we love, and our audience. It is a suicidal desire. Harry has his famous choice between grief and nothing; Charlotte is not so fortunate. "Between grief and nothing?" Shit.

NOTES

1. Even Watkins locates a parallel discontinuity between male and female roles in soap operas, where men can "depart" from sanctioned male roles (to the extent of being criminals, even rapists) and then reform themselves via penitent sympathy for their victims, eventually rejoining the community as renewed males. Women lack this power: once a bad girl, always a bad girl; no penitence or gender-reversal is allowed female characters. "That such an option never really appears [for women] is a good clue to who actually benefits from the modalities of performance," according to Watkins. "The destabilization of gender-identified roles facilitates what nevertheless remains a primarily masculine power of behaving differently. Men, again, can act differently as men; women can act differently only by somehow appearing 'beyond gender.'" *Throwaways: Work Culture and Consumer Education* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 154-55. In the language of MTV, males can unplug themselves far more meaningfully (and profitably) than females.
2. William Faulkner, *The Wild Palms* (New York: Vintage, 1966; orig. published 1939), 210. Subsequent references to this text are made parenthetically.
3. Judith Wilt, *Abortion, Choice, and Contemporary Fiction: The Armageddon of the Maternal Instinct* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 34.
4. Faulkner took advantage of this male prerogative in the 1950s when he presented himself "unplugged" in the public arena, claiming no literary authority and identifying himself as a Mississippi mule farmer. Jay Watson, in *Forensic Fictions: The Lawyer Figure in Faulkner* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1993), identifies this role as that of the American Cincinnatus and traces its origins to George Washington's return to farming after serving two terms as President. "For Faulkner discovered, just as Washington had, that he could legitimate and even strengthen his authority as a leading citizen and public spokesman precisely by appearing to renounce his authority. By retiring to his farming duties, his ostensible first love, he sought to whet as much as to escape public interest in his political views" (36). Can we turnabout and imagine Toni Morrison making the claim, after winning the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993, that she is no literary woman but a simple farmer, or perhaps a quilter? The consequences of Morrison's unplugging would not result in an increase in her authority, but would probably invite ridicule.

5. On the status of the novel as "a masculine popular romance plot," see Anne Goodwyn Jones, "The Kotex Age: Women, Popular Culture, and *The Wild Palms*," in *Faulkner and Popular Culture*, ed. Doreen Fowler and Ann J. Abadie (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1990), 142-62.
6. Faulkner experienced a similar "roar" of reaction when he would attempt, later in his life, to unplug himself from the South by his more moderate public statements during the Civil Rights era. I thank Robert Hamblin for pointing this out to me. Perhaps the culture has not achieved a consensus on the source of the writer's power either.
7. Minrose C. Gwin, *The Feminine and Faulkner: Reading (Beyond) Sexual Difference* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990), 136, 137.
8. *The Wild Palms and The Old Man* (New York: Signet/New American Library, 1954). Malcolm Cowley preceded Signet, however, when he printed "Old Man" in *The Portable Faulkner* (New York: The Viking Press, 1946), claiming that it was "more effective" than "Wild Palms" and that "it gains by standing alone," a kind of paradoxical right to life through narrative abortion.
9. I thank Noel Polk for pointing out that the very first abortion performed on the text eliminated the title Faulkner had intended for the novel, "If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem." Faulkner's Random House editors considered the reference to the 137th Psalm too biblical, too Jewish, to sell. According to Polk, who has edited a Corrected Text of the novel restoring its embryonic title, Faulkner was furious with the placement of *The Wild Palms* on the title page (electronic correspondence with me, 24 August 1994). Judging by reactions at the 1994 Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha Conference to the restoration of *If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem*, the handling of this text continues to be controversial. I have chosen, in this paper, to cite the abortion, not the restoration, and thus I would hope that my cunning not be concealed by either hand.
10. Irving Howe, *William Faulkner: A Critical Study*, 2nd ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1952), 233-43.
11. Joseph J. Moldenhauer, "The Edge of Yoknapatawpha: Unity of Theme and Structure in *The Wild Palms*," in *William Faulkner: Three Decades of Criticism*, ed. Frederick J. Hoffman and Olga W. Vickery (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1960), 305-21.
12. Thomas L. McHaney, *William Faulkner's "The Wild Palms": A Study* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1975), 118.
13. "I decided that ['Wild Palms'] needed a contrapuntal quality like music. And so I wrote the other story simply to underline the story of Charlotte and Harry." *Faulkner in the University: Class Conferences at the University of Virginia, 1957-1958*, ed. Frederick L. Gwynn and Joseph L. Blotner, 2nd ed. (New York: Vintage, 1965), 171.
14. Gwin, 151.
15. Kristin Luker, *Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 5, 157. Emphasis in original.
16. Frances Myrna Kamm, *Creation and Abortion: A Study in Legal Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 42.
17. Wilt, 6-7.
18. John N. Duvall, *Faulkner's Marginal Couple: Invisible, Outlaw, and Unspeakable Communities* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), puts this issue to rest: "The presence of the Buckners . . . works against those critics who wish to read 'Wild Palms' as Faulkner's antiabortion tract. That line of reasoning claims: Charlotte has an abortion and dies; therefore, Faulkner did not approve of Charlotte and Charlotte is aligned with the forces of death. But Billie has an abortion too and lives through it, so apparently Faulkner felt no need to kill off women who have abortions" (49).
19. François Pitavy, "Forgetting Jerusalem: An Ironic Chart for *The Wild Palms*," ed. Michel Gresset and Noel Polk, *Intertextuality in Faulkner* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1985), 124.
20. Janet Carey Eldred, "Faulkner's Still Life: Art and Abortion in *The Wild Palms*," *Faulkner Journal* 6:1&2 (Fall 1988/Spring 1989): 151. Eldred places Charlotte's abortion within the historical context of "the liberalization of abortion law during and after the

Great Depression" (143 and *passim*) and argues that Charlotte's primary threat to orthodoxy is her "rejection of the role of motherhood" (154).

21. Eldred, 140. Eldred thoroughly reviews the critical history surrounding *The Wild Palms*. The question of what is and is not "fit subject matter" is problematic, to say the least. If the Western literary canon begins with ancient myth and drama, worse things than abortion lie at its core.

22. Gary Harrington, *Faulkner's Fables of Creativity: The Non-Yoknapatawpha Novels* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990), 82, 71.

23. Barbara Johnson, "Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion," *Diacritics* 16 (Spring 1986): 33.

24. *Ibid.*, 38.

25. Gail L. Mortimer, "The Ironies of Transcendent Love in Faulkner's *The Wild Palms*," *Faulkner Journal* 1:2 (Spring 1986): 34. The "boundary confusion" that Harry experiences is "the blurred sense of self and hence, of control, that is the essential danger of closeness to women (in Faulkner's view)" (35).

26. Karen Ramsay Johnson, "Gender, Sexuality, and the Artist in Faulkner's Novels," *American Literature* 61:1 (March 1989): 1, 6, 7.

27. Duvall, 46.

28. Luker, 194.

29. Claire Crabtree, "Plots of Punishment and Faulkner's Injured Women: Charlotte Rittenmeyer and Linda Snopes," *Michigan Academician* 24:4 (Summer 1992): 532.

30. Dieter Meindl, "Romantic Idealism in *The Wild Palms*," in Michel Gresset and Patrick Samway, SJ, *Faulkner and Idealism: Perspectives from Paris* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1983), 91.

31. McHaney, 147.

32. Duvall, 55.

33. *Ibid.*

34. A figure who tries to remain racially disconnected from his time and place, Joe Christmas, is physically unplugged by his brutal executioner in *Light in August*. Charlotte's ambition is no less tragic. I don't want to push this image too far, but Faulkner creates a number of characters whose attempts to unplug themselves result in physical disaster: Temple Drake, Quentin Compson, the mutinous regiment in *A Fable*, Flem Snopes in *The Mansion*. On the other hand, empowerment awaits some via the same act: the corporal, the reporter, Anse Bundren, Bayard Sartoris in *The Unvanquished*.

35. I do not wish to overstate this point, but only to suggest the unevenness of the parallel. Men are certainly divided on issues of male sexuality, from their reactions to homoeroticism through various manifestations and definitions of sexual deviance. Compulsory male participation in armed services, furthermore, has divided men concerning the relation of their bodies to the state. But none of these issues has reached the social thoroughness of the abortion question, an issue over which males divide as vehemently as do females.

Mister: The Drama of Black Manhood in Faulkner and Morrison

PHILIP M. WEINSTEIN

I wish to begin at what appears to be a certain distance from my topic—"Mister"—by reflecting on what it means to come back to this conference, for the fifth time to be standing on this podium. No one does it for the money, and the weather in August can be downright uncomfortable. Nevertheless, when I arrive, usually a few days before my talk, I find myself helplessly acting out a Faulknerian scenario. Deep in *Go Down, Moses*, I am on the threshold of yet another hunt—male and female this time—wondering who's going to be here, how many familiar faces, how many new ones, whether this will be the year we catch him once and for all. And I say to myself what a laconic Sam Fathers says to the eager Ike McCaslin: "We aint got the dog yet."¹

"We aint got the dog yet": this won't be the year we catch up with, gain possession over, the writer who is both our beloved and our prey. He'll escape once again. However indelibly this year's talks may (or may not) capture Faulkner's meanings, he'll elude our chase; we'll regroup next summer and begin again. Indeed, what would it mean to capture him? Could we ever have the dog that secures a final grasp upon our desired object? Would we want this even if we could achieve it?

We continue to participate in the *Go Down, Moses* hunt, seeking less to capture him than to invoke him, wanting this event in time—a week in August—to partake as well in something that has happened often enough to seem timeless: "the old bear absolved of mortality and himself who shared a little of