A Lesson About Manhood: Appropriating “The Word” in Ernest Gaines’s A Lesson Before Dying

by Philip Auger

The word in language is half someone else’s. It becomes “one’s own” only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention. Prior to the moment of appropriation, the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language . . . , but rather it exists in other people’s mouths, in other people’s contexts, serving other people’s intentions: it is from there that one must take the word and make it one’s own. (Mikhail Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel”)

If we must die, let it not be like hogs
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot . . .
If we must die, O let us nobly die,
So that our precious blood may not be shed
In vain . . .
(Claude McKay, “If We Must Die”)

From Ernest Gaines’s earliest published works of the late 1950s and ’60s to his most recent novel, A Lesson Before Dying, Gaines consistently writes about

black men who face the problems of being denied the dignity and self-worth found in the status of “manhood.” In A Lesson Before Dying Gaines again picks up this theme as the narrator of the story, Grant Wiggins, a black college-educated school teacher, takes on the responsibility of convincing Jefferson, a non-educated black laborer who has been sentenced to death for a murder he didn’t commit, that Jefferson is indeed a “man,” and not a “hog” as his white attorney declared as part of his defense strategy:

Do you see a modicum of intelligence? Do you see anyone here could plan a murder. . . . a cornered animal to strike quickly out of fear, but to plan? . . . I would as soon put a hog in the electric chair as this. (7–8)

While much of Gaines’s work addresses the issue of establishing manhood, A Lesson Before Dying is distinct in that it focuses on this issue in a most direct way: the problem Grant and Jefferson are faced with is a problem of redefining Jefferson, from his identity given to him by the white dominant culture, hog, to a new identity, man.

Within the scope of this problem, A Lesson Before Dying explores the roles of social institutions such as education, law, and especially religion as they all have a part in producing human dignity and self worth. It is in the mythologies and ideologies these social institutions produce that the foundations for definition and identity are created. Jefferson does feel that he has experienced a change in identity by the novel’s end, and that change is made possible through his and the black community’s appropriation of social institutions and of myths and ideologies themselves. Gaines recognizes that for a change in Jefferson’s identity to have any lasting “substance,” language itself, the complete make-up of discursive formations surrounding Jefferson, must change also. More specifically, Jefferson’s becoming a man at the novel’s end is an act based on the reinscription of (among other things) a most essential foundation for discourse, the Bible. In doing so, Jefferson is understood as a man because his life first takes on Christ-like significance.

In defining discourse and its social power, Michel Foucault writes that the discursive power of a doctor, the power to present and sanction truth, is socially determined through a network of systematic authorization involving medical, judiciary, educational, and even religious representation: “discourse is not the majestically unfolding manifestation of a thinking, knowing, speaking subject, but, on the contrary, a totality” (50). In this respect, the task before Jefferson and Grant takes on enormous significance. Jefferson is a “hog” because the socially dominant system of inscription, white-supremacist
patriarchy, deems him so. In effect, for an act of redefinition on Jefferson and Grant’s part to have any lasting impact, the totality of systematic networks of authorization must be breached.

It is important to remember that although Jefferson’s symbolic importance in the novel is central, this is Grant’s story. Grant is the novel’s narrative voice, and he is the person given the primary responsibility of transforming Jefferson’s status to that of “man.” Obviously, Grant’s own situation is somewhat similar to Jefferson’s in that both he and Jefferson are undergoing a profound change in their own self-perceptions. Grant doesn’t want the responsibility for initiating this transformation mostly because he feels any effort made toward this end would be futile. Grant makes it clear that even he, a black man who has become college educated, cannot express himself in the way he wishes in his community. He finds his own freedom extremely limited, if it indeed exists at all, and he sees the future of his students to be lacking in any promise of advancement. He realizes, for instance, that the work his students perform for the schoolhouse, chopping wood and other menial chores, is the same work they will likely have in the future:

And I thought to myself, What am I doing? Am I reaching them at all? They are doing exactly what the old men did earlier. They are fifty years younger, maybe more, but doing the same thing those old men did who never attended school a day in their lives. Is it just a vicious circle? Am I doing anything? (62)

Grant feels that his role as an educator bears no promise of producing change either; he finds that he must work to promote the dominant white-supremacist ideology—or not work at all. Grant is doing the same work and teaching the same ideas that his own teacher, Matthew Antoine, had done a generation earlier. And Grant has come to share Mr. Antoine’s pessimistic conclusions as well: “It doesn’t matter anymore,” he said. “Just do the best you can. But it won’t matter” (66).

Grant realizes that the powerlessness of Jefferson is, in fact, not so different from the powerlessness he himself feels. While Jefferson is imprisoned in a literally confining structure of white law, Grant is also imprisoned within the structures of white discourse. The most obvious example of such discursive confinement is that of the educational system itself. The schoolhouse is a detention camp of sorts in which Grant is allowed to teach only the ideology that will keep himself and his black community powerless. And Dr. Joseph, the school superintendent, is, in effect, a type of warden whose role is to make sure Grant and the students stay powerless. Grant even sees some telling
significance in the way Dr. Joseph inspect the school children:

And besides looking at hands, now he began inspecting teeth. Open wide, say “Ahhh”—and he would have the poor children spreading out their lips as far as they could while he peered into their mouths. At the university I had read about slave masters who had done the same when buying new slaves... (56)

Gaines emphasizes the complete imprisoning function of white discourse by the many “structures” he selects for the voice(s) of white patriarchy. Pichot and the town’s patriarchal elite often take refuge in Pichot’s library, a structure designed to surround one with the white-supremacist ideology presented in his books; the sheriff is often behind his desk at the prison, and the group of white men who declare Jefferson a murderer are found within the confines of the courtroom. Even Dr. Joseph is secure in his “confining structure”—the school house. The connection is clear: these white men are so powerful not simply because they are positioned in such architectural structures; instead, their power is supported by the discursive structures that they all, in return, uphold and enforce. These discursive structures—of ideology, law, and ultimately language itself—are, literally and figuratively, structures designed to preserve white forms of power. These structures are the manifestations of power Foucault refers to when he speaks of discursive totality. For black members of this Southern community, such “structures” of white patriarchy are there to disempower, to convict, to imprison, to enslave.

The way in which Grant’s aunt (Tante Lou), Jefferson’s godmother (Miss Emma), and Reverend Ambrose learn to deal with such oppression is through their faith and in the institution of religion. Grant, however, sees religion as doing little to produce change. The prayers his students recite are the same ones he recited as a student, and the Christmas play his students perform hasn’t changed, nor has it proven to effect change. Grant has as little “faith” in institutional religious practice as he does in his own ability to produce change within the educational system.

In order to subvert a discursive formation that defines Jefferson as a hog, Grant comes to learn that simply recognizing the problems that cause such injustices is not enough; nor is it enough to “put one’s faith” in institutionalized religion which seems to promote passivity and patience more than any active approach to change. The change that is needed is one in which the foundations for definition, for identity, are subverted. And although Grant isn’t necessarily aware of the changes he is helping to bring about, Gaines presents the solution to changing identity as nothing short of a revolutionary
discursive shift, built upon a whole new rhetorical foundation for language itself.

In discussing the relationship between language and the cultural critic who presents himself as the agent of change, Terry Eagleton, in Walter Benjamin: Or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism, provides a significant “anatomy” of revolution which is certainly applicable to Gaines’s novel:

To say that [a text] is “true” is not to state that it represents a real state of affairs. It is to claim that the text so fictionalizes the “real” as to intend a set of effects conducive to certain practices that are deemed, in light of a particular set of falsifiable hypotheses about the nature of society, to be desirable . . . The practice of the [revolutionary] cultural worker, in brief, is projective, polemical, and appropriative. (113)

In theorizing “toward a revolutionary criticism,” Eagleton writes that even a Marxist critic like himself must to a certain extent become a Platonist, advocating an absolutist philosophy to which, by nature, Marxists stand in opposition. In other words, since all truth is based on relational discursive formations (and therefore fictional), the agents of change should move beyond the inevitable fictionality of their position and be more interested in doing all that they can to promote their desired ends. If that means appropriating the language of the opposition, then so be it.

The theory I aim to pose in this essay is that the lesson Gaines puts forth in A Lesson Before Dying is one similar to the revolutionary theory of Eagleton’s: that producing change is ultimately a rhetorical act. If one’s goal is to change identity, one must subvert the dominant discursive formations themselves. Only with such a foundational change can hogs be redefined.

In subverting the white power structure, Grant does understand part of what he and Jefferson have to do:

‘Do you know what myth is, Jefferson?’ I asked him. ‘A myth is an old lie that people believe in. White people believe that they’re better than anyone else on earth—and that’s a myth. The last thing they ever want is to see a black man stand, and think, and to show that common humanity that is in us all. It would destroy their myth.’ (192)

Grant understands that “truth,” or at least this truth about common humanity, is based on myth. In order to destroy the myth, it is their job to show its falseness. What Grant doesn’t understand is that in destroying one myth he
is being, in Eagleton’s words, “projective, polemical and appropriative” in that he must replace one myth with another. Grant sees that white power is based on lies; he comes to learn from Reverend Ambrose that to produce a feeling of power for the black community, he must lie as well:

“Yes, you know. You know, all right. That’s why you look down on me, because you know I lie. At wakes, at funerals, at weddings—yes, I lie. I lie at wakes and funerals to relieve pain. ‘Cause reading, writing, and ’rithmatic is not enough. You think that’s all they sent you to school for? They sent you to school to relieve pain, to relieve hurt—and if you have to lie to do it, then you lie. You lie and you lie and you lie.” (218)

As I have suggested earlier, the lies that keep the black community so oppressed and keep Jefferson from gaining his “manhood” are ingrained deeply into the social institutions that control discourse. If one can gain control of these institutions, one can control the mythology that produces identity. The “lying” that Grant produces takes shape in the way that he, Tante Lou, Miss Emma, and the whole black community work together to do more than simply destroy the white-supremacist mythology; they effectively replace that mythology with one of their own.

It is the first priority for Jefferson’s godmother, as initiator of this new mythology and, ultimately, the reinscription of Jefferson, to penetrate the cage of white-supremacist discourse that surrounds him. And for that reason, her and Tante Lou’s insistence on entering Jefferson’s prison cell is significant; their success represents the first ray of hope that the “prisonhouse of language” can be breached.

The many images Gaines provides of Jefferson’s family, Reverend Ambrose, and other members of the community entering the prison to be with Jefferson are also significant, for they show how the forces creating ideology and mythology, such as communal affirmation, education, and religion, are allowed to penetrate white discourse. Just as the legitimacy of Pichot’s patriarchal power is confirmed by his various forms of social affirmation—especially in the way he usually surrounds himself with the affirmational support of other patriarchs—so it is that Jefferson will ultimately reach some feeling of self-worth.

Yet this step is only the beginning. The abundance of communal affirmation given to Jefferson gives him symbolic and even iconographic value. The image of him kneeling to gain forgiveness is an important one for Reverend Ambrose, and the image of him standing with pride upon facing his death is
the image his aunt and the whole community want confirmed in the end. With this in mind, the new mythology being created is one in which Jefferson becomes a Christ-figure in that his divinity, his centrality as a transcendentalist meta-signifier, is the power that allows for his “manhood” to become a reality. Like Christ he is both God and man. What Grant comes to learn by the end of this experience is that change isn’t built upon a simple eradication of the old God. Instead, he and the black community have to produce a new God, one that can confirm the community’s human dignity. He learns that in order to redefine a man, one must first redefine God.

Gaines overtly presents those who “play God” as representing discursive power. According to the dominant discourse, the white patriarchy are the God figures, and therefore they control the discursive power—the power to confirm or deny humanity. Grant asks “Who made them God?” after he realizes that they have “come up with the time and the date to take the life of another man.” And, of course, Grant asks a similar question about himself when he begins to understand the significance of the task being asked of him: “The jury, twelve white men good and true, still sentenced him to death. Now his godmother wants me to visit him and make him know—prove to these white men—that he’s not a hog, that he’s a man. Who am I? God?” (31). This passage makes clear the power that the God-figure has in creating identity. So much so that when Vivian is asked by Tante Lou about the future of her religious affiliation, the phrasing is especially poignant: “You’ll leave your church and just become—nothing?” (114). Similarly, in the Christmas play put on by Grant’s students, the scene they re-create emphasizes the power of the God-figure to take the “nothings” of the world and give them self-worth:

Shepherd Two: But we ain’t nothing but poor little old shepherds.

Wise Man One: The lowest is the highest in His eyes. (149)

The transformation of Jefferson into a God-figure is also foreshadowed by Grant’s reflection on the God-like significance of Joe Louis to the black community:

I could still remember how depressed everyone was after Joe had lost the first fight to Schmeling. For weeks it was like that. To be caught laughing for any reason was a sin. This was a period of mourning. What else in the world was there to be proud of, if Joe had lost? Even the preacher got into it. “Let us wait. Let us wait, children. David will meet Goliath again.” (88)
And after Louis’s win in the rematch, Grant remembers the explosion of pride in his community: “For days after the fight, for weeks, we held our heads higher than any people on earth had done for any reason” (89). The symbolic power of this black man resisting and defeating the white heavyweight champion makes him God-like in that he is a positive creator of identity for his black following. The preacher’s sermonizing about Louis proves his mythological importance. It is in this victory of biblical proportions that Louis’s followers gain their “manhood.”

In Jefferson’s resistance to the white patriarchal labeling of him as a hog, Ernest Gaines shows that such resistance makes Jefferson similar in god-like stature to Louis. In fact, Gaines again overtly establishes the Christ-like significance of Jefferson. Besides the obvious connection of this innocent man being put to death for a less than just cause, Jefferson’s death is timed by the town’s officials so as not to conflict with a religious holiday, as Christ’s death is timed by Roman and Jewish authorities so as not to coincide with the Jewish Passover. The actual span of Jefferson’s life in prison is from the Christmas season to the Easter season. And the moment of his actual death happens appropriately “on Friday. Same time as He died, between twelve and three” (158). His Christ-figure status is further established in his wish to die like “He” did, without “a mumbling word,” and the connection is perhaps most explicit in that he realizes that what Grant is asking is that he “take the cross” of others: “Me, Mr. Wiggins. Me. Me to take the cross. Your cross, nannan’s cross, my own cross. Me, Mr. Wiggins. This old stumbling nigger. Y’all axe a lot Mr. Wiggins” (224).

Jefferson’s Christ-figure significance establishes an allegorical dimension to A Lesson Before Dying that reinforces the role of myth in the re-creation of Jefferson. With Jefferson as the Christ, Miss Emma, Jefferson’s godmother, takes on the role usually reserved for God the father: she is the initiator of the discursive movement; from her ultimately springs a new identity for Jefferson and his “followers.” In this sense she has the creative potential associated with God. Her role as godmother is also significant in that it establishes the new mythology being created as matriarchal. This may be Gaines’s way of expressing the fullness of this discursive shift away from both whiteness and patriarchy, and it may be a statement by Gaines about an absence of father figures from such impoverished black communities of the Deep South. But it is important to note that although Gaines presents her as the initiator of this discursive shift, her power diminishes after this effort. Her principle role from that point is as a provider of physical nourishment in the form of the food she makes for Jefferson; the metaphysical nourishment he needs as a symbolic and
mythical figure is taken over by the other “god-figures,” mainly Grant and Reverend Ambrose.

The significance of Grant and Reverend Ambrose in this regard is important in the appropriative scheme Gaines sets up. In appropriating the white patriarchal order, a complete shift to matriarchy would not be necessary (or believable). The educational and religious significance of Grant and Reverend Ambrose is that they represent a discursive order reinscribed with black faces, but not necessarily with matriarchy. In appropriating the Christian mythos, Gaines must maintain a patriarchal order with its symbolically central “God become man.” In this respect, Jefferson’s “manliness,” as a gendered entity, bears its greatest importance. In order to re-create Jefferson as a powerful source of identity within a patriarchal order (white or black), Gaines must insure that Jefferson’s iconographic value increases in direct proportion to his ability to “reflect patriarchy.”

Moreover, the allegorical resonance of Jefferson as Christ figure is again compounded with Gaines’s inclusion of Jefferson’s journal. In it Jefferson relates all of the simple expressions of love he encounters in the days before his death. He includes passages about many firsts: the first time he tells somebody (Grant) “I like you,” the first time members of the community, including the handicapped Bok, show him expressions of love, and the first time he experiences such affection from his godmother: “... an i tol her i love her an i tol her i was strong an she jus look ole and tied an pull me to her an kis me an it was the fis she never done that it felt good an i let her long is she want...” (231). Perhaps the most important first of the journal is in his confirmation that Grant’s efforts have paid off: “... i cry cause you been so good to me mr wigin an nobody ain’t never been that good to make me think im somebody ...” (232). Jefferson shows with abundance the power to be gained in the spirit of mutual giving. Jefferson and the members of his community all gain in their actualizations of self-worth as they give to each other. Perhaps a significant distinction to be acknowledged here is that Jefferson as a reinscribed God is not the vengeful God of law represented in the Old Testament. The patriarchs of the white community take on this role. Instead, Jefferson becomes the giving God of faith of the New Testament. His power resides in his ability to make people believe that “to give is to receive.” Obviously the form of Jefferson’s discourse, as written, takes on religious significance as well. In line with his significance as a Christ figure, he leaves behind “the word,” a Biblical text that can be read as a guide to “lov[ing] one another.” In this regard Jefferson provides a literal “new testament” of great symbolic weight.
Along with the allegorical impact Jefferson’s writing has as a Biblical text, one must not overlook the symbolic and revolutionary impact to be found simply in the act of Jefferson’s writing. In “Writing ‘Race’ and the Difference it Makes” Henry Louis Gates puts this idea in perspective as he discusses the symbolic importance of writing in Western culture in the eighteenth century:

Writing, especially after the printing press became so widespread, was taken to be the visible sign of reason. Blacks were “reasonable” and hence “men,” if—and only if—they demonstrated mastery over “the arts and sciences,” the eighteenth century’s formula for writing. (8)

Although the plot of Gaines’s novel is, of course, set well after the eighteenth century, a similar argument is used by Jefferson’s attorney in declaring Jefferson’s lack of manhood; he notes Jefferson’s illiteracy as proof of this lack:

“Oh sure, he has reached the age of twenty-one, when we, civilized men, consider the male species has reached manhood, but would you call this—this—this a man? No, not I . . . . Mention the names of Keats, Byron, Scott, and see whether his eyes will show one moment of recognition. Ask him to describe a rose, to quote from one passage of the Constitution or the Bill of Rights.” (8)

Set against this white patriarchal prescription for manhood, Jefferson’s writing must be recognized as a radical act in itself. Of course, Grant’s college education is seen as a threat to Pichot and his fellow patriarchs. But Jefferson’s writing isn’t simply a cry for legitimacy in white culture. Perhaps his writing “across the lines instead of above them,” as well as his already noted concentration on the issue of mutual giving, is indication enough that Jefferson’s discourse is “going in a different direction,” truly a “new testament” of how legitimacy and manhood can be obtained.

Into this unfolding, biblically allegorical scheme that A Lesson Before Dying takes on, the significance of Paul, the guard who befriends Grant and Jefferson, seems to fit almost too neatly. Like his namesake of the New Testament, Paul is the converted soldier struck by a “bolt of lightning” to ultimately preach “the word” of the Christ:

“I heard the two jolts, but I wouldn’t look up. I’ll never forget the sound of the generator as long as I live on this earth . . . . Allow me to be your friend Grant Wiggins. I don’t ever want to forget this day. I don’t ever want to forget him.” (254–55)

Paul’s eagerness to read the journal after Grant is finished and to help Grant
spread “the word” to Grant’s students that Jefferson was the “bravest man” at the execution adds to his parallels with the biblical St. Paul. And perhaps the most significant connection to his biblical namesake rests in the importance St. Paul places in justification by faith above the law:

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in our hope of sharing the glory of God. More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us. (Romans 5:1–5)

One can easily imagine Gaines’s character giving a similar formula for hope to Grant’s students.

Grant tells Paul in the final chapter that “You have to believe to be a good teacher” (254), and Paul then bears witness to the transformation Grant’s teaching did produce. In the creation of this new Christ, Grant and his community have created and “share the glory” of someone they can believe in. Grant’s original hope of debunking faith was due to the problems he had with the form the Christ figure takes in the white dominant discourse—a white patriarch. Grant learns that his role as an agent of change is not simply to debunk the myth but to appropriate the myth—to reinscribe it, so it works toward his and his community’s own ends. Ultimately, the teaching of St. Paul rings true for Grant. Throughout the novel he struggles to find something to believe in; in the end he finds it in Jefferson, and he finds it in himself. It is important to note that the meaning he is seeking, his own justification, is not obtained by realizing any “tangible” results: Jefferson still dies unjustly, and the black community is still fundamentally oppressed. Yet, Grant, Paul and the members of the black community have received “justification by faith.”

Since such “tangible” results have not been realized, one must ask about the “actual” limits of power gained by this discursive reinscription of Christian myth. Can Grant now be as subversive as he pleases in the classroom? Does Paul stand a chance as a white police officer preaching about black “manhood” in a white-supremacist, Southern black town? The answers to these questions seem less than hopeful. One can hear the voice of Sheriff Guidry holding the novel’s hopeful ending in check: “... the first sign of aggravation, I’m calling it off” (50). His voice, as representative of white patriarchal law, suggests that although Miss Emma and Grant have been able to penetrate white discourse, they have also been contained within it. Their interaction with Jefferson,
always within the country jail, would seem to confirm this. However, the transformation of Paul confirms that some "substantial" change can be effected. Although Paul is acknowledged from the beginning as being "from good stock," he is also a representative of white patriarchal law. His change has its greatest value in its symbolic importance: it shows that white patriarchy has not contained this new discourse; instead, white patriarchy is now being changed, not just penetrated. While "practical," "substantial" change still seems remote, the symbolic power in the transformations of the black community and especially of Paul show that the potential for such change is great.

And perhaps that potential is the most significant New Testament connection of all. Christ's presence in the New Testament signifies the promise of eternal life—not its fulfillment. As with Christ, Jefferson's symbolic value has only begun in his death. The point here is that A Lesson Before Dying, like the New Testament, resists closure. It is the novel itself that confirms the promise of the "projective" power within the "appropriation of the word." The transformative power that Jefferson's word has on Grant and on Paul is projected to readers in Grant's (gospel) narration. The novel itself becomes the promise renewed and extended.

Ultimately, the Lesson Before Dying that Ernest Gaines provides is a lesson about manhood. Gaines makes it clear that "being a man," especially for a black man in the white-supremacist South, has more to do with appropriating discursive power than with being male. For Jefferson, as for the white patriarchs of his community, the power to define oneself and to define others is confirmed in the ideologies produced by the social structures of culture. With this in mind, Gaines shows how becoming a man is truly an act of mythical and even biblical proportions.

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