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Raveling/Unraveling the Fading World of *As I Lay Dying*

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How do our lives *ravel out* into the no-wind, no-sound, the weary gestures wearily recapitulant: echoes of old compulsions with no-hand on no-strings; in sunset we fall into furious attitudes, dead gestures of dolls. Cash broke his leg and now the sawdust is running out. He is bleeding to death is Cash.

“Darl,” 120; my emphasis.

Methought I heard a voice cry, “Sleep no more!
Macbeth does murder sleep”— the innocent sleep,
Sleep that knits up the *ravell’d* sleeve of care,
The death of each day’s life, sore labor’s bath,
Balm of hurt minds, great nature’s second course,
Chief nourisher in life’s feast.

William Shakespeare, *Macbeth* II.2, 35-40; my emphasis.

Prologue: a Dangling Subordinate Clause

The very title of the novel, “As I Lay Dying,” suggests open-endedness, well beyond the abundantly documented hesitation on the verb-tense in *lay*: it is a subordinate clause missing its main clause. According to Joseph Blotner, when asked, “Faulkner would quote the speech of ghostly Agamemnon to Odysseus: ‘As I lay dying the woman with the dog’s eyes would not close my eyelids for me as I descended into Hades’” (vol. 1, 634-35, 91). This is not completely satisfactory. Faulkner may have been quoting from memory, but the phrase “the woman with the dog’s eyes” does not occur in any of the translations available in the 1920s, which raises the question of how Faulkner, who did not study Greek, could have come across it. The most likely explanation would probably be the tutoring of Phil Stone, his literary mentor and a classicist. “The woman with the dog’s eyes”—whatever the

metonymy suggests—is the literal translation of *κυνῶπις*, the qualifier in the Greek source in verses 424-426 of Book XI of *The Odyssey*:

ἦ δὲ κυνῶπις
 νοσφίσατ', οὐδέ μοι ἔτλη ἰόντι περ εἰς Ἄϊδαο
 χερσὶ κατ' ὀφθαλμοὺς ἐλέειν σὺν τε στόμ' ἐρεῖσαι.

A.T. Murray's 1919 translation in the Loeb Classical Library bilingual edition reads: "And as I lay dying with the sword in my chest, I raised my hands and let them fall to the ground. But she, bitch that she was, turned away, and did not deign, though I was going down to the House of Hades, either to draw down my eyelids with her fingers or to close my mouth" (Homer 430-431). *Bitch that she was* elegantly conveys the intended innuendo, but it may not be what Homer had in mind: as Emily Wilson, the first woman to translate Homer's *Odyssey* into English, remarks, emphasizing gender biases in translation, the qualifier *κυνῶπις* is also applied to Helen of Troy and suggests that a woman with such eyes *hounds* you, leaving you no peace, certainly an appropriate summary of Addie's lingering influence on her family.¹

The phrase "the dog's eyes" the literal translation that constitutes the other fragment of the incomplete title sentence, occurs elsewhere in the Faulkner corpus, interestingly in the earlier "As I Lay Dying" story included in the Norton edition of *As I Lay Dying*—"Her eyes were dog's eyes" (182)—, but also in the short story "Carcassonne," a very early short story, which reads rather like a Joycean prose poem:

His skeleton lay still [...] as he lay beneath the tarred paper bedclothing. (895)

Something of the rat [...] a fairy pattering of little feet behind a bloody arras where fell *where fell where I was King of Kings*² but the woman with the woman with the dog's eyes to knock my bones together and together. (898)

¹ Jean Marie Pottier specifically refers to the translation of *κυνῶπις*, dog's eyes or dog's face, as when Helen tells Telemachus "they made my face the cause that hounded them."

² A probable reference to Agamemnon, the leader of the coalition of Greek kings.

. . . the skeleton said. "I know that the end of life is lying still."
(898)

The "bloody arras" suggests a parallel between *Hamlet* and *The Odyssey*: it is the bloody arras behind which Polonius hides in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* when Hamlet kills him, as both Agamemnon and Hamlet's father have been murdered by their wives and their lovers. So the title of Faulkner's novel is haunted by private literary references that leave its meaning untypically incomplete and open.

Suffering Bodies

Critics have not been kind to Anse Bundren. Granted, he shamelessly steals the savings of his own children. Granted, he comes across as a shiftless redneck, and in time his image in the eyes of readers may have had the poor white shiftless characters made famous by Erskine Caldwell rub off on him. Granted, his reaction when his wife dies seems to be completely selfish: "She taken and left us," he says ("Darl," 29), and then: "God's will be done," he says, "Now I can get them teeth" ("Darl," 30). This is completely callous, self-centered, and conveys absolutely no sense of human grief—Anse comes across as resentful against his wife for deserting the family when she is needed and, on the other hand, he seems relieved to be now free to seek his own comfort. However, Faulkner himself went out of his way to defend him. Asked if Anse was the villain in the story, he noted:

I'm not too sure there has to be a villain in the story. If there is a villain in that story, it's the convention in which people have to live, in which in that case insisted that because this woman had said, I want to be buried twenty miles away, that people would go to any trouble and anguish to get her there. (*Faulkner in the University* 112)

Sean McCann, one of the few critics sensitive to Faulkner's balanced view of the poor farmers, suggests that "in this novel dominated by the interior monologues, [...] the way we might know Anse sociologically by his history and his actions tend to be disregarded" (54). The narrative situation must always be taken into account: the previous quotation from the novel is part of a section entitled "Darl," so a section bent by Darl's own subjectivity. Moreover, this section is about a scene that Darl does not witness. In his vision he is reconstructing what his

father is possibly, typically doing, based on his own conflictual history with him. But Darl does not invent, because he is an extraordinarily keen watcher. As early as the third section he lets us in on his father's suffering body—from mouth to feet. The mouth, first: "Pa is tilting snuff from the lid of his snuff-box into his lower lip, holding the lip outdrawn between thumb and finger" ("Darl," 8). Anse belongs to the snuff-chewing class. Years before he started to compose *As I Lay Dying*, Faulkner had started on a project about the Snopeses, who were such snuff-chewing shiftless people. But snuff is bad for the jaws, and so Anse has lost all his teeth—he complains about it in one of his few sections: "me without a tooth in my head, hoping to get ahead enough so I could get my mouth fixed where I could eat God's own victuals as a man should, and her hale and well as ere a woman in the land until that day" ("Anse," 22). It is easy enough to imagine how Anse's bad teeth and his snuff-flavored breath would have turned off his wife.

Now his feet: "Pa's feet are badly splayed, his toes cramped and bent and warped, with no toenail at all on his little toes, from working so hard in the wet in homemade shoes when he was a boy. Beside his chair his brogans sit. They look as though they had been hacked with a blunt axe out of pig-iron" ("Darl," 8). In her section Addie remembers the hale young man she married, but life has taken its toll. These poor whites are exhausted, which Tull also mentions soberly, remembering his own mother, discreetly empathic of his neighbors' upcoming bereavement:

It's a hard life on women, for a fact, some women. I mind my mammy lived to be seventy and more. Worked every day, rain or shine; never a sick day since her last chap was born until one day she kind of looked around her and then she went and taken that lace-trimmed night-gown she had had forty-five years and never wore out of the chest and put it on and laid down on the bed and pulled the covers up and shut her eyes. "You all will have to look out for pa the best you can," she said. "I'm tired." ("Tull," 18)

Years before James Agee and Walker Evans—arguably an inspiration to them—Faulkner praises the dignity of these poor farmers who stand up to their harsh conditions. In real life, when Faulkner is writing, these conditions have just been made harsher by the catastrophic floods of 1926 and 1927, when the South cried for help and when up in the North the federal administration of President Hoover paid them no heed. On October 25, 1929, the day after the Wall Street crash, when

Faulkner started work on the manuscript of *As I Lay Dying*, he could imagine that more devastation might be on its way.

On the day of Addie's funeral service, oblivious of the occasion, the Bundrens' neighbors' conversation translates their concerns about how weather conditions and the economy can seriously affect their revenue (see 52-53). Anse shares the Southerner's political jealousy for the capitalists that create the economic slumps that come by the road and affect the farmers:

It's a hard country on man; it's hard. Eight miles of the sweat of his body washed up outen the Lord's earth, where the Lord Himself told him to put it. Nowhere in this sinful world can a honest, hardworking man profit. It takes them that runs the stores in the towns, doing no sweating, living off of them that sweats. It ain't the hardworking man, the farmer. Sometimes I wonder why we keep at it. It's because there is a reward for us above, where they can't take their motors and such. Every man will be equal there and it will be taken from them that have and give to them that have not by the Lord. ("Anse," 63)

Yet Anse stands tall, and he makes it a poor man's philosophy: man is made to stand erect, not crawl horizontally, parallel to the ground, like a snake or a corpse—such is the lay of the land. A man is made to stand tall and stay put, not beholden to anyone. "Durn that road": Anse blames all the disruptions in his life to the tragic closeness of a road to his doorstep. As for Samson, he shrewdly notes with a touch of grudging admiration that Anse is someone who loves a challenge, including when it is raised by the elemental forces of nature: "He set there on the wagon, hunched up, blinking, listening to us tell about how quick the bridge went and how high the water was, and I be durn if he didn't act like he was proud of it, like he had made the river rise himself" ("Samson," 65).

Darl also sees the road as an adverse force. As he rides the wagon that Jewel is driving, he contemplates the road as if it were "vanishing" behind the wagon, the wheel-axle a spool for the road's ribbon. The fantasy of vanishing triggers a vertigo of disappearance: "It takes two people to make you, and one people to die. That's how the world is going to end" ("Darl," 24). The road implies *dis/placement* in its etymological sense: it contains the sense of losing one's standing in the world of being.

Fading

An analysis of the frequency of occurrences of the verbs *to fade*, *to vanish*, *to fail*, *to dissolve*, *to drain* in the novel shows a particularly rich

cluster in the “Darl” section corresponding to Addie’s death. While many of these occurrences are powerfully descriptive, they are also unexpected or even surrealist and help develop a subliminal thematic plot:

She looks at pa; all her failing life appears to drain into her eyes, urgent, irremediable. (“Darl,” 28)

Admittedly Addie’s life is failing her. Still, the image of draining associates the trauma of death with an assault on the upright integrity of the human body. Anse was right to worry about the perils of horizontality.

She is looking out the window, at Cash stooping steadily at the board in the failing light, laboring on toward darkness and into it as though the stroking of the saw illumined its own motion, board and saw engendered. (“Darl,” 28)

The failing light adds pathetic fallacy to the moment of death: light fails as life is failing.

From behind pa’s leg Vardaman peers, his mouth full open and all color draining from his face into his mouth, as though he has by some means fleshed his own teeth in himself, sucking. (“Darl,” 29)

The draining contaminates little Vardaman, who seems to suck himself away into nothingness, as though spilling in instead of out:

his eyes round, his pale face fading into the dusk like a piece of paper pasted on a failing wall, and so out of the door. (“Darl,” 29)

We are getting to the minute when the fading mother contaminates the whole household, or the whole world for the Bundrens. They are losing the third dimension and, moreover, the wall itself is dissolving.

about the shattered spokes and about Jewel’s ankles a runnel of yellow neither water nor earth swirls, curving with the yellow road neither of earth nor water, down the hill dissolving into a streaming mass of dark green neither of earth nor sky. (“Darl,” 29)

From his struggle with the wagon, Darl watches with anxiety as earth, air and water dissolve intensely into each other and lose their distinctness. Fading is disappearance, and it amounts to existential loss:

Cash is not listening. He is looking down at her peaceful, rigid face fading into the dusk as though darkness were a precursor of the ultimate earth, until at last the face seems to float detached upon it, lightly as the reflection of a dead leaf. ("Darl," 29)

Finally, in a striking hypallage, the quilt that covers the corpse itself fades away, and the body becomes a statue of fading bronze under a fading quilt:

Pa looks down at the face, at the black sprawl of Dewey Dell's hair, the out-flung arms, the clutched fan now motionless on the fading quilt. ("Darl," 30)

Dewey Dell rises, heaving to her feet. She looks down at the face. It is like a casting of fading bronze upon the pillow, the hands alone still with any semblance of life: a curled, gnarled inertness; a spent yet alert quality from which weariness, exhaustion, travail has not yet departed, as though they doubted even yet the actuality of rest, guarding with homed and penurious alertness the cessation which they know cannot last. ("Darl," 30)

The simile is interesting: a bronze statue is the result of hollow casting, as it takes the shape of the emptiness within a mold.³ The same paragraph returns on the naturalistic dirge of hard work that is the lot of the Southern farmers, especially the female of the species, as Tull had warned us. What shapes poor Southerners in this respect is the harshness of their condition.

Shaped

The metaphor of the mold, or the vessel or container, is recurrent in *As I Lay Dying*. It suggests that the object is *shaped* by the outside matter in which it is encased, and without this outside mold, which is not it, it has no possible integrity. This is sensed by several Bundrens: first,

³ The image of the bronze statue had incidentally been associated to the woman with the dog's eyes in the early "As I Lay Dying" (see Norton edition, 183).

Dewey Dell, for whom “[t]he dead air shapes the dead earth in the dead darkness, further away than seeing shapes the dead earth” (“Dewey Dell,” 38). Then Cash, as Darl imagines him without seeing him, sawing in the rain, “his back shaped lean and scrawny by his wet shirt as though he had been abruptly turned wrong-side out, shirt and all” (“Darl,” 45). Then Addie: “I would think about his name until after a while I could see the word as a shape, a vessel, and I would watch him liquefy and flow into it like cold molasses flowing out of the darkness into the vessel, until the jar stood full and motionless: a significant shape profoundly without life like an empty door frame” (“Addie,” 100).

Possibly the most complex instance of this notion occurs in one of Darl’s strikingly delirious passages, where the sound of the rain rather than the substance of the rain itself shapes the object: “Beyond the unlamped wall I can hear the rain shaping the wagon that is ours, the load that is no longer theirs that felled and sawed it” (“Darl,” 46). This emphasis on the ground to outline the figure points to the flatness of cubist paintings in which figure and ground tend to have contiguous values and it also allows Darl to reflect upon the mystery of being:

In a strange room you must empty yourself for sleep. And before you are emptied for sleep, what are you. And when you are emptied for sleep, you are not. And when you are filled with sleep, you never were. I don’t know what I am. I don’t know if I am or not. Jewel knows he is, because he does not know that he does not know whether he is or not. He cannot empty himself for sleep because he is not what he is and he is what he is not. Beyond the unlamped wall I can hear the rain shaping the wagon that is ours, the load that is no longer theirs that felled and sawed it not yet theirs that bought it and which is not ours either, lie on our wagon though it does, since only the wind and the rain shape it only to Jewel and me, that are not asleep. And since sleep is is-not and rain and wind are *was*, it is not. Yet the wagon *is* because when the wagon is *was* Addie Bundren will not be. And Jewel *is* so Addie Bundren must be. And then I must be, or I could not empty myself for sleep in a strange room. And so if I am not emptied yet, I am *is*. (“Darl,” 46-47)

Where Shakespeare’s Macbeth saw the comforting quality of sleep as “knitt[ing] up the ravell’d sleeve of care,” Darl contemplates sleep as the threat of hollowing out the self’s identity.

The book’s concern with naming and erasing works its way into minute details: Samson, a secondary character, offers a comic variation on the relation between naming and emptiness: through the section in his name, he keeps trying to recall the name of a MacCallum boy he cannot

remember. In her monologue, Addie stresses the same paradox when she contemplates the word as “a shape to fill a lack,” but she has less patience with this negativity and outright rejects the spuriousness of signifiers against the concrete reality of the flesh, hers or her students’. Unhappy and impatient with their unwillingness to learn, she would make an impression on them by beating them up, by forcing a contact with their bodies. It is also by body-count that she trades with her husband Anse, while her monologue expresses her dissatisfaction with words.

I knew that it had been, not that they had dirty noses, but that we had had to use one another by words like spiders dangling by their mouths from a beam, swinging and twisting and never touching, and that only through the blows of the switch could my blood and their blood flow as one stream. I knew that it had been, not that my aloneness had to be violated over and over each day, but that it had never been violated until Cash came. Not even by Anse in the nights.

He had a word, too. Love, he called it. But I had been used to words for a long time. I knew that that word was like the others: just a shape to fill a lack; that when the right time came, you wouldn’t need a word for that any more than for pride or fear. Cash did not need to say it to me nor I to him, and I would say. Let Anse use it, if he wants to. So that it was Anse or love; love or Anse: it didn’t matter. My aloneness had been violated and then made whole again by the violation. (“Addie,” 99)

As in real life the Stock Market has collapsed when credit burst, ruined by an economic bubble, the words have lost currency for Addie—unless the very complexity of her long monologue proves the contrary. The men around her continue to use the words to masquerade their puny urges, as when her lover Whitfield satisfies himself that confessing his sin in secret is worth redemption or when Anse talks of love. Anse will remain to his grave cushioned in “the cottony insulation of the words he lives within” (Weinstein 64), but she is not fooled. In the Bundren family everyone has to cope with his or her misery on their own.

Tricked by Words

Little Vardaman slowly becomes aware of the uncertain value of words but to him they are still literally true, and except Darl and Dewey Dell, no one seems to pay much attention to his distress. When he hears

that his brother Darl “*went crazy and went to Jackson both*” (“Vardaman,” 144) he wonders if “*Jackson is further away than crazy*” (“Vardaman,” 145). When he hears that his mother “is gone,” that “she taken and left us” (“Darl,” 29), he takes the word literally, assuming that his mother has departed. In a stream of consciousness passage, several pages later, we follow how he tries to make sense of this:

It was not her. I was there, looking. I saw. I thought it was her, but it was not. It was not my mother. She went away when the other one laid down in her bed and drew the quilt up. She went away. “Did she go as far as town?” “She went farther than town,” “Did all those rabbits and possums go farther than town?” God made the rabbits and possums. He made the train. Why must He make a different place for them to go if she is just like the rabbit. (“Vardaman,” 39)

Right after his mother’s death, Vardaman runs away from the house and assaults the horses of the doctor in the barn, confusing cause and consecution. When he calms down, we get one of the most poignant statements of grief-caused annihilation in the novel:

I am not crying now. I am not anything. Dewey Dell comes to the hill and calls me. Vardaman. I am not anything. I am quiet. You, Vardaman. I can cry quiet now, feeling and hearing my tears.

[...] It is dark. I can hear wood, silence: I know them. But not living sounds, not even him. It is as though the dark were resolving him out of his integrity, into an unrelated scattering of components—snuffings and stampings; smells of cooling flesh and ammoniac hair; an illusion of a coordinated whole of splotched hide and strong bones within which, detached and secret and familiar, an *is* different from my *is*. I see him dissolve—legs, a rolling eye, a gaudy splotching like cold flames—and float upon the dark in fading solution; all one yet neither; all either yet none. (“Vardaman,” 33-34)

No one helps Vardaman to overcome the trauma of his mother encased in a box, which throws him back to the experience of being shut up in a crib with a rat, suffocating. This leads him to bore holes into the top of the coffin to let his mother breathe. Dewey Dell is unhinged by another kind of disruption: the process of “coming unalone” that threatens the integrity of her body. As for Cash, he thinks he has the technology to take into account the stresses of the natural world, as in his instruction-manual like chapter.

To Darl, the moment of horror seems to come in front of the swollen river. Gazing at the flooded river bottom, he is profoundly shaken by a sense of complete disruption. In his view, men are deprived of agency and meaning while the river takes over, not even in anger; it is almost strangely articulate.

Before us the thick dark current runs. It talks up to us in a murmur become ceaseless and myriad, the yellow surface dimpled monstrously into fading swirls travelling along the surface for an instant, silent, impermanent and profoundly significant, as though just beneath the surface something huge and alive waked for a moment of lazy alertness out of and into light slumber again. ("Darl," 82)

The quiet, sibilantly signifying power of the river is contrasted with to the uprootedness of living things:

Above the ceaseless surface they stand—trees, canes, vines—rootless, severed from the earth, spectral above a scene of immense yet circumscribed desolation filled with the voice of the waste and mournful water. ("Darl," 82)

The sentence itself comes unhinged, with words paratactically juxtaposed, suspended like the natural objects they refer to, ghostlike. In the river Darl feels the "motion of the wasted world accelerat[ing] just before the final precipice" ("Darl," 85). The ultimate fading away is drawing close. The last words of this Darl chapter are about the mules but they refer to a common obsession of his: "They roll up out of the water [...] their legs stiffly extended as when they had lost contact with the earth" ("Darl," 86). As if to emphasize the horror of this loss of point of support, especially for Darl, these are the last words of the section.

Darl and his brothers cross the river but their wagon is dislocated in the stream. On the other side of the river, the reconstruction of Cash's toolbox becomes a kind of synecdoche for the reconstruction of the family:

The wagon is hauled clear, the wheels chocked (carefully: we all helped; it is as though upon the shabby, familiar, inert shape of the wagon there lingered somehow, latent yet still immediate, that violence which had slain the mules that drew it not an hour since) above the edge of the flood. ("Darl," 90)

As Darl watches the torsos of his brothers moving across the surface of the treacherous water, he thinks, "It looks peaceful, like machinery does after you have watched it and listened to it for a long time. As though the clotting which is you had dissolved into the myriad original motion, and seeing and hearing in themselves blind and deaf; fury in itself quiet with stagnation" ("Darl," 163-64). Darl thus contemplates a sense of being before selfhood and awareness, a sense of the revolution (in the sense of coming full circle) that may result from apocalyptic assault. Honda Ryohei relates Darl's sensitivity to this dissolution to a deep awareness of death: "The gestures which compose the life of each man are nothing more than reiterations of vain actions a myriad of men have taken in the face of nothingness, and all human beings are anonymously reduced to nothing and into silence. For Darl, because the being of a man will be lost (that is, it will become 'was'), 'is' in the present is meaningless. This nihilistic vision of life deprives him of action. [...] Numbed by the darkness of death, Darl says to himself: 'If you could just ravel out into time. That would be nice. It would be nice if you could just ravel out into time' ("Cash" 121)."

One by one the Bundren men recover the tools of Cash's trade: "the plane, the saw, the hammer, the square, the rule, the chalk-line," and it is as if the family were piecing itself together after the catastrophe, although they are not unified in their hidden motivations for going to town. They have to cope with several converging disasters—the flood that came after the heat, then the death of the mother. Finally, the reader realizes that the yellow mud will have awakened in Darl the memories of his time in the trenches in France, where he lost his mind. There is no happiness for him but for his siblings and his father, there are the simple joys that restore human dignity: enjoying a banana in the shade, a good horse, a new set of teeth to enjoy God's victuals with, a spare Mrs. Bundren to tend the house, and above all a graphophone to gather around and sing along to the tunes of the records that will come by mail order. "It's a comfortable thing, music is," Cash shyly confesses ("Cash," 136).

Summing up the end of the story and untypically using the past tense of the narrator, while most sections of the novel ascribed to the Bundrens are told in the present of description by the characters, Cash, unlike Darl, brings the logical links of narrative to the end of the chaotic journey. While Darl meditates that "it would be nice if you could just ravel out into time," the narrative eventually stitches together the strands

of the Bundrens' complex adventures and *balances* the books, as Addie would: "It wasn't nothing else to do" ("Cash," 134). From the bottom of the misery that took them down from their hilltop, the Bundrens have passed the Red Sea to the Promised Land of the town and the consumer society. The trip to Jefferson will have been a watershed: with their access to the mail-order retail system, they are now members of what Daniel Boorstin called "consumption communities"—the large web of the customers of the Chicago catalogue retail firms like Montgomery Ward, the firm which gives its name to one of Faulkner's Snopes characters. With the sacrifice of two family members linked in their sense of human finitude, the Bundrens seem to have achieved the comforts of life, overcoming the dissolution that washed Darl away with the commodified connectedness provided by the modern consumer economy.

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