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The Metaphysical and Ontological Quest Inwilliam Faulkner's *as I Lay Dying*

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Compared to the long and often tortuous delivery of Faulkner's other great masterpieces—*The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!*—his fifth novel, *As I Lay Dying*, came to him fully formed at its inception and was completed in a great sprint of imaginative intensity. "Before I began I said," Faulkner declared, "I am going to write a book by which, at a pinch, I can stand or fall if I never touch ink again." Faulkner's grotesquely heroic account of the hard-scrabble Bundren family's attempt to bury its matriarch, Addie, while contending with what Faulkner described as "the two greatest disasters known to man: flood and fire" on their journey through the blazing heat of midsummer Mississippi is fractured into 59 alternating monologues by 15 witnesses, from the four Bundren brothers—Cash, Jewel, Darl, and Vardaman—their sister Dewey Dell, and their father Anse, to a chorus of eight neighbors and those encountered along the way, as well as the dead Addie herself. In Faulkner's daring, Cubistlike structure of multiple, juxtaposed perspectives, narrative coherence and a full understanding of the family's past and motives emerge only gradually, reassembled by the reader out of often conflicting, subjective, and biased testimony. With such a book, Faulkner

asserted, "the finished work is simply a matter of fitting bricks neatly together, since the writer knows probably every single word right to the end before he puts the first onedown. This happened with *As I Lay Dying*. It was not easy. No honest work is. It was simple in that all the material was already at hand." The result is one of Faulkner's greatest technical achievements and one of his most profound explorations of the human condition. With *As I Lay Dying* Faulkner dissolves the fundamental polarities of human existence: life and death, the individual and the group, language and actuality, private and public, comedy and tragedy in pursuit of a new synthesis that expresses a fuller truth. As much a metaphysical and ontological quest as a family's internment drama, *As I Lay Dying* is in every sense the tour de force that Faulkner habitually described it, a masterpiece in which the vernacular and its regional setting buttress a profound, universal human drama.

As I Lay Dying represents both a complication and a simplification of the theme and method of *The Sound and the Fury*. As in the earlier novel, Faulkner presents a family drama of inadequate parents and their damaged children from multiple viewpoints within the family. However, instead of the four narrative divisions of *The Sound and the Fury*—of the three Comp-son brothers and a third-person narrator centered on the family's servant, Dilsey—*As I Lay Dying* multiplies both the number of viewpoints (all seven Bundrens and eight "outsiders") and narrative sections (59). Despite this increase in perspectives and fragmentation, *As I Lay Dying* is considerably easier to follow than *The Sound and the Fury*. Instead of the flashbacks and flashforwards before and during the period 1910 to 1928 in the earlier novel, time in *As I Lay Dying* contracts to a 10-day, straightforward chronological sequence, beginning with an account of Addie Bundren's death and the family's subsequent journey, in fulfillment of her wishes, to bury her with her people in the cemetery at Jefferson, 40 miles away. Less a disjointed series of interior monologues that The Sound and the Fury sometimes resembles, *As I Lay Dying* employs clearly identified alternating first-person

narration, with each of the various narrators advancing the action in a logical, chronological sequence shaped dramatically and suspensefully by the Bundrens' goal of completing their delivery mission. The monologues here more closely resemble soliloquies, and as Faulkner's biographer Frederick Karl has stated, *As I Lay Dying* can be regarded as "Faulkner's first play." Like The Sound and the Fury, key secrets relating to family relationships that the Bundrens repress are withheld from the reader and are only gradually clarified. Finally, although both novels share a nihilistic tone, established by Faulkner's reference to Shakespeare's lines—life "is a tale/Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,/Signifying nothing"—the tragic resonance of The Sound and the Fury is in *As I Lay Dying* complemented with a greater emphasis on the comic absurdity and grotesqueness of life's meaninglessness. The Bundrens' heroism as they doggedly contend, Job-like, with the punishing forces aligned against them is continually undercut by the ludicrousness of their situation and their behavior, transporting a putrefying corpse in the Mississippi summer heat in defiance of all common sense and propriety. Absurdist comedy is juxtaposed with existential tragedy, complicating the reader's assessment of theBundren family and the significance of their actions.

The literal and figurative center of the novel is Addie herself, both dead and alive. Introduced on her deathbed as her son Cash constructs her coffin outside her window, presenting each board for her approval before nailing it in place, Addie suggests someone in a liminal state, suspended between life and death, symbolic of the contradictory role she will play throughout the novel, as well as Faulkner's interest in overturning or, more precisely, inter-penetrating rigid categories of human experience. Married to the shiftless Anse, who is convinced that sweat is fatal and who has managed mainly by having others work for him, Addie has endured a kind of living death with her unresponsive husband. Now in death she assumes a more vital and central role than she ever played in life. The Bundrens, riven by

resentments, instinctual needs, and divisive compulsions, will be brought together as a family to carry out Addie's final request for burial in Jefferson. Yet each is far from selflessly devoted to their task. Anse, called by the critic Cleanth Brooks, "one of Faulkner's most accomplished villains," wants to take advantage of the visit to Jefferson to obtain "store-bought teeth." Cash, the cool-headed, practical craftsman, would like to buy a "graphophone." The pregnant Dewey Dell wants to procure medicine that will induce an abortion. The youngest, Vardaman, the Benjy-like innocent who, struggling to comprehend his mother's death, drills holes into her coffin (and Addie's face) to give her air, wants a toy train. The visionary, intuitive Darl, the Hamlet-like figure in this domestic drama, is jealous of his mother's favorite, self-centered, cruel Jewel, who refuses to let his mother go and blames everyone else for her death. As the critic Harold Bloom has observed, "The Bundrens manifestly constitute one of the most terrifying visions of the family romance in the history of literature." Faulkner devises for them a mythic journey to deliver Addie "home" for burial, setting in motion the means to unbury the various family secrets and traumas that have crippled them, while turning the Bundrens' alternately ludicrous and heroic efforts into a universal and existential drama.

With the bridges down by flood, the six-day journey to Jefferson takes on the quality of an epic challenge causing the family and several onlookers to confront its meaning. Faced with the rapidly decomposing corpse they are transporting, each faces the question to what extent the coffin holds mother, wife, neighbor, human being, or only noxious matter that should be disposed of as quickly as possible. Vital spirit or memento mori, Addie in her coffin is the still center of the novel's swirling action that culminates in the two biblical tests of flood and fire. Forced to ford the swollen Yoknapatawpha River, the Bundrens are forced into an elemental immersion described by Darl

> It is as though the space between us were time: an irrevocable quality. It is as though time, no longer running straight before us in a diminishing line, now runs parallel between us like a looping string, the distance being the doubling accretion of the thread and not the interval between. The mules stand, their fore quarters already sloped a little, their rumps high. They too are breathing now with a deep groaning sound; looking back once, their gaze sweeps across us with in their eyes a wild, sad, profound and despairing quality as though they had already seen in the thick water the shape of the disaster which they could not speak and we could not see.

Struck by a log, the wagon overturns, the mule team is lost, but the coffin is rescued. Anse, stripped now of the means of continuing the journey, sells Jewel's most prized possession, his horse (a displaced substitute for his mother), for another team. Undercutting the Bundrens' heroic resistance to the flood and their stubborn determination to accomplish Addie's last wishes at all costs is Addie's own testimony that makes clear that she has set her family their task out of sheer vindictiveness and penance for the life she has led with Anse. In the tour de force monologue of this tour de force novel, unlocking the family secrets and the philosophical core of the book's meditation on the link between sex and death, being and nonbeing, words and actuality, Addie offers an interpretation of her father's saying "that the reason for living was to get ready to stay dead a long time." For Addie, living requires a vital sexual drive to break through one's isolation—"my aloneness had to be violated over and over each day." Anse, who "did not know that he was dead," fails her, and, after giving birth to her two sons, Cash and Darl, Addie achieves the violation she requires in an affair with the preacher Whitfield, the father of Jewel. "I gave Anse Dewey Dell to negative Jewel," Addie confesses. "Then I gave him Vardaman to replace the child I had robbed him of. And now he has three children that are his and not mine. And then I could get ready to die." Addie makes

clear that failed autonomy and mutuality are at the core of the novel's existential drama, and their breakdown is the source of the family's disintegration. Anse, who was incapable of apprehending Addie's vital existence in life, must now contend with the reality of her corpse in death, as her children, damaged by too much or too little love from their needy, bereft mother, struggle for a sustaining grasp on their reality.

As the burial journey continues, buzzards circle the wagon attracted by the stench emanating from the coffin that appals all they pass. On the fifth day of their journey, the Bundrens stay the night at Gillespie's farm. Darl, who insists on bringing an end to the family's painful and pointless mission, sets fire to the barn where the coffin is being stored. Jewel, however, man-ages to save his mother's coffin, riding it out of the burning barn like a horse. Finally arriving at Jefferson the next day, they manage to bury Addie, but the successful completion of their quest mixes tragedy and black comedy. Darl, who is turned in by his siblings as a barn burner, is taken away to a prison for the criminally insane; Cash's broken leg, set grotesquely in concrete by his family, is treated, but he will be permanently crippled. Dewey Dell is deceived and seduced by a soda jerk pretending to be the druggist, and the toy train that Vardaman had been promised would be in the drugstore window is gone. Only Anse emerges from the ordeal unscathed. Acquiring his new teeth by appropriating the money Dewey Dell had saved for her abortion drug, Anse returns to his family ready for the return home with a new acquisition, introducing the duck-shaped woman from whom he had borrowed the spades to bury Addie, saying "Meet Mrs. Bundren."

Managing what Cash the craftsman calls "on a balance," *As I Lay Dying* unites tragedy and comedy, unavoidable death and irrepressible life, private selves and public actions, soul and body, heroism and absurdity, natural-ism and symbolism. It aspires, like all Faulkner's great works, to the widest possible truth in which limited and simplistic categories

of experience and expression are made to reveal the greatest mysteries and meanings of our existence.

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