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## As I Lay Dying: *Demise of Vision*

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THE criticism of William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* manifests the heterogeneity, the ambivalence, and the outright contradiction that characterize Faulkner criticism in general.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile the work continues to provoke ever more provocative commentary. Among traditional interpretations that even yet attempt to find meaning as statement, nontraditional readings are beginning to let the meaning lie while they follow Faulkner's strange experiments with time and space, with memory and imagination, with consciousness and unconsciousness.<sup>2</sup> Still, whatever the reading, it is usually expressed in terms of rationalist thinking, i.e., in negative terms, as disruption, disjunction, vacancy, and absence, as distortion and loss. The only novelty I hope to offer is that my interest is to describe what shows up or what happens where old meanings have disappeared without merely speaking in reverse. Exploring the novel's explicit treatment of language, my study will make its way literally along, searching the bare bones of the narrative, attempting not to repeat or to archaeologically reconstitute the work, but to follow alongside it in a thinking.

It is Addie who gives emphasis to (raises the spectre of) language as such. Words, she claims, are ineffectual.

And so when Cora Tull would tell me I was not a true mother, I would think how words go straight up in a thin line, quick and harmless, and how terribly doing goes along the earth, clinging to it,

<sup>1</sup> For studies before 1973 see André Bleikasten, *Faulkner's As I Lay Dying*, trans. Roger Little, rev. and enlarged ed. (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1973); for a general overview a decade later, see Doreen Fowler and Ann J. Abadie, eds., *New Directions in Faulkner Studies: Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha*, 1983 (Jackson: Univ. Press of Mississippi, 1984).

<sup>2</sup> For example, John T. Irwin, *Doubling and Incest/Repetition and Revenge: A Speculative Reading of Faulkner* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1975).

so that after a while the two lines are too far apart for the same person to straddle from one to the other; and that sin and love and fear are just sounds that people who never sinned nor loved nor feared have for what they never had and cannot have until they forget the words.<sup>3</sup>

Not words but “doing”—something terrible that belongs to the earth—is what matters. Addie’s essential disagreement with Anse turns on precisely this point of doing versus not-doing, a horizontal-vertical earth-space set of contraries. Things God meant to stay in one place, says Anse—such as trees, men—He set in an upright, vertical position; things devoted to moving—roads, snakes—He made horizontal. Anse cordially loathes movement. Living in Addie’s terms is evil in his (pp. 34–35).<sup>4</sup>

Living in her terms is evil in the terms of her culture, too: Mississippi bible-belt terms which counsel to suffer the little children, not to relish whipping them; to honor father and mother, not to hate the father for “planting” one; to submit to the husband, not to deny unequivocally his significance; to bring up a child in the way he should go, not to reject him (Darl), not to worship him (Jewel); not to commit adultery; not to refuse to confess or repent; not, above all, stubbornly to choose one’s own terms. In Addie’s culture, natural instinct is fallen nature; desire is concupiscence; will is willfulness; initiative is disobedience; independence is pride.

But when Addie insists on choosing her own “terms,” does she escape the function or the necessity of words? And can we ignore the tautology in the denial of the validity and utility of words by the character whose words provide the title of the novel and the central chapter? Setting these doubts aside for the moment, we commence our exploration after Addie’s example, with a story, with Addie’s story, taking her literal statement as our first subject of inquiry. The “Addie” chapter gives an account of Addie’s lifetime of interpreting and reinterpreting (1) the nature of the words of her culture, their emptiness and

<sup>3</sup> William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying* (New York: Random House, 1964), pp. 165–66.

<sup>4</sup> Compare Faulkner’s remarks in an interview for *Paris Review* in 1956, in which he equates life with motion and motion with motivation, claiming that the intention of the artist is “to arrest motion, which is life, by artificial means and hold it fixed so that a hundred years later, when a stranger looks at it, it moves again since it is life.” Quoted in *Lion in the Garden*, eds. James B. Meriwether and Michael Millgate (New York: Random House, 1968), p. 253.

inadequacy, and (2) the nature of living—a “doing,” separate and different from those words.

Addie’s first interpretation is partial and instinctual, derived as a young teacher, a lonely, educated woman in a Mississippi country community, profoundly frustrated, all the more for the lack of a direct cause or a direct object. The opening sentence in her chapter sets the tone: “In the afternoon when school was out and the last one had left with his little dirty snuffling nose, instead of going home I would go down the hill to the spring where I could be quiet and hate them.” At night, as she recalls, “Sometimes I thought that I could not bear it, lying in bed . . . with the wild geese going north and their honking coming faint and high and wild out of the wild darkness,” and during the day, “it would seem as though I couldn’t wait for the last one to go so I could go down to the spring.” She interprets her hate in terms of the “secret and selfish” thoughts and lives of the children, each with his own “strange” blood. Thus she whips them till the skin welts and bleeds, till she has “marked” their blood with her own in a cruel empathic (sado-masochistic) catharsis.

In a later reinterpretation Addie expressly attributes this early frustration to the problem of words. Whipping the children was a futile attempt to mitigate the condition of aloneness—aloneness, she later understands, by reason of their dependence upon words for touching. She and the children “had had to use one another by words like spiders dangling by their mouths from a beam, swinging and twisting and never touching, and . . . only through the blows of the switch could [her] blood and their blood flow as one stream” (p. 164). In this image, the beam is a part of an apparently stationary structure. Hanging from the beam at intervals are spiders that dangle and twist without touching each other. Each spider is connected to the beam by its own thread, but the connection of spider to spider is contingent on the beam, whose essential function is not related to spiders’. Like the given beam, preestablished language does not originate in Addie and the children or in their essential function: doing. In this image, as in the vertical-horizontal image above (and the geese image below), language is a high, separate, separating nonmediator.

Addie and the children “use” each other “by words” as the spi-

ders hang onto the beam “by” their mouths. Words are like the spider threads; their origin is essential but their function is artificial and mechanical, routed through the non- and dis-connecting beam, dysfunctional language. When words do not mediate, cannot penetrate, interpenetrate, then human intercourse requires something more, more essential: doing. “Doing” for Addie incorporates a principle of violation—a violation not merely physical, but a violation of *aloneness*. Whipping the children is an attempt to make-them-aware-of-me; and it fails (p. 164).

“And so I took Anse.” The word “so” (pp. 162–63) indicates an essential relationship between Addie’s frustration and her “taking” of Anse (not her being-taken-by Anse; “doing” is her *modus operandi*, not his). The same implication is given by the same word a few paragraphs later. Addie tells Anse that she has never known any kind of people, living or dead, who were not “hard to talk to”; the next paragraph begins, “So I took Anse.” Again the “so” implies a relationship between frustration and taking Anse, but this time the problem is indirectly identified with ineffectual language in her first—implicit—critique of language.

Marrying Anse means a violation-of-virginity, the oldest remedy in the world for the oldest frustration; but marriage fails to satisfy Addie’s violation-principle. The violation which satisfies her demand occurs with the birth of Cash. This “doing” brings the more-than-physical violating and restoring of aloneness which provides at last a wholeness (of aloneness), a “circle” exclusive of “time, Anse, love, what you will”—but not of Cash or of *loving*, the deed displaced by the word “love.” (This insular self-inclusiveness is characteristic of Faulknerian women, an often bitter, hard, wise insensitivity, principle of female endurance, enduring.) A second violation, a second pregnancy—a “trick” of Anse’s word “love”—will motivate the rest of the story, but to our purpose here, the “doing” of “having” the children is, Addie discovers, the “answer” to “terrible” living; and it includes, involves, the earth: “Sometimes I would lie by [Anse] in the dark, hearing the land that was now of my blood and flesh” (p. 165). If we analyze Addie’s condition, if we sort her answers and terror and blood into mental, emotional, and physical categories, or if we attempt to define her state in terms of objective reality or subjective interpretation, we sacrifice their “flooding,”

“boiling” actuality, and enact the very process of abstraction that she has discovered and denounced.

Compare Addie’s former frustration, lying at night alone listening to the geese cries overhead. Now, after she has “had” Cash and Darl, when she has achieved some essential potentiality, she lies awake, “hearing the dark land talking of God’s love and His beauty and His sin; hearing the dark voicelessness in which the words are the deeds, and the other words that are not deeds, that are just the gaps in peoples’ lacks, coming down like the cries of the geese out of the wild darkness in the old terrible nights, fumbling at the deeds like orphans to whom are pointed out in a crowd two faces and told, That is your father, your mother” (p. 166). “Other words” are orphans, though their parents are living: words as deeds, which belong to the “dark voicelessness” of the “dark land talking.” “Other words” are all the words she knows, we assume, since she denounces words per se, denies and contradicts their meanings. “Other words” are alienated words, dissociated from and without effect upon real—i.e., doing—living. “Other words” are inert and must be forgotten in order to deal directly with living, doing.

She thinks about the function of words:

I would think: Anse. Why Anse. Why are you Anse. 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; and then I would find that I had forgotten the name of the jar. I would think: The shape of my body where I used to be a virgin is in the shape of a \_\_\_\_\_ and I couldn’t think *Anse*, couldn’t remember *Anse*. It was not that I could think of myself as no longer unvirgin, because I was three now. And when I would think *Cash* and *Darl* that way until their names would die and solidify into a shape and then fade away, I would say, All right. It doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter what they call them. (P. 165)

In Addie’s analogy a name is like a jar that has a shape, a pre-fabricated form—with contours, definition, limitation (a name already belongs to language). Into this jar the strangely adapting Anse flows. Since the form is already made, shaped, limited, the transforming Anse fills that form, takes that shape, admits that limit. The jar is not Anse, is not an image of him, not

a representation, but a shape (a form, signifier) lent to Anse (a doing, signified), a shape which accommodates Anse himself. The adaptation of Anse to the jar is reminiscent of what we usually call "concept," meaning a psychological construct of Anse in the mind of Addie. But if we resist the temptation to call it "concept," we may obtain a new view of the phenomenon appearing here. In Addie's description the jar is not the same phenomenon as Anse himself, sleeping beside her as she thinks about the function of his name; yet to install a third entity in the scheme, an idea in the mind of Addie, does not answer to the phenomenon either, since the jar is only temporary. The jar-name dissolves and leaves Anse behind—or it leaves nothing, since Anse is "dead." What remains is not the jar but what flows into the jar and is released.

And what is the nature of what the jar "Anse" receives and releases? Anse himself, strangely (unaccountably) adapting to the transference, is present to Addie through the function of the word, and outside it. This being-present-to is perhaps another mode of the same miracle by which Anse sleeping would be present to her if she turned her attention to him. The notion of a recurring or cumulative Anse who has been and may be present to her ignores or dismisses the metaphysical concept of Anse-in-himself. Thus we object that this Anse is, or is altered by, Addie's subjective perception. But in this text it is not possible to locate any entities-in-themselves, and so the point is moot. At any rate, to return to the function of the word, the jar does not so much contain Anse as it maintains him. That is, Addie recalls the name "Anse" first, separately, then recalls Anse—flowing into, filling the word-jar. The name serves to bear or carry Anse, to bring or call him to presence. But once the name has performed this function, the name itself is displaced by Anse and in itself is forgotten.

Addie would forget the name of the jar; to recall it she would think of Anse himself. If a name stood in a reciprocal or a necessary relationship with a person, then the recollection of the person should recall the name. But when Addie thinks of the person Anse, she recalls a blank. The experiment seems to corroborate her theory that names function to signify doings ("Anse" recalls Anse to presence), while doings function quite healthily without reference to names (Anse does not recall

"Anse" to mind). Another implication concerns the character of Anse. When Addie thinks of the word "Anse" (and of Anse's word "love"), the form (filled jar) is like an empty doorframe. An empty doorframe is a base for a door, the preparation for a door, and it implies the intention of a door; but ultimately it functions to signify the absence of a door. Like words in themselves, outside their function, like a mere doorframe, Anse is "a significant shape profoundly without life."<sup>5</sup>

Now when Addie forgets Anse's name and tries to recall it by thinking of him, she thinks of sexual intercourse, according to her violation-of-aloneness principle (doing). But in spite of the fact that he has fathered her two children ("I was three now"), in spite of the profound significance that these two "violations" have had for her, still Anse himself has never touched her according to her violation-of-aloneness principle; thus he has no meaning. The name "Anse" is a sign signifying nothing: a shape signifying a lack.

It is different with "Cash" and "Darl," although the function of names remains the same. When Addie thinks of "Cash" and "Darl," the names "die and solidify into a shape and then fade away," as "Anse" did. But "it doesn't matter what they call them." She learned when she was pregnant with Cash "that words are no good; that words don't ever fit even what they are trying to say at" (p. 163). The names "Cash" and "Darl" are shapes which function to signify (recall, bring), but the shapes in themselves are not significant; in Addie's view names in themselves are arbitrary and unnecessary. "When [Cash] was born I knew that motherhood was invented by someone who had to have a word for it because the one that had the children didn't care whether there was a word for it or not. I knew that fear was invented by someone that had never had the fear; pride, who never had the pride" (pp. 163-64). The significance in "Cash" and "Darl" is the reality of "having" these two children. Cash and Darl, with or without names, are genuine *doings*, according to her violation-of-aloneness principle.

There is one more active understanding of life and of words that Addie achieves before she must clean her house. This time

<sup>5</sup> Compare Sutpen's empty doorframe in *Absalom, Absalom!* where the ironies of intention misdirected, misapprehended, thwarted, and shattered are multiplied *ad infinitum*.

the doing is passion and the word is "sin." Motherhood has provided the key to ("terrible") living, Anse has "died," and now she interprets her duty in life as duty *to* life, to "the alive." (Cora will castigate her for neglecting her Christian duty, but Cora's "duty" is another high, dead sound in the air.) "I believed that I had found it. I believed that the reason was the duty to the alive, to the terrible blood, the red bitter flood boiling through the land" (p. 166).

"Sin" is the word people who haven't sinned use to cover up what-sin-is. "Sin" is for people who have to have a word for something they never had. It is a shape to fill a lack. But for Addie, the sinner, "sin" is a "gallant garment already blowing aside with the speed of his secret coming," a garment her lover and she lay aside in order "to shape and coerce the terrible blood to the forlorn echo of the dead word high in the air." The deed that "sin" displaces is a living, life-forcing doing.

The meaning of words is for Addie only the doing of human living. Words like "sin" and "love" and "fear," which have lost their connection with doing, which have flown off from doing (which is clinging to the earth) into the wild, dark air, have become falsifiers and expropriators of life and language. Thus Addie's injunction against substituting words for doings and her warning that people will never experience doings until they forget words.

But does the principle enjoin silence? Does it address literally all words? As we have already noted, Addie's principles of life and language are themselves "terms." Having examined these directly, we peruse her chapter again for further implications about the function of words.

There are the words of Addie's father, his dictum: "the reason for living was to get ready to stay dead a long time." Addie contemplates this sentiment at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end of her narration. What her father says in this dictum is at the beginning an ironic witticism to which her experience gives a bitter, humorless interpretation. If *this* (teaching school, hating and whipping the children, unmitigated aloneness) is the only way to get ready to stay dead, she wishes her father had not "planted" her. In the middle of the chapter the words occur again. After the "trick"—Anse's, "love"'s, life's—of a second pregnancy, this violation violating the consummation of the first,

and after Darl's birth, Addie extracts Anse's promise that when she dies he will take her back to Jefferson where her people, presumably her father as well, are buried, "because I knew that father had been right, even when he couldn't have known he was right anymore than I could have known I was wrong." Now she knows the doing to which the dictum refers, knows that violation-of-aloneness is not "the answer" to living after all. At three moments of bitter revelation Addie interprets her father's dictum as each wave of violation overwhelms the last. Perhaps with the second she begins to know the inherent self-contradiction life is, the violation that it commits against itself—continuous moving precluding the possibility of arrival, continuous getting precluding the possibility of attainment, continuous process precluding the possibility of product, until afterward.

At the end of her narration, after the secret "sin," when she discovers the new pregnancy, Jewel, and its price (cleaning up the house afterward), Addie "knew at last what [her father] meant and that he could not have known what he meant himself, because a man cannot know anything about cleaning up the house afterward." Her father's dictum signifies a doing which he could not have "known." She has speculated at three different points as to the meaning this saying had for him, who, as far as we know, authored the words. At each point the saying has come to mean something different for *her*. The saying is always composed of the same words, words of her father who is dead; but their meaning is not fixed, has not solidified, died. If Addie's experience with her father's words is an indication of the legitimate function of living words, then the difference in old words that are dead and old words that are living is not in their age nor in their sound or sense, but in their relationship with living doing.

Addie has illustrated the difference between dead and living words. In both cases the name (word) is a given shape that has an arbitrary relationship to what it names. But dead words are only given shapes; and what-they-name, what Addie's "jar" holds, is inert or nonexistent. Living words are dead names/shapes too (names/shapes *in themselves* are dead), arbitrary too, and forgettable, but what-they-mean is living, real. Name them or not, name them something particular or something else, in any case what-they-mean "is," is memorable. And what the words

mean is memorable *by way of language*, as Addie's experience with her father's words has shown.

In fact, there seems to be an ambiguity principle operating in living words—not that the meanings of words are not determinable or clear but that they are not fixed, not static, not complete, finished, totalled. We have seen it in Addie's father's words living out of the past. We find it again, for example, in Addie's conversation with Cora on the subject of her refusal to confess, even under the ardent admonitions of the sanctified Brother Whitfield (pp. 158–60). Addie's words (e.g., "I know my own sin. I know that I deserve my punishment. I do not begrudge it") are extremely provocative to poor spiteful Cora, whose nose for iniquity is quite reliable, but who is helpless to get a hold here without a "word" from Addie. And though Addie is confessing in words, words that have the meaning that both she and Cora understand, she nevertheless withholds the word outright (the confession, naming the party) that would satisfy Cora's malicious curiosity (and perhaps atone for the fact that Addie has sons and can cook).

Ostensibly Addie is returning to Cora language of her own kind. Cora uses words no one can refute, religious phrases straight from the mouths of the likes of Brother Whitfield, hardened empty "jars" the church has handed around to everyone and stands every day to authorize. And her use of these empty truisms is fairly transparent; a bully, she uses them like clubs. But the tantalizing, maddening thing about Addie's use of such words is that they are not empty forms when she says them; they are living, and for Cora they are brimming with a salacious mystery. Addie's words accommodate, house, what she means, a doing. Cora's words deny, belie, her doing meaning.

The ambiguity principle that allows dead language to serve the living, to live again, operates in reverse as well, allows living language to serve the dead, to die. Anse is fond of characterizing Addie in such phrases as "She was ever a private woman"; "She was ever one to clean up after herself" (pp. 18–19). In such remarks Anse states words whose meaning is true, i.e., going-on, doing. Addie *has been and is doing* what these words indicate. Nevertheless the words in Anse's mouth are the solidified forms that Addie despises. The words are dead, for Anse is dead. He says the words, as Cora says her platitudes; but he means

nothing by them. That is, the words mean what he means, which is nothing. They serve at best as an excuse for not-being, a substitute for being. At their most positive, Anse's words are a complaint. Anse's arduous trek to Jefferson to bury Addie is his ultimate (doing) word (deed) of this kind; he seems glad that the task is impossible, absurd, indecent. The degradation is his manifest abdication of responsibility for his own doing (he disapproves of doing, we know): this obscene advertisement of ignorance and stupidity is *her* idea, *her* wish, *her* command ("It's a trial. . . . But I dont begrudge her it," p. 156).<sup>6</sup>

Where is the living in living words? Are the words doing the living? Anse says words that are "true," that say doing, and yet his words are empty. When we, readers, read his words, we understand that they are living by Addie's standards even though Anse does not know it. The answer seems to be that words belong to speakers and hearers. For Anse the words are dead; for us they are living, just as Addie thinks the words of her father were dead to him though they are living to her. *Living* does not belong to any abstract or objective "reality" and not to words in themselves, but to whoever is living, doing. And living words are unfinished, are ambiguous; they allow doing to happen in them. Like the words of Addie's father, they accommodate changing, living doing.

The legitimate use of words, to hold a place for meaning to go on, has been shown above. But is the use of words, even the legitimate use, necessary? What is the effect of words? The novel shows in many cases the point of origin of words. That is, characters approach a word and break off—refuse to say it. Why?

"It's laying there, watching Cash whittle on that damn . . ." Jewel says. He says it harshly, savagely, but he does not say the word. Like a little boy in the dark to flail his courage and suddenly aghast into silence by his own noise. (Darl, p. 18)

<sup>6</sup> We see the principle in small when in the passages I have cited both Anse and Addie use the word "begrudge," with different motivation and to different effect. Anse's word conceals his meaninglessness (not-doing), at least from himself; Addie's word indicates her meaning (doing), at least for herself, for us. We note that Addie's word does not reveal her meaning to Cora, for whom living language can indicate only mystery—and menace.

When they get it finished they are going to put her in it and then for a long time I couldn't say it. I saw the dark stand up and go whirling away and I said. . . . (Vardaman, p. 62)

Before the word, at the point of origin, there is an approaching. Jewel approaches *coffin*; he stops short. We recall that earlier he could not stand the sound of Cash's hammer. "One lick less. One lick less. One lick less until everybody that passes in the road will have to stop and see it and say what a fine carpenter he is" (p. 15). Jewel is right; for Cash the coffin does amount to a good job to do well. But for Jewel, who cannot bear to finish his sentence, the completion of the job would mean: coffin. The sound of the hammer, the deed (doing) of the making of the coffin, is a sound he hates, for he hates the sequel—denies, refuses the spoken or carpentered reality. He suppresses the word; denies, opposes the deed, as he will suppress, deny, oppose the truth (doing) of his own identity that Darl knows; suppress, deny, oppose Darl who could say the word.

Before the word, we have said, at the point of origin, there is an approaching. Vardaman approaches *nail-her-up*. He says it: "Are you going to nail her up in it, Cash? Cash? Cash?" A breathless space and he says it again, this time discovering where the emphasis is: "I got shut up in the crib the new door it was too heavy for me it went shut I couldn't breathe because the rat was breathing up all the air. I said 'Are you going to nail it shut, Cash? Nail it? *Nail* it?'" (p. 62).

What is the principle here? It is expressed by Darl, telling Dewey Dell (in their unspoken language), "'You want her to die so you can get to town: is that it?' She wouldn't say what we both knew. 'The reason you will not say it is, when you say it, even to yourself, you will know it is true: is that it? But you know it is true now'" (pp. 38–39). This story is full of secret knowledge, private and shared knowledge, subconscious motivation and determination of what characters say and do, knowledge that could perhaps subvert dead forms that their lives are trapped by, made impotent and crippled by. Saying it would drag it into the light, bring it into view, expose it. Saying it would mean seeing it. Saying false words fixes falseness, nothing; fixes a blight, death. Saying doing words means seeing doing, establishing it in view so that one, and others, can continue to

see it. We find ourselves at something of an origin here: to say words is to create reality.

An ontology of language has been traced in this novel to the problem of a beginning. In such a novel, which treats such a subject, we should at least glance briefly at the question of art. If language functions to create reality, then the makers of language are gods. How does this novel characterize the artist?

The artist is Darl—the rejected seer, oracle, prophet; separated from the others, apparently uncaring and uninvolved, alienated, and finally excommunicated. Jewel and Dewey Dell, the others abetting, get him, fix him. Like the abortion Dewey Dell wants desperately to get to town for, this “fixing” will eliminate the tell-tale indicator of the truths about themselves. The truth could set them free? Crucify him! Darl’s last word is mad, ironic laughter.

Vardaman’s experience of making language to articulate Darl’s disappearance is suggestive. His words break off again and again when they approach what-has-happened-to-Darl. The blank/stop seems to run into a genuinely empty space—not horror or fear, but incomprehension, enigma. He says “crazy” without difficulty, but that does not finish the matter, the thought, the syntax. There is more *doing*, not brought into words yet. Darl my brother went crazy and was sent to Jackson *but that is not all*.

And there is another ambiguity. I have suggested that the Bundrens are suppressing and denying self-knowledge. They might drag themselves out of the mud primeval by making words, creating life, I have implied. Perhaps they could. They are profoundly guilty for their own condition and for the loss of the artist and for his immolation. But their fear of the truth is not simple perversity. Something fearful does lie beneath the language of the novel. Darl’s vision from time to time takes on Faulknerian tones, pessimistic: “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” (pp. 196–97); or “Life was created in the valleys. It blew up onto the hills on the old terrors, the old lusts, the old despairs. That’s why you must walk up the hills so you can ride down” (p. 217). We pause before the artist Faulkner to consider the novel for a moment in

terms of its own treatment of language. What kind of language does it use—dead or living?

Innumerable conventional “words” are employed in the construction of the novel: conventions of epic, of tragedy, of comedy, of romance, of allegory; motifs of the journey, descent into the underworld, hell, Christ, the scapegoat. There are techniques borrowed from the art of painting—impressionism, cubism, pointillism: comparisons to paintings (Darl often sees life *like a painting*, life imitating art), literal descriptions that exclude perspective, stream of consciousness, lack of narrator, collage of many narrations, many voices, points of view. Language theory, Freudian thought. No doubt the list could go on till the last echo from the past has been transcribed. The crucial question: Are these forms solidified fossils, deadweight, or are they living? Do the words define a space where “doing” is happening still?

The difference between the old meanings of the words and the new ones is part of what the new ones mean. The new living (doing) words stand here in a dialogic relationship with the past. (Bakhtin’s polyglossia principle corresponds interestingly with the Heideggerian thought that has guided this reading.) We can make a few generalizations at once. There is a falling off. Whereas epics deal with heroes and warriors, and tragedy with men of elevated rank and superior character, the Bundrens represent the very lowest elements of human society. They are shabby and ignorant and grossly insensitive as they bear the stinking corpse across the country, the buzzards unnecessarily advertising what every bystander’s olfactory apparatus has already told him. The motives of the family are shabby too. Tull says during the crossing of the river episode, “Just going to town. Bent on it. They would risk the fire and the earth and the water and all just to eat a sack of bananas” (p. 133). Bent on going to town—Anse for teeth, Cash for a talking machine, Dewey Dell for an abortion. Their episodic odyssey is a spectacle of stupid heroics, “putting out” neighbors along the way and offending every sentient being. The elements of this story would be appropriate for comedy, but they are treated here with seriousness and often, as in Darl’s chapters and Vardaman’s, informed with a grotesque or naked beauty. The effect is a painful comedic irony.

Tragic heroes fall and in the falling grasp at last a bitter self-

knowledge. If Jewel—who is Addie's savior from the flood and the fire—is taken for the hero, we must note that he extinguishes the oracle—"fixes" Darl who is the sign of his true identity. Oedipus, awakened, blinds himself. Jewel blinds himself to prevent awaking.

How does the novel reflect upon itself? We may set the first scene into contra-diction with the last. In the beginning Darl is dogging Jewel. Addie—the one signifier of truth for Anse, the central focus of meaning for Jewel and Darl—is dying, and a storm is coming. Surely crisis is at hand. At the end of the story the family is standing on a street corner eating bananas. There are two obvious changes. First, there is a new Mrs. Bundren, a substitution for Addie (a shape to fill a lack). Second, Darl is gone. The artist-character, always suspect, alien, has been declared crazy and *he will be crazy*. If Addie functions in the story as something of a center (her chapter occurs at about the center of the book; her meaning in the lives of the others is the meaning of the story; her death is the event of the story) and as fundament (her voice is given the first and last word as it gives the title, precedes and outlasts the story), then "I" as center, as self-consciousness, is what does die in this story, since the only seers, Addie and Darl, are put away in Jefferson (though seeing endures as potentiality in Vardaman).

The substitution for the traditional prophet-priest is Cash—Cash, whose first principle is precision and whose fine art is perfect, methodical carpentry. The last words of the story are his. His simple meagre soul is pleased with the new Mrs. Bundren's graphophone (signifier of a new kind of word, technological), only one brotherly ripple of a doubt disturbing the bucolic peace.