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Frédérique Spill, Gerald Préher

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Introduction

Frédérique Spill and Gérald Préher

Université de Picardie Jules Verne

Institut Catholique de Lille

Faulkner supposedly started working on *As I Lay Dying* on October 25, 1929, the day after the Wall Street Panic, which marked the beginning of the Great Depression. A penniless husband and father, he worked nightshifts at the powerhouse on the campus of Ole Miss, the University of Mississippi in Oxford. On January 12, 1930, his novel was ready to be sent to his editor, Hal Smith. Between those two dates, *As I Lay Dying* was written in forty-seven days, plus a month of revisions and typing, in a remarkable outburst of creative energy—a “tour de force,” indeed, considering the novel’s originality and many intricacies. Faulkner liked to make people believe he had not changed a single word to his first draft, composed in six weeks between midnight and four in the morning, when the workload at the powerhouse was low. Critics who had a chance to take a look at the original manuscript have shown that this is not exactly true. But what a feat anyway, especially when one considers that Faulkner’s fifth novel followed the publication of *The Sound and the Fury* in an amazingly close succession and that he came up with more novels that are equally spectacular—all fated to become American classics—before the 1930s were over.

The family whose story is told in *As I Lay Dying*, the Bundrens, comes from the hills of Northern Mississippi; they are poor white farmers who live on a farm at the top of a hill. The father, Anse Bundren, was born there; his wife, Addie, comes from the nearby small town of Jefferson, where she used to be a schoolteacher. From the start, they do not quite belong to the same world. Yet they had five children together—this is at least what Anse was made to think—over about fifteen years: Cash, Darl, Jewel, Dewey Dell, the only girl, and Vardaman. By the time the reader gets acquainted with the Bundrens, Addie has been lying dying for ten days. Faulkner’s choice of Northern Mississippi as the location of his story hardly comes as a surprise considering his comments on what Sherwood Anderson taught him to keep in mind when he started off writing: “You had only to remember what you were. ‘You have to have somewhere to start from: then you begin to learn,’ [Sherwood Anderson]

told me. ‘It dont matter where it was, just so you remember it and aint ashamed of it. Because one place to start from is just important as any other’” (“A Note on Sherwood Anderson” 8). If *As I Lay Dying* centers on a death in the Bundren family, it is also the first work in which Faulkner names his fictional county, Yoknapatawpha, where “water runs slow through flat land” (*Faulkner in the University* 74). Addie’s slow death thus also leads to a beginning.

Though the novel contains a few analepses, the plot of *As I Lay Dying* develops in a straight line, along bad roads made even worse by the heavy rains and flooding rivers. Water is one of the central elements related and relating to the mother for, as Ron Rash’s narrator in “The Woman at the Pond” remarks, it “has its own archeology, not a layering but a leveling, and thus is truer to our sense of the past, because what is memory but near and far events spread and smoothed beneath the present’s surface” (193). The whole novel, which some critics have seen in cubist terms, is an assemblage of past moments that are *presentified*, of present moments that seem timeless. The surface, as that of the river, is forever unstable. Through the heat of July, the Bundrens drive across the countryside in a mule-drawn wagon, meaning to reach town, bunched up around—and sometimes on top of—a box in which the wife and mother is now lying dead, waiting to be taken to “the ultimate earth” of her final destination. Because this is what she wanted: to be buried with those she considered her people, her kinsfolks, in Jefferson. The promise Anse made her is to be fulfilled at any cost. Yet the road is long and the trip forever extended by an endless chain of adversities. This is how Faulkner commented on the composition of *As I Lay Dying* in the course of a 1957 conference at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville: “I took this family and subjected them to the two greatest catastrophes which man can suffer—flood and fire, that’s all... That was written in six weeks without changing a word because I knew from the first where that was going” (*Faulkner in the University* 87).

Jefferson is the capital of the apocryphal Yoknapatawpha County, where most of Faulkner’s novels and short stories—though not all of them—take place. This now legendary, unpronounceable, name appears in the voice of a secondary character named Moseley, who describes the Bundrens’ strange procession as follows: “They came from some place out in the Yoknapatawpha county, trying to get to Jefferson with it. It must have been like a piece of rotten cheese coming into an ant-hill, in that ramshackle wagon that Albert said folks were scared would fall all to pieces before they could get it out of town” (118). In just a few words,

Moseley evokes the novel's main three locations: where the Bundrens come from, "some place" out there in the middle of nowhere; their destination; the road, along which most of the novel is staged, in which respect *As I Lay Dying* enters the category of road novels, in turn taking up one of the most emblematic leitmotifs of American culture. Moseley also makes it clear that, whatever the box the Bundrens carry along with them contains, it smells so unimaginably bad that "it" cannot possibly be named in regard with anything known. Periphrasis is therefore needed to designate the terrible reality Addie Bundren has become in the moist heat of the Mississippi summer.

As I Lay Dying is Faulkner's shortest novel. With it, Faulkner went on with the narrative experimentation he started with *The Sound and the Fury*, published a year earlier in 1929. His previous novel is narrated by three successive first-person narrators, the three Compson brothers, before opening up in the novel's last fourth part onto an omniscient perspective with a view to clarifying the fuzzy, intricate, if not completely opaque, ratiocinations of the three brothers. Faulkner's third monological novel, probably the most complex of all, is *Absalom, Absalom!*, published in 1936.

As I Lay Dying is built upon the use of multiple viewpoints. Fifteen first-person narrators successively tell the story, as well as their stories; they include the seven members of the Bundren family, as well as eight neighbors or chance encounters. Some of them, like Jewel, Addie and most people met along the road, are one-time narrators. Others' voices are heard several times, as a result of which their respective narratives emerge in a fragmented way, as subjective perspectives float, intercross, merge and sometimes collide, forever encouraging the reader to wonder about the reliability of each narrator and about the plausibility of what is being said. *As I Lay Dying* is thus made of a total of fifty-nine monologues, all preceded with a heading that allows unmistakable identification of the narrator. Their length is extremely variable: the shortest, in the voice of little Vardaman, is five-word-long; the longest are up to several pages. Darl is the most represented narrator; his voice is the most frequently heard, his words the most haunting.

While most narrators in *As I Lay Dying* express themselves in a language that generally is in keeping with their class, education and background, Darl—and he is not the only one to do so—sometimes transgresses that rule. Indeed, Darl and, to a lesser extent, Vardaman and Dewey Dell (Addie's neglected children) are likely to lapse into a language whose poetic accents are both remarkable and quite unlikely

considering their deeply rural upbringing. The novel's narrative structure certainly is one of its most remarkable features insofar as it involves the creation of fifteen distinguishable idiolects that contribute to the progression of the narrative, to characterization and to the evocation of a very specific atmosphere.

As often with Faulkner's novels, for the reader to enter *As I Lay Dying* is a radically unusual experience that involves a heady sense of disorientation. It is a quite unusual experience because, as readers, we are propelled *in medias res* in the consciousness of a narrator (Darl, in the opening monologue) about whom we do not know anything, yet with whom we are made to share an unsettling form of intimacy. Except from stopping to read, there is nothing we can do to control that immersion into the meanders of another's mind. It is an experience of dispossession because the literary conventions along which most readers have been educated before Faulkner—to be more accurate, before James Joyce, Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner—have manifestly become irrelevant. Therefore, the reader has to accept to evolve in a floating territory, while no stable landmark is offered to him/her.

This collection is made of eleven essays that explore various aspects of the novel, from various angles. They are all original essays written by academics that have devoted part of, if not all of, their research to the work of William Faulkner, both in France and in the United States. Most of the essays derive from a succession of one-day conferences organized in France between December 2017 and February 2018. We thank the research group CORPUS, EA4295, at the University of Picardie Jules Verne in Amiens, for allowing the organization of the first of these conferences and initiating this project. We also thank Adeline Chevrier-Bosseau at the University of Auvergne in Clermont-Ferrand, Nicole Ollier at the University of Bordeaux III and Marie Liénard-Yeterian at the University of Nice-Sophia Antipolis for taking the initiative of the next three. Those days were the occasion for many fruitful exchanges between some of the contributors of this volume and eager students, who demonstrated to us that you could be in your twenties in the 21st century and still be in awe of William Faulkner's talent—a heart-warming find for most of us.

In the first part, the articles revolve around the novel's context, dealing with the issues of rurality (Taylor Hagood) and economy (Aurélié Guillain). Though obviously transitioning toward the second part, which focuses on figures and forms, Claude Romano's contribution on Faulkner's use of the kaleidoscope naturally found its place after

Aurélie Guillain’s emphasis on that very object at the end of her piece. In part two, the novel is approached through the lens of its singular grammar (Ineke Bockting), through its representation of “the social fact” (Françoise Clary), through its grotesque imagery (Marie Liénard-Yeterian) and through the notion of imbalance (Françoise Buisson). The last essay in this section focuses on the poetics of elements (Frédérique Spill), paving the way for the last part, which examines the link between time and narration (Stéphanie Suchet), the curse of “fading away” (Jacques Pothier), and intertextuality (Gérald Préher).

The page references in the whole volume correspond to the 1994 Norton edition of *As I Lay Dying*. For our readers never to forget how important singular voices and idiolects are in Faulkner’s conception of his novel, every page number is preceded by the name of he or she who speaks.

We want to thank all your contributors for accepting to write fine original articles within a tight schedule. We are addressing our gratitude to Marie Liénard-Yeterian who made it possible for those articles to be published together in a special issue of *Cycnos*. We thank Jacques Pothier for allowing us to use the bibliography he put together for the Société des Anglicistes de l’Enseignement Supérieur and for the Association Française d’Études Américaines. Finally, we are very grateful to Ron Rash for adding his special touch to this volume.

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