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Reading the Rural in *As I Lay Dying*

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As I Lay Dying is a deeply rural novel. So obvious is such a statement it seems unnecessary to make, much less to focus on rurality in a book in which the rural is axiomatic and pervasive. It may even seem that the rural in the novel would stand beyond the pale of interpretation and criticism: strange to isolate it as something to be analyzed when it is *the* key ontological component of the novel's milieu. However, the thick ruralness of *As I Lay Dying*—its details that are so thoroughly ensconced in machinations of rural life and labor—has been overwhelmingly obscured in most critical comments on the novel and in many cases in the teaching of it. In this essay, I want to stress the rural as a cogent, serious, non-caricatured, non-demeaned center with its own ethics and aesthetics. Rather than seeing it as something to be rehabilitated (namely something Faulkner in his genius elevated and transformed into art), I read the rural as a socio-spatial figuration that functions as an actualizing factor of William Faulkner's fictional vision and something that merits attention in its own right.

Like many of Faulkner's works, *As I Lay Dying* challenges readers in oblique ways, specifically by blending the alterity of the Bundrens' world-view and epistemology with a paradoxical presentation that renders the characters' complex and often poetic interior monologues incongruous with their simple exterior modes of communication. It has long been commonplace to say that Faulkner's interior monologues reveal dignity in the kind of otherwise rustic, uneducated hicks that populate the work of Erskine Caldwell (thus making *As I Lay Dying* greater than, say, *God's Little Acre*). But it could well, and maybe should well, be argued that interiority alone does little to establish dignity and certainly does not obliterate the alienating alterity in Faulkner's rural characters. Their differentness remains in their interior lives, and even their exterior alterity renders the Bundrens strange to other rural characters in the novel, although those characters' reasons for finding their "peers" strange may seem equally strange and even of a part with a general rural strangeness. In our own moment, that alterity of strangeness within the rural from the viewpoint of the urban might eerily correspond

to the differing deep epistemologies of red and blue states in the United States.

Many, if not most, critics take the assumption of Faulkner's instilling dignity via poetic interiority as *the* cue to view the novel as having literary value and to analyze it within sophisticated theoretical frameworks. They do so to great effect, and I would point to some essays published recently that exemplify such work. Julie Beth Napolin, focusing on the thematic functions of the graphophone, argues that "*As I Lay Dying* points to a Faulkner who was not only considering the ontological problem of technologically mediated sound, like so many writers of his time, but also to rethinking novelistic form through sound recording as a technology of memory" (123). In a different direction, Charles Hannon uses word count software to analyze "invisible" words such as prepositions and pronouns that structure meaning and texture in the novel. Without giving way to a reductionist concept of the rural that suggests that media, including digital media, have no place in rural work or living, it is nevertheless striking that these scholars make hay (if the pun may be forgiven) by finding sophisticated modes of analyzing a novel that can be elaborate stylistically but which is woefully backwards.

Even two recent essays on the novel that *do* take the rural into account approach it theoretically. Cliff Staebler sees a connection between Vernon Tull and Jethro Tull, noting that the latter was an important agronomist and adapting the model of Hegelian dialectic and applying it to horses and mules in what he calls an "equine dialectic." This dialectic has little to do with actual "living" mules and horses in the novel but rather to the two different kinds of animals as metaphors in which mules are pitted against horses as representatives of a closed backward agricultural based social structure and one that represents the possibilities of entrepreneurial efforts, respectively. Meanwhile, when James E. Caron examines pastoralism in the novel, it has little to do with Faulkner's depiction of lived rural experience and more to do with Caron's sense that Faulkner abstracts that life and within that realm of abstraction evokes Ralph Waldo Emerson's concept of sublime pastoralism.

I point to these essays and could cite many more to illustrate that it is often much easier for scholars trained thoroughly in theory and criticism to engage with metaphors, technology, and abstractions about the novel and even rural elements in the novel than actually to engage with the details of ruralness that Faulkner goes to great care to present in the novel. This is the case for a number of reasons: first, it is a rare

“rural” person who both reads *and* makes critical comment on it.¹ Second, while certain scholars have approached Faulkner with at least a semblance of rural awareness (Cleanth Brooks and Elmo Howell, for example), most have analyzed his writing, and this novel particularly, from a cosmopolitan-centered viewpoint. Third, modernism tended so to privilege urban(e) sophistication, and those of postmodern-based critical theory have so followed suit, that more often than not critics approach the novel determined to find the complex, sophisticated, modern elements “hidden” within the ruralness of the novel.

Attempting to develop some guiding concept of “the rural” is itself fraught because by its nature it strikes an anti-theoretical pose. It would not be quite accurate to understand the rural to be purely pragmatic, although pragmatism deeply colors its contours even when an aesthetic enforces itself—which is to say that a farmer may be moved to admiration for rows of corn curving over rolling hills without letting satisfaction in its aesthetic supersede the practical purposes of agricultural technique. In such work comes also a kind of philosophy, and that slightly more amorphous and arguably organic term/concept comes closer to allowing the kind of play to be found in the emoti-intellectual machinations of the rural. To let *As I Lay Dying* speak for itself on rural philosophizing, I would point out that Anse and Dewey Dell both present Darl as having the faculty/condition of having eyes “full of the land.” Dewey Dell says, “I did not think that Darl would [care], that sits at the supper table with his eyes gone further than the food and the lamp, full of the land dug out of his skull and the holes filled with distance beyond the land” (“Dewey Dell,” 17). Anse is vexed that “they” (presumably state authorities) will cart Darl off to the insane asylum “just because he’s got his eyes full of the land all the time” (“Anse,” 22).

In both cases, the uses of the phrase “eyes full of the land” are complex, poetic conceptualizations of Darl’s simultaneous inward and outward vision that renders him strange to the outer world but uncannily

¹ I in no way mean to suggest “rural” as an essentializing category, as the ensuing discussion hopefully shows. I have no way of knowing the full backgrounds of the many scholars who have written on *As I Lay Dying*. By using the term in quotes I mean to signify that the exigencies of literary critical practice, especially since the 1980s, generally require adopting an urban and cosmopolitan-based critical viewpoint that precludes the inherently non-academic perspective of the rural in the United States as I am describing it.

perceptive to his inner world and that of others, which in some cases (Dewey Dell most obviously), are linked. The phrase does not quite hit the note of romanticist ideas of “land”—I doubt Anse, Dewey Dell, or many readers see in the phrase a Wordsworthian formulation of sylvan landscape. At the same time, while the statement seems to refer to a part of the earth designated by labor (“land dug out”; “holes filled with distance”; and a worry that Darl as a laborer will be removed), the phrase does not specifically offer up a plowed field or clearly or exclusively describe class consciousness. In fact, this abstraction of land seems rather more like a surrealist landscape of Dali’s. “The land” and having eyes full of it comprehends both Romanticism and Marxism while also surreally and uncannily (in the Freudian sense) functioning as a situation/description/ontology that represents something in-between Romanticism and Marxism.

Already I have come dangerously close to theorizing to the point of alienating myself from the rural in the text. Indeed, my very use of the term “the rural” presents problems. It is tempting to offer up the term “rurality,” but it seems even worse, being redolent of a kind of limiting positionality. No less problematic is placing the “the” before the “rural,” which arguably brings the baggage of grand abstracting so characteristic of a not-so-long ago era when European and urban-centered and -generated theory was (perhaps) innocently but limitingly mobilized to explain and define literature of any place and time. Furthermore, using the term “the rural” evokes the problems in employing any such “the _____” formulation because it risks colonizing non-urban performance, labor, aesthetics, etc. with a universalizing and perhaps American or southern or just north Mississippian concept. I naturally also want to avoid the trap of ahistoricism in assuming that rural ontology and epistemology, for example, are exactly the same in 2018 as they were in 1930.

At the same time—I write at the risk of postmodern heresy—it is ludicrous to imagine that a rural-urban binary has not existed in some form/various forms in Western culture for centuries: Shakespeare’s *As You Like It* or Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* are utterly unintelligible if a reader cannot recognize difference and conflict between their urban and rural spaces, and recent political upheavals in both the United States and Europe, despite their differing specifics, include an element of rural versus urban, if nothing else within the often-oversimplified rhetoric of media. Such oversimplification functions powerfully despite the reality that spatial politics are immensely nuanced: certainly there is a spectrum

and variety of rural and urban spaces that serve strategic purposes for actors within them who both negotiate and play upon the rigidity of the oversimplified binary and the nuances of unessentializable nature of these scapes simultaneously. If I myself may be allowed to have my cake and eat it too, I would seek to avoid the reductionism of claiming there is at work in these situations of both present and past a rigidly definable entity called “the rural” yet nevertheless would assert that a malleable functional mode persists that can be referred to as “the rural.” *As I Lay Dying*, I further assert, provides one portrait of this functional mode, this philosophy that does not truck with theorizing, this pragmatism that achieves aesthetic in spite of as well as because of itself.

It might be argued that many if not most (if not all) dynamics of the mode I am calling “the rural” can best be approached armed with the apparatus for examining the psycho-performative elements hinging on center and periphery furnished by postcolonial theory. Not only does the framework of center-periphery help describe the rural-urban situation, but conceptualizations of liminality, such as Bhabha’s conceptualization of “Third Space,” can be useful in complicating the rural-urban binary and avoiding seeing either space/spatial conceptualization as homogenous. Applying elements from postcolonial theory, however, also immediately brings into play the political and historical problematics of applying it indiscriminately. While *As I Lay Dying* features elements of a psychological sense of inferiority or at least peripherality among rural people, especially the Bundrens, simply conceiving of “the rural” as a version of postcolonial peripherality seems inadequate and untrue to the differences, subtle and not-so-subtle, between subjugation and, say, unprogressive or simply nonurban. It is not so much that the postcolonial shoe does not fit—it is just that the rural more often than not just go barefoot. That said, it might be useful to think of “the rural” as being another figuration that discerns a specific rural-urban formulation, thus aligning the term with other such space-specific ones as “decolonialism.” Thereby, the cultural political power machinery postcolonial theory so well identifies might be applied, and the psychological urban-rural (center-periphery) keyed dynamics of *As I Lay Dying* can be readable.

Faulkner provides a discernable thread concerning such positioning of rural versus urban, or, as his characters put it, the country versus the town.² When Dewey Dell flatly says, “We are country people, not as

² Again, I stress the functionality of the terms rural, urban, town, and country. Arguably, the town of Jefferson itself would be far from an urban space from

good as town people” (“Dewey Dell,” 36), she would seem to voice the standard wisdom on the subject. But she makes the comment in regard to Peabody, the doctor who has come from town to tend to Addie and from whom Dewey Dell wishes she could find a solution to end her pregnancy. Just before commenting that country people are not as good as town people, Dewey Dell says, “I dont see why he [Peabody] didn’t stay in town” (“Dewey Dell,” 36), which renders the following statement less clear. Does she really believe country people such as herself to be inferior to town people? Or is she simply verbalizing the attitude of town people? Has she perhaps internalized that attitude by both believing it and resisting it simultaneously? “Not as good as” meanwhile remains such an unspecific lexical item. It could refer to morals, economics, or any number of other vectors. The concept tends to be tied to female attractiveness and sexuality when other characters think about or speak of Dewey Dell. Cora Tull describes her as “near-naked” (“Cora,” 15) but also a “tom-boy girl” (“Cora,” 6), which suggest that Dewey Dell outrages Cora’s sense of proper lady-like appearance and performance in multiple ways. When Dewey Dell goes to the drugstore in Jefferson, Skeet tells MacGowan, “She looks like a pretty hot mamma, for a country girl” (“MacGowan,” 139), and it is clear that MacGowan classifies her as a dumb but oversexed and available inferior cheap sex object. Dewey Dell’s own proclamation of “not as good as” could refer to her being stereotyped as a country slut (Daisy Mae, Daisy Duke, and plenty more eroticized poor white American country women attest to the power of that stereotype), but it seems just as likely that she means more by it—something more abstract and not altogether as inferior as it would seem to be.

This complex positionality of country-versus-town appears in Dewey Dell’s dealings with Vardaman in which the dimensions of town-versus-country become embodied in consumable products associated with the space of “town” that are also aesthetic objects to his eyes. Vardaman observes,

Dewey Dell said we will get some bananas. The train is behind the glass, red on the track. When it runs the track shines on and off. Pa said flour and sugar and coffee costs so much. Because I am a country boy because boys in town. Bicycles. Why do flour

the standpoint of a resident of nearby Memphis, Tennessee, which itself surely seems a small city from the perspective of a New Yorker.

and sugar and coffee cost so much when he is a country boy. "Wouldn't you ruther have some bananas instead?" Bananas are gone, eaten. Gone. When it runs on the track shines again. "Why aint I a town boy, pa?" I said. God made me. I did not said to God to made me in the country. If He can make the train, why cant He make them all in the town because flour and sugar and coffee. "Wouldn't you ruther have bananas?" ("Vardaman," 39)

As an impressionable child grappling with ontology and identity (so pressured that he believes his mother may have transformed into a fish), Vardaman absorbs ideas of country and town from his sister, his father, and presumably his brothers and whomever else he has encountered in the larger matrix of space-building and -enforcing in his world. Clearly, he has a sense that either town boys have enough money to afford toy trains, bicycles, bananas, coffee, flour, and sugar, or at least that country boys are too poor to. Yet the more striking moments in this passage are the parallel constructions of the phrases "because boys in town" and "because flour and sugar and coffee": the statements are both unfinished and utterly complete, vividly stating that ontological differences exist between town and country and yet also exemplifying the ways those differences are not defined by an easy essence but rather through a series of images, assertions, attitudes, and so on. Without resorting to labeling the rural simply a Bhabha-ian "Third Space," it nevertheless seems accurate to the "because" logic here to articulate the rural as a mode that negotiates conceptions of superior/inferior, romantic/unromantic, labor-focused/not class conscious.

The products of town themselves are also markers of the town and country divide, signifying within themselves the difference between town and city boys in terms of economics but also that "something else" which comprehends and negotiates that rural-urban binary. After offering up the previously-cited thoughts about town and country boys, Vardaman says, "We are going to town. Dewey Dell says [the train] wont be sold because it belongs to Santa Claus and he taken it back with him until next Christmas. Then it will be behind the glass again, shining with waiting" ("Vardaman," 58), and he closes the monologue with, "It'll be there. It'll be there come Christmas, she says, shining on the track. She says he wont sell it to no town boys" ("Vardaman," 59). Vardaman's talking about the toy train is a burlesque in miniature of the machine in the garden and is a harbinger of the "can't get them back on the farm after they've seen Paris" logic the novel seems to bear out in its conclusion.

But Santa Claus, for Vardaman, registers a certain disruption because he has the power to withhold the train from the town boys, and Vardaman may even imagine that Santa will bring the train to him in the country. Again the rural emerges as something more than a simple periphery: it is unclear if Vardaman understands Santa to be from the North Pole exactly, but just as God represents an entity outside of the urban-rural binary, so Santa may be an outside force who can rearrange the seeming hierarchy of the town over the country. Both God and Santa bring into play a kind of moral justice and corrective to established spatiality. It may be fitting to read Vardaman's constant mention of looking through the glass window to see the train as an evocation of Alice's looking glass—certainly Faulkner's poor whites behave just as unexpectedly as the Cheshire Cat, the talking white rabbit, and the other fantastic characters of Lewis Carroll's imagination.

One source of Vardaman's mystification of town products is Anse, for whom the town-country difference distills itself in dimensions of modes of labor, aesthetics, and morality. To Anse's thinking, teeth are a kind of moral right—he says early on he is “hoping to get ahead enough so I could get my mouth fixed where I could eat God's own victuals as a man should” (“Anse,” 23)—as well as an aesthetic asset worth having as a prosthetic. In his reasoning, his not having teeth comes from a sense of sacrifice that surely seems to most readers perverse. That sacrifice itself is connected with labor within the rural that he seems both to condemn and defend. Consider his thoughts on the plight of working rural men:

It's a hard country on a 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 aint 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 cant take their autos 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)

The differing ways of country and town thinking about labor and means by which to profit could not be sharper here. To Anse's eyes laboring to produce from the earth is a divinely-decreed, cyclical enterprise, which is something he seems to defend. Such mutual

sustainability of earth and human is a pragmatic and unromanticized one; it may seem that Anse's comments express a kind of romantic aesthetic, but while it is true that such overtones haunt about his viewpoint, pragmatism modifies the aesthetic, keeping it from finding the kind of rarification possible for an outsider encountering the rural unassociated with and maybe innocent of its labor. One might just as readily, however, discern a proletariat ethic operating in it even as class consciousness finds itself modified by a polarizing spatiality. Although it might be the morally superior mode of labor, farming emerges in these comments as something unfairly harsh and ultimately a way of life a farmer, Anse particularly, seeks to escape.

In fact, the moral dimension of Anse's conception of the rural incarnates differently than for Dewey Dell and Vardaman. Where gender performance and expectation position Dewey Dell's body within sexual stereotype and Vardaman operates within a complex of puerile desire, Anse weaves, intentionally or not, an elaborate design of moral obligation. Other characters chastise Anse for being lazy, but where Dewey Dell has little recourse to defend or counter the label of "immoral" Anse holds to a kind of superior morality. As illustrated in the passage above, his labor follows the natural laws of God. But it does not end there: throughout the novel Anse insists that he will not be "beholden" to anyone. As so many characters note, he constantly maneuvers people in passive aggressive ways to do things for him.

At the same time, Anse tries to exempt himself from payback through declaring his determination not to be himself beholden. When he gets to Jefferson he declares that surely there are Christians in town to help him. The reader should see through this ruse's self-contradiction, but that fact does not modify the way that the rural is the center of morality for Anse. And with this panoply of defensiveness comes a kind of superiority that negotiates the inherent inferiority imparted to the rural. That dynamic becomes evident when at the initiation of their "courtship" Addie tells him she "has people" in Jefferson. "His face fell a little" and he replies, "Well, I got a little property. I'm forehanded; I got a good honest name. I know how town folks are, but maybe when they talk to me" ("Addie," 99). This complex comment simultaneously implies that town folks have limiting prejudice against country folks that places them on a lower moral ground while at the same time allowing Anse to define himself as being morally above the inferior position of a man from the country. The coin of the realm for Anse is the "good honest name" that to his mind should be the calling card of Christians. To be sure, Anse

himself never confuses monetary currency with moral currency, but he certainly hopes other people will.

Anse privileges such moral currency over not just money but also aesthetics and labor, his manipulation of moral obligation being the brilliance of his brand of charlatanry. Part of Anse's way of making people beholden to him is to refuse to exhibit shame at his ineptitude in the kinds of practices and labor coded rural. Rural pride plays a major role in the novel, and this pride is based in an array of skills. The novelist-turned-farmer and advocate for agricultural innovation, Louis Bromfield, well expresses this pride:

The *good* farmer or livestock man is no longer a 'hick,' as indeed he never was. He must always be an intelligent man of parts, knowing perhaps more about more things than any other citizen. He must know and understand something of markets, the weather, distribution, machinery, economics, history, ecology, disease, bacteriology, and many other things, but most of all he must understand the earth and the laws of God and nature which govern its maintenance and productivity. (9)

Bromfield goes on to write in *Malabar Farm* that in the post-World War II world farmers should focus on single crops and eschew the all-purpose farm typical of the Bundrens at the time of Faulkner's writing and earlier, yet Bromfield makes clear in many of his writings that talented farmers should have a variety of skills and a range of knowledge that lifts him or her to a level of equality and maybe even superiority over urban workers. For Bromfield as for Tull and other rural characters in *As I Lay Dying* who possess such range and variety of skills, it is shameful when a rural worker does not exhibit "country smarts." Anse's genius is to realize that people around him will be so outraged by his ineptitude and lack of shame that they will feel obligated out of concern for his family, his farm, and just the order of things within the rural that they will go to extraordinary lengths to do things for him he should do for himself. It goes without saying that Anse's antics and his refusal to show shame over them would surely doubly outrage the urban: how many readers have recoiled in horror at seeing in Anse a male selfishness that inflicts indignity on his dead wife's body, using her/it as an excuse to get new teeth and even a new wife in the very town space he derides?

Ineptitude is not just a problem with Anse but in one way or another with the Bundrens generally during their journey to transport

Addie's body to town. Dewey Dell in her innocence cannot rectify her being pregnant, even if she does show awareness of that failure. As talented a carpenter as Cash may be, he does not object when Anse directs the family to set his leg in cement. Even though less would be expected of a child, much less one distressed by his mother's death, the reader may not see in Vardaman a boy destined for special sagacity. Darl stands as far from country know-how as seemingly possible. It might be said that most of the Bundren family ultimately is better suited to town life than to country life—they take to the trappings of town life, whether it be false teeth, trains, bananas, and graphophones, and Anse must find a town way of living much easier, not requiring the range of skills and, with a new wife who looks suspiciously like a woman of means, featuring less hard labor than the country does.

Jewel seems the exception in the family, and one perhaps wonders if “town” and “country” should be read in the novel as elements in one's blood. Jewel arguably possesses the skills and knowledge to be typical of the rural—the man who clears a field at night and works also during the day in order to pay for a spirited pony. His pride leads him to seethe in anger not only when people around him judge his family but also at Anse's poor judgment. But then it could be argued that his having a different father than Anse and his being so similar to Addie drives him to such maniacal pride; in his “blood” he may be in his essence a town man who does not know he is but who feels the deep call of “superiority” and cannot stand to be judged as inferior. His conflicted passions and sense of identity emerge within the country-town matrix when the Bundrens are entering Jefferson and Darl relates that black people gasp at the smell of Addie's corpse. When Jewel curses them a white man thinks he is talking to him. The man calls Jewel out, but Darl tries to allay the man. When Jewel snarls “Thinks because he's a goddamn town fellow” (“Darl,” 133), the unfinished-yet-complete of the rural position, experience, attitude, and ontology gleam.

Thus far I have focused on the rural as it appears in human attitude, behavior, and performance, but arguably undergirding all these is an operative immanence of the rural. The space of the rural and the objects, animals, plants, practices, and so on within that space all influence the cognitive workings of the characters. This influence appears throughout the characters' ways of speaking and conceiving of their world within images, aspects of labor, and social interaction. A few examples should suffice, especially to show the details necessary to establishing the novel's setting. The characters say what they see. “The trees look like

chickens when they ruffle out into the cool dust on the hot days” (“Vardaman,” 32), Vardaman says. Later, when he gets to town he observes that “lights are in the trees around the courthouse. They roost in the trees [. . .]” (“Vardaman,” 144). Tull describes Vardaman’s expression as “eyes round and black in the middle like when you throw a light in a owl’s face” (“Tull,” 40). In a particularly interesting case, Dewey Dell sees where the “cow stands at the foot of the path, lowing” (“Dewey Dell,” 36) and that presence begins to affect her metaphors and similes, as she explains that her father “looks like right after the maul hits the steer and it no longer alive and dont yet know that it is dead” (“Dewey Dell,” 36). The rural again here appears as a figuration of in-betweenness/both-and, although unlike the cow, Anse is well aware of the most effective ways to play in that realm of the in-between. Dewey Dell goes on to lead the cow away, and her description of the cow breathing on her is erotic, leading to her closing thought, “I feel like a wet seed wild in the hot blind earth” (“Dewey Dell,” 38).

The latter phrase exhibits the thorough internalization of farm labor within Dewey Dell’s thoughts about her pregnancy that will lead to a different kind of labor; it also identifies an active immanence of the land in a manner that evokes Jane Bennett’s ideas about the agency of compost, which draw on the sociological assemblage concepts of Actor Network Theory as presented by Bruno Latour. Arguing that social assemblages are dynamic and mysterious, driven not by human agents alone but by variegated and changeable actants whose roles shift in subtle ways, Latour poses provocative questions that consider the possibility that invisible and strange forces exert themselves in the shaping even of human consciousness and social interaction. In one of these batteries of questions Latour wonders if villages that seem to spring up haphazardly in Europe actually are built on old Roman village sites: “What force has been exerted? How could Caesar still be acting through the present landscape? Is there some other *alien* agency endowed with the long-lasting subterranean power to make settlers ‘freely choose’ the very place it has allotted them?” (44).

Another such scenario and line of questioning hits even closer to home with the transformation of the Bundrens from rural to urban folk in *As I Lay Dying* when Latour considers the case of a person obtaining a university degree (presumably representing a shift in space from home) and now feeling estranged from and ashamed of her parents. The question follows “*who* has estranged you from your very kin, who has molded your voice, your manners, your face so differently from theirs?”

Perhaps a strange beast that pertains to no one in particular and who is nobody's responsibility. It is a force to be sure, maybe a *habitus*" (44). Latour's evocation of a term Pierre Bourdieu so well employed in thinking about space's influence on behavior—*habitus*—may be useful in thinking about the rural in *As I Lay Dying*, adjusted to account for the idea that even inanimate objects may play a role in a social assemblage as "actants." Perhaps even more appropriate to Faulkner's novel, building on Latour's work, Bennett argues that "vibrant matter," including debris, compost, dirt, and even nonorganic elements exert a force on humans and their interactions with each other and nonhuman entities.

The forces of such actants can be traced in Faulkner's novel. Already we have seen a glimpse of how nonhuman objects associated with town exert influence over the Bundrens' desires. Sometimes they may be spurious, as in the case of Anse's excuse for not working being that he "was sick once from working in the sun when he was twenty-two years old, and he tells people that if he ever sweats, he will die" ("Darl," 11). Well, not spurious exactly—sweat occurred and Anse responded to it in his way, and Darl adds, "I suppose he believes it" ("Darl," 11). A different kind of actant is the "chuck" sound of Cash's adze: Cash is acting upon the wood to make the sound, but the sound itself becomes disembodied and functional. The most powerful actant in the novel is the rain. It begins to operate from the novel's beginning as a threat. Then it arrives and functions directly, not only creating the crisis that nearly thwarts the Bundrens' journey but also driving some of the novel's most breathtaking prose when Darl describes the broken wagon wheel (itself exerting force and shaping situation) as the rain pours:

Overhead the day drives level and gray, hiding the sun by a flight of gray spears. In the rain the mules smoke a little, splashed yellow with mud, the off one clinging in sliding lunges to the side of the road above the ditch. The tilted lumber gleams dull yellow, water-soaked and heavy as lead, tilted at a steep angle into the ditch above the broken wheel; 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)

I quote at length because this italicized passage functions in such a unique way as to generate meaning and action in the novel, becoming itself a quasi-actant of form. The passage appears in the section in which

Darl describes Addie's death, but he does so from a distance, not from being in the room with her. He imagines that scene while out in the rain with the broken wheel. It would stand to reason that the "real" action of the section should be in standard print with the italics signifying the material that is pure imagination, but Faulkner reverses that order. The impact of this technique is to shift the "real" action into a kind of other realm in which the description itself functions along with narrativizing to make meaning. That meaning is the power of the rain, which arises as a devastating force that Darl seems uniquely suited to comprehend.

Of course, for all its pragmatic nature and as much as Latour presumably dislikes to think so, Actor Network Theory is still theory, and in bringing it and Bennett's work into the discussion again I find myself running the risk of doing what so many scholars have done in approaching this novel; as I stated earlier, I want to read the rural on its own pragmatic, anti-theoretical terms as it exists in *As I Lay Dying*. Trying to do so ultimately uncovers a crisis about Faulkner himself because it requires trying to locate the quickening energy, as it were, of the novel. That vague phrase "quicken energy" may seem too mystical to warrant critical thought, but I use it to express the difficult-to-define positioning of Faulkner himself in regard to the rural, which owes some of its power to the difficult-to-define nature of the rural itself. On one hand, this matter is not a crisis at all, as it helps to show the fullness of Faulkner's vision. But in a different sense there are large and disturbing political consequences in Faulkner's "dignifying" the rural.

One thing about Caldwell's cartoonish characters is that it can be easy for educated, morally mainstream readers to see a great distance between themselves and the rural. Caldwell's rural is as bizarre and set apart as the stage in the Jerry Springer show. But Faulkner has his illiterate characters articulate a complicated positioning of the rural in a manner that can exceed many readers' poetic limitations much less intellectual ones (the existential implications of Darl's pondering about *is* and *was* places him in high philosophical company as does Addie's linguistic theorizing). Haunting about *As I Lay Dying* is the possibility that Faulkner might actually sympathize with the rural, a concept that might be palatable in some respects (in Bromfield's writing perhaps, certainly when Michael Pollan is writing about agriculture) but that also carries highly problematic baggage when the rural's politics stand in opposition to Progressivism. A backyard farm with chickens might be a hipster thing to have, but often the politics of farmers in middle America

are as far from such sustainability practices as country music fans are from college-educated American folk music fans.

The fact is that Faulkner might not have been much of a Progressive, politically speaking, in his depiction of the rural, which presents a problem because reading the rural can itself become a political act in the present moment when whiteness and labor have combined to dictate political machinations in the United States. One might argue that drawing a connection between the rural, including poor white workers, of the novel's moment and those of the present is anachronistic, except that the rural and its poor whites of the current moment themselves are anachronistic in relation to what would seem a moment in history when only a few years ago the doctrines of white supremacy that numbers of working class whites have embraced, especially in rural middle America, were thought to have been once and for all categorized as antisocial and thoroughly stigmatized. Scholars often see Faulkner as rising above the rural through his artistry, standing as a kind of native informant who can translate the periphery into something intriguing and vivid.

The characters in *As I Lay Dying* sometimes express their views in such stately ways that surely the novel must mean something grand, scholars have hoped, suspected, believed. Such statements on aesthetics, existentialism, labor, and so on have been seized upon as the important and even "real" elements of the novel in a pseudo-Platonic insistence that Faulkner in his great skill *must* be dealing with those great concerns of civilization. Faulkner does deal with those great concerns, but the same man who does so in his writing also at one point bought his own farm and experienced the realities of agricultural work first hand, albeit not with the anxieties of subsistence. Yet there persists an unspoken assumption among many Faulkner scholars that Faulkner is not "one of them"—the "deplorables," Hillary Clinton's term that middle Americans applied to themselves in another case of rural-urban superiority-inferiority negotiation during the 2016 presidential campaign cycle. Faulkner may write about those people, the logic goes, but he did so surely as an artist in exile; it disturbs many scholars and readers to think he could have been sympathetic with or even one of "them." To reframe the comment in a more immediate way, many hope Faulkner could never have voted for Donald Trump and would have been proud that Barack Obama once quoted from one of his novels.

For a number of scholars and writers the latter assertion is easily met with derision and clarity about Faulkner's problematic political positioning. African American writers from James Baldwin to Haki

Madhubuti—who wrote that “We must destroy Faulkner, dick, jane, and other perpetrators of evil” (6)—have been especially clear in identifying Faulkner as the enemy, especially in light of his comments about shooting black people during the Civil Rights movement in order to defend Mississippi. Even Toni Morrison in her admiration for Faulkner’s writing nevertheless often modulates her indebtedness to him as she looks to write African American experience from out of his shadow.³ Certain scholars have also worried that Faulkner’s limitations should not be forgotten, Deborah Clarke being the most recent to note that his “greatness” and the accuracy of his depiction of women and minorities should not be taken for granted by readers or scholars. A number of “Faulkners,” such as “Global Faulkner” and “Feminist Faulkner” have been presented to combat Faulkner’s worrisome politics. In introducing “Rural Faulkner” I am seeking not to rehabilitate Faulkner but rather to cast his political thorniness in the spotlight. I do this as a way to illustrate that the complexity of his politics is the source of his fictional power.

Thus I offer the rural as something that Faulkner did not really seek to rise above but rather a place, performance, position, and viewpoint to embrace in order to write compelling fiction. Reading the rural in Faulkner means acknowledging the clash of politics in his work and pondering the value of that work in the current moment. I am not suggesting that *As I Lay Dying* should be taken as a guidebook or a more artful version of J. D. Vance’s *Hillbilly Elegy*—I agree with Cleanth Brooks that the novel is not a sociological exercise *per se*, although Anse Bundren not only greatly resembles the white male working class voter that has outraged Progressives but, in his refusal to manifest shame, he may even look something like the current president himself. A sociological work the novel may not be, but Faulkner, like Flannery O’Connor, understood the rural intimately, and his artistry provides a nuanced presentation of it. Most importantly, paying close attention to the rural in *As I Lay Dying*—which I have tried to model on a small scale in this essay—is crucial for understanding it as a vital aspect of Faulkner’s fictional vision.

³ For discussion of these African American responses, see the essays in Watson and Thomas.

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