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Economy in Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*

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In “*As I Lay Dying* in the Machine Age,” John T. Matthews argues that even if Faulkner’s modernist novel differs from a proletarian novel in many crucial ways, it nevertheless represents characters who are partly defined by the tensions and contradictions of the modern economy of the United States in the 1920s. And indeed, *As I Lay Dying* keeps an eerily scrupulous record of economic transactions taking place in the *diegesis*: every profit and loss is recorded with fastidious care, reminding the reader that the Bundren family is a strained economic unit as well as a discordant chorus of melancholy voices mourning a mother’s death. Moreover, contrasts are frequently drawn between characters making an economical use of their resources and characters who are perversely wasting them: while the Tulls seem to embody sensible thrift and hard-nosed practicality, the Bundrens’ endlessly postponed burial of Addie is staged as an extremely costly process in which self-destructive forces evading the rationality of economic calculation seem to be at work. The model of *homo œconomicus*, a rational agent maximizing profit and minimizing loss (Godbout), does not seem to apply to the spatial or mental wanderings of the Bundrens for whom the loss of a mother triggers a chain of self-inflicted losses.

Does Faulkner’s novel suggest that an irrational, self-destructive drive is at work in the monologues of the melancholy Bundrens? Is the mourning subject portrayed as a potentially pathological subject straying from the avenues of rational discourse and rational behavior? And does the opposition between economic calculation and overspending point to a more basic opposition between rational and irrational thinking?

This article will demonstrate that the treatment of economy in Faulkner’s novel does not rest on this kind of fundamental opposition between rationality and irrationality; on the contrary, it will argue that the novel posits a fundamental unity in human experience. The first part will focus on the way the text stages a tension between a pre-modern economic rationale and a modern economic rationale, two logics coexisting in rural economies in the 1920s. Then I will contend that the trope of balanced accounts is used in the novel to dramatize most attempts at achieving a form of equilibrium in a world of universal flux.

Finally, as the last part will endeavor to show, even in the monologues of Tull and Cash, although these characters have been said to embody the spirit of economic rationality, the reader finds fault-lines and glimpses of a non-economic relation between the human subject and the physical world.

Thrifty Capitalists and Extravagant Spenders

Cora Tull's first monologue refers to a failed investment: in order to produce several cakes, the character used some eggs laid by her hens and swapped a dozen more of these eggs for additional raw material ("the sugar and the flour"). Since Cora regards the cost of that raw material as having been amortized already ("the eggs wouldn't be costing anything") and since she chooses to overlook the market value of her own labor ("it's not like they cost anything except the baking"), she refers to the anticipated exchange value of her cakes not as gross profit, but as "net" profit: "I could bake them and earn enough at one time to increase the net value of the flock the equivalent of two heads" ("Cora," 5). Yet because of a lack of demand ("the lady had changed her mind") those cakes end up having no exchange value and the seller is left with the use value of what she initially intended to be a commodity and a source of profit: the cakes will not be sold but eaten by the Tulls or, as the reader later finds out, given away to the Bundrens as a charitable gift.

Although Cora's enterprise is clearly a failure, she comically interprets her "miscue" as a success: "I can tell him that anybody is likely to make a miscue, but it's not all of them that can get out of it without loss, I can tell him. It's not everybody that can eat their mistakes, I can tell him" ("Cora," 6). One obvious function of this monologue is to establish Cora's status as a target of the author's irony since we are bound to perceive the biased and self-deluding quality of her story. Another function of the monologue consists in portraying Cora Tull as an economic agent who must be economically successful to be justified in the eye of some superior authority—either in the eyes of her husband, the representative of patriarchal authority within the household ("I can tell him"), or in the eye of God, the transcendent source of all authority. Cora fits the type of the industrious Protestant portrayed by Weber in *L' thique protestante et l'esprit du capitalisme*: she regards the "success" of her economic ventures in the modern capitalistic economy as a sign that she is justified in the Lord's perspective and that His grace is shining upon her actions. And indeed Cora stitches together

the portrait of herself as a justified Christian and a contrasting portrait of Addie Bundren as a reprobate soul: "the eternal and the everlasting salvation and grace is not upon her" ("Cora," 6). Pious Cora embodies a modernized version of the Christian faith, one striving to reconcile compliance with God's Design and the desire to be a thrifty, industrious and successful economic agent on a modern market.

By contrast, the grieving Bundren family embody a different kind of religious zeal. As opposed to Cora's devotion, theirs does not involve the earnest attempt at profit-making or even balancing out gains and losses. On the contrary, the Bundrens accept potentially infinite economic losses as proof of their devotion to a sacralized mother figure. They are "not begrudging" the loss of their mules and not even begrudging Cash's physical integrity. Economic extravagance is repeatedly interpreted by Anse as a manifestation of his family's devotion to the deified entity that Addie has become. This father poses as a priest-like interpreter, reminding both relatives and bystanders of the religious significance of the family's macabre odyssey: "I give my promise," he says. "She is counting on it" ("Tull," 81). The use of the present continuous to refer to his dead wife's state of mind suggests that he views—or claims that he views—Addie as being still alive. The transcription of "give" makes Anse's past tense sound like a present tense, as if the action of taking the oath was being perpetually renewed in the present moment. Not only does the interpreter transform Addie into a deified figure whose Law must be obeyed *at all costs*, he also makes the ghostly mother a creditor figure. Anse often characterizes her as a creator who gave life to her offspring and thus created a debt that now must be paid off: "her wanting us all to be in the wagon with her that sprung from her flesh and blood" ("Anse," 61).

As long as the promise to carry the body to Jefferson has not been fulfilled, the symbolic debt is due. Even Cash having to suffer exquisite pain on the wagon—instead of being left at Armstid's farm to recover—is presented by Anse as a mark of respect for the dead woman's wishes: "It's because she wouldn't have us beholden" ("Vardaman," 113). Addie is thus constructed as an otherworldly creditor: between her demise and her burial, she is treated like a powerful goddess oscillating between a tutelary house goddess (*Lares*) and a vampirical ghost (*Larva*) claiming her pound of flesh: when Anse states that "[he] just never wanted to be beholden to none but her flesh and blood" ("Darl," 132), "flesh and blood" can be read as a syllepsis referring both to children, to metaphorical flesh and blood, but also to

the literal flesh of Jewel or Cash which is damaged by water or burnt by fire as a holy sacrifice to her spirit. A similar change in skin color, which turns them into figures of racial otherness in Vardaman's eyes, also marks them out as sacred tributes: "Does it hurt, Jewel?" I said. 'Your back looks like a nigger's, Jewel,' I said. Cash's foot and leg looked like a nigger's" ("Vardaman," 129).

The logic foregrounded by Anse is an essentially religious one: it specifies how human debtors must pay their debts to a deity. Linguist Emile Benveniste reminds us that both "credit" and "creed" derive from the Indo-European root *kred, which applied to the sphere of the sacred even before it applied to the sphere of economics (171-78). In Anse's books, overspending is required, just as the balancing of one's accounts was required in Cora's. In Faulkner's novel, there is a thin line between mere overspending and what Bataille would call "pure expense": the power of the dead woman is conveyed by the exorbitant quality of her demands, which could lead to the sacrifice of her sons' lives. This sacrificial logic, which requires a form of "pure expense," contrasts with a modern economic logic that requires a balancing out of expenses and gains. The nine days spent by the Bundrens on the journey to Jefferson represent valuable labor time, all the more so as the scene is set in July and the cotton is "laid by," ready to be picked ("Darl," 3). During the funeral procession, the family jeopardizes a considerable portion of its labor power: as a result of the endlessly protracted journey, Darl is committed to a mental institution and Cash is likely to remain permanently crippled: the family as an economic unit is left "shorthanded" as Anse would put it. Yet, the text does not present such behavior as irrational, but rather as obeying the pre-modern rationale of economic exchange, one in which the gift or destruction of goods is endowed with the power to strengthen *personal* bonds between the living or between the living and the dead (Bataille, Godbout, Polanyi, Rist).

Homo Donator and Homo Œconomicus

At first Jewel seems wholly characterized as a modern *homo Œconomicus*: he sells his individual labor power in order to purchase commodities that are meant for his exclusive use (Lon Quick's spotted horse, for example). In that sense, Jewel is less a member of the Bundren household than a free modern individual, a wage-earner and a consumer. He does not define himself through personal interactions but rather through impersonal transactions. Cora remarks on Jewel's status as a

wage earner in the eye of the community: "Jewel always doing something that makes him some money or got him talked about" ("Cora," 15). Accordingly, Jewel is careful never to accept personal gifts that would compromise his freedom by creating the necessity of a counter-gift: he makes sure that he will not be "beholden" to his father for his horse's feed—"He won't never eat a mouthful of yours" ("Darl," 78); he will not be "beholden" to Samson and when he offers to purchase some extra-feed for his horse, the farmer remarks on his breach of the pre-modern rules of hospitality: "You can't buy no feed from me, boy" ("Samson," 66). Yet, even Jewel, who behaves in so many ways like a modern *homo oeconomicus*, proves to be a *homo donator* in relation to his idolized mother: he suffers the sacrifice of his horse and later rescues Addie's coffin from the flames so that the promise made by Anse to Addie may be fulfilled. In the episode of the burning barn, Darl's characterization of Jewel as a figure on a Greek frieze—"they are like two figures on a Greek frieze" ("Darl," 127) reinforces the symbolic connection between the oathkeeper and a pre-modern society.

A similar tension can be sensed in the characterization of Cash as an economic agent: in the opening monologue, he is portrayed as the pre-modern craftsman and the epitome of *homo donator*. His patient, loving work on Addie's coffin seems worlds apart from the production of a commodity for the market place. The coffin is conceived as a unique, irreplaceable artefact: it is a solemn counter-gift from the craftsman to the mother who gave life to him. In that sense Cash is initially portrayed as a *homo donator* defined by the personal relationships that gifts and counter-gifts create. Yet it later appears that Cash is a wage-earner who often sells his labor time on the marketplace: he is a shrewd *homo oeconomicus* too. More importantly, in the final stages of the journey, because Cash identifies with the work ethic of the small farmer whose commodities represent his labor time (his "sweat") and because Cash proves keenly aware of the family's economic interests, he is willing to forfeit his personal bond with his brother Darl, presumably to avoid having to pay Gillespie a financial compensation for the destruction of his barn. Cash is also portrayed as a consumer, or a would-be consumer: he yearns to purchase a graphophone from Surratt, a salesman based in Frenchman's Bend. Both the coffin and the graphophone are boxes allowing the voice of some absent speaker to be preserved and listened to. Yet, quite unlike the coffin, the graphophone is a modern commodity: it reproduces the human voice thanks to mechanical means and the machine is in itself the outcome of

mechanical reproduction. When the novel suggests that the pre-modern artefact (the coffin) and the modern commodity (the graphophone) fulfill similar functions in Cash's mental world, the reader's attention is drawn to the coexistence of two modes of production in modern rural societies; as Cash is both a pre-modern craftsman and a modern wage-earner, the coexistence of these two statuses in a modern economy is brought to the fore.

Through the duplicitous figure of Anse, the coexistence of two conflicting rationales is again underlined. We have seen that in the diegetic dialogues, Anse upheld a pre-modern logic. In his internal monologues, he also portrays himself as the representative of a rural enclave that is symbolically cut off from town and every aspect of the modern economy. To him, the road is the metonymy of all horizontal movements connecting rural areas with urban areas, as it puts the farmer in contact with the marketplace where his cotton is sold, thus exposing the American Adam to the postlapsarian world of evil and loss ("Anse," 22). By contrast, the house on the hill becomes the metonymy of a self-contained world existing out of the reach of historical and economic change. To Anse, houses and trees are the motionless and vertical symbols of a stable connection between mankind and a divine authority that has defined the fixed essence of mankind once and for all ("Anse," 22). Peabody's monologues confirm this interpretation of Anse's inertia as a form of faithfulness to his origins: "Anse has not been in town in twelve years. And how his mother ever got up there to bear him, he being his mother's son" ("Peabody," 25). Anse's immobility is viewed as the symbolic repetition of the primordial state of an equally inert mother figure.

Yet, once the family's journey to Jefferson has begun, Anse becomes literally unstoppable: "like it aint the moving he hates so much as the starting and the stopping" ("Samson," 65). Not only does he take to the road, but he surprisingly welcomes every form of the modern economic exchange which the road symbolizes. For instance, Anse's interaction with the shopkeeper in Mottson reveals that he easily adjusts to a small town environment and takes advantage of it being the site of impersonal relationships defined by market rules: "'It's a public street,' the man says. 'I reckon we can stop to buy something same as airy other man. We got the money to pay for hit, and it aint airy law that says a man cant spend his money where he wants'" ("Moseley," 118). Once in Jefferson, Anse negotiates an excellent deal with the future Mrs. Bundren, which confirms his adjustability: his "conjur[ing]" tricks work

in the impersonal town environment as well as they did in his personal interactions with his neighbors ("Armstid," 112).

Although Anse repeats that he is the keeper of his word and a keeper of the faith, the reader realizes that he is neither a man of God nor a man of his word. Anse is an opportunistic trickster who will assert his status as a free, modern individual or will present himself as a "Christian" who is entitled to the charitable help of other Christians, whenever it suits him and depending on the context. As long as he remains within the confines of his familiar neighborhood, a territory where relations between neighbors are defined as personal bonds created by the exchange of gifts and counter-gifts, Anse will take advantage of his fellow-man's hospitality, albeit in a cautious and skillful way which is designed to play down the obligations that any gift will create.

Whenever he can, he shows his reluctance to accept hospitable gifts: "'Take my team, Anse.' 'We'll wait for ourn. She'll want it so'" ("Tull," 54); "We'll use the shed yonder. I know it's an imposition on you" ("Darl," 105); once he has bought cement he is reluctant to borrow a bucket: "'I wouldn't be beholden,' pa says, 'God knows'" ("Darl," 120). Like Tull before him, Armstid suspects that Anse will take advantage of his hospitality: "I looked at my mules and same as told them goodbye for a spell" ("Armstid," 109). Yet Anse defeats both Armstid's and the reader's expectations: he prefers entering the impersonal space of the marketplace, which is symbolized by Flem Snopes. Indeed, in Faulkner's long unpublished story "Father Abraham" (1926), in the short story "Spotted Horses" (1931) or in *The Hamlet* (1940), Flem Snopes embodies the impersonal forces of modern capitalism conquering the post-bellum South ("Darl," 77).

The fact that Snopes should remain an off-stage presence in *As I Lay Dying* stresses his status as the metonymy of an impersonal market place. When Anse declines Armstid's hospitable offer and prefers to negotiate with Snopes, he avoids incurring one more symbolic debt in the pre-modern economy, in which each transaction is "embedded" in the social fabric of personal bonding. Instead, he mortgages his seeder and cultivator, incurring a debt within the impersonal frame of the modern economy ("Armstid," 110), one that gives him more leeway as well as the opportunity of acquiring a new span of mules in the long term. Thus, as the novel unfolds, we realize that Anse was only paying lip service to the pre-modern rationale in his worship of a household goddess—that the trickster had always been heading toward Jefferson in

order to get prosthetic teeth and a new wife before the cotton picking season begins.

In contrast to the Agrarians' pastoral idealization of small southern husbandry (see Ransom *et al.*), Faulkner's novel shows that the small farmer is not at the center of a rural economy that would stand outside of, and apart from, the mechanisms of modern capitalistic economy. The novel deconstructs the dichotomies between country and town, rural hospitality and urban impersonality, pre-modern forms of exchange and modern forms of exchange. It stresses the small white farmer's integration into a modernized economy and his dependence on it, as Matthews ("Machine") and O'Donnell have brilliantly argued. Yet, the text also shows that the rationale of gifts and counter-gifts is a persistent logic in the modern rural economy of the South, so that the Bundrens' extravagant wastefulness does not appear as a symptom of irrationality but as the hyperbolic form of a pre-modern rationale.

Significantly, whenever the trope of balanced accounts crops up in the various narratives, it rarely conveys the speaker's attempt at a rational or rationalized approach to a situation: more often than not, economic calculation is presented as a magical attempt at restoring some balance to a world which is irremediably off-balance.

Settling One's Accounts

Anse and Addie: The Tyrant's Secret Books

Françoise Buisson rightly remarks that in *As I Lay Dying* the characters' economic trajectories are more or less successful and that their personal accounts are more or less balanced at the end of the journey (84). To Jewel or Dewey Dell for instance, the journey clearly amounts to a net loss as Jewel forfeits the value of the horse and Dewey Dell is robbed of the small sum of money Lave had given her to purchase an abortifacient. Cash's accounts are not well-balanced either: to purchase a new span of mules, Anse stole the money that he intended to spend on a graphophone and even if the machine received as a dowry can be regarded as a form of compensation, one can still consider that Cash has suffered a net loss; his labor power, hence his ability to earn and save more money in the future, has probably been impaired by the injuries he suffered during the journey (Buisson 84). To Anse on the contrary, the journey amounts to a net gain: when the narrative comes to a close, Anse's lost mules and dead wife have both been replaced, a set of prosthetic teeth and a graphophone have been obtained in the bargain. Buisson convincingly argues that Anse is using Addie's corpse to create

a public display of his loyalty, thus earning some symbolic capital that he is later able to convert into practical advantage, which includes the acquisition of a new wife, the major transaction that restores some balance to Anse's accounts (87). The simultaneous acquisition of teeth and a duck-shaped wife by the dog-like father point to his animal-like, predatory nature: his new acquisitions will satisfy both his appetite for food and his sexual appetite.

At first reading, it is tempting to regard Anse's final bargain as a comedic motif symbolizing a restored equilibrium between life forces and death-drives. Yet, the trope of animal appetite suggests a sub-human, a-moral quality in Anse's character. His final triumph is the victory of a small but brutal predator, which restores a form of economic balance but also re-asserts Anse's absolute, tyrannical control over his family. Indeed, his perception of his family is similar to the perception of chattel slaves by a slaveholder, one of the many features Anse's character shares with Jason Compson, the tyrannical family head in *The Sound and the Fury* (1929). He views his relatives as sources of expenses or potential sources of profit and resents the attempt of the state to commit Darl to a mental institution as a way "shorthand[ing him] with the law" ("Anse," 22). When he eventually allows his "queer" son to be committed to a mental institution, it is again out of an economic calculation.

In this settling of accounts, the balance of power between the family members and the repository of patriarchal power is at stake. At the beginning of the novel, Kate Tull is quoted saying: "And I reckon [Addie]'ll be behind him for thirty years more,' Kate says. 'Or if it aint her, he'll get another one before cotton-picking'" ("Tull," 20). Kate, like her mother Cora, is a "choric" character, as the pun on Cora's name suggests: Kate is voicing the dominant patriarchal world view—one in which wives are interchangeable bodies that husbands can use both for re-productive and productive purposes. At the close of the novel, when Kate's prediction is about to be fulfilled, Cash refers to the house of Anse's future wife as to the house of "Mrs. Bundren" ("Cash," 136): the narrator is not only suggesting that Anse's remarriage is evoked from a chronologically distant perspective; he is also stressing the interchangeability of commodified female bodies on the matrimonial market.

As for Addie's central monologue, it also foregrounds the motif of the balance of power between husband and wife: Addie's section can be interpreted as a long protest against patriarchal norms and the abuse of

grandiloquent words like “love” to justify the confinement of women to a productive and reproductive role (“chapping”) in the household economy. Addie’s attempts at restoring the balance of power between Anse and herself are merely symbolic, or rather magical, uses of speech. Addie’s attempt at getting even with Anse mostly consists in making him swear to take her corpse to Jefferson after her death, in a symbolic repudiation of patrilinear norms. A purely magical attempt at settling her accounts with her husband is noticeable when the vocabulary of theft and financial compensation is used about their children: “I gave Anse Dewey Dell to negative Jewel. 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,” 102). In the wife’s monologue, no less than in her husband’s, children are objectified and regarded as chattel slaves, pieces of property that can be exchanged for other pieces of property in a bargain that is struck between two human dealers.

In Anse’s actual restoration of economic balance, what is at stake is a consolidated position of masculine power; in Addie’s mental creation of a symbolic economy, a reversal of power is attempted, but through ineffective, magical speech acts. The resentful voice of Addie does not strike one as a rebellious, transgressive voice, but rather as the voice of a would-be female tyrant, a sinister, ghostly double of the actual male tyrant.

Vardaman and Cash: “It wasn’t on a balance” (“Cash,” 95)

Economic transactions are not always associated with a rational desire to balance out profits and losses, or with the rational attempt to gain something out of a bargain; they are also used to create artificial stability in a radically unstable world. To Anse, purchasing teeth is a “comfort”: “‘Now I can get them teeth.’ That will be a comfort. It will” (“Anse,” 63). To Cash, purchasing a graphophone is imagined as a “comfortable thing” (“Cash,” 136) and to Vardaman, the prospect of purchasing a toy train provides solace. The longed-for commodities are associated with “comfort,” that is to say a peaceful state—which Freud would have called a state of “homeostasis.” Cash is a carpenter and he builds balanced, symmetrical structures; he is also associated with the construction of mental symmetries: between the image of Addie’s face and the sound of Addie’s voice which are communicated to him through the frame of the window—“a composite picture of all time since he was a child” (“Darl,” 28)—and the perfectly preserved voice of a singer in

the box of the graphophone—"all shut up as pretty as a picture" ("Cash," 149)—, a principle of equivalence is established in the text.

Both wooden frames are associated with the beauty of a picture, with a square or rectangular structure, with the preservation of the past. But can a graphophone provide peace and does it preserve the past? Ironically, the commodity which is associated with restored balance and peacefulness is a primitive record-player; the recorded music is a remainder, a counterfeited imitation of live music: a reminder of loss as well as a semblance of restoration of the past. The acquisition of the graphophone, far from restoring the image of a balanced and peaceful world, seems to usher Cash into the nostalgic world of signifiers pointing to lost signifieds: a mental world that will never be "on a balance."

Similarly, in Vardaman's reveries, a toy train is often seen appearing and disappearing on circular rails. Paradoxically, the circular pattern does not create an image of stability: because the train keeps vanishing and re-appearing, it is also an image of continually deferred satisfaction, the image of a tantalizing object that will never be fully possessed. When Dewey Dell connects the possession of the train with the promise of Christmas ("Vardaman," 144), a figurative link is established between Dewey Dell's empty promise and the apocalyptic promise of the return of Christ at the end of time. Implicitly, the experience of human time is not compatible with the possession of the ideal object. Even in Vardaman's fantasies, the toy appears behind the glass of a shop window, a transparent obstacle replacing the object by its tantalizing image: "In Jefferson it is red on the track behind the glass" ("Vardaman," 122). In the final scenes, the Bundren family will not purchase the object of desire (the toy train) and will instead buy some food (bananas): the child's appetite is satisfied but his wish will not be. This points to a fundamental distinction between need and desire: while the object of one's need can be made present and even incorporated, the object of desire remains an indefinitely deferred presence. When Addie dies, Cash enters the world of nostalgic longing and Vardaman is ushered into the world of desire.

From Economic Ratiocination to Poetic Reverie

It is All about Time: Measuring it or Unraveling into it

MacGowan, the sexual predator, checks the clock obsessively ("MacGowan," 140); Vernon Tull, the thrifty farmer, views time in terms of opportunities: "getting [Peabody] in the nick of time, as Vernon

always does things, getting the most of for Anse’s money like he does for his own” (“Peabody,” 25). Tull and MacGowan are both men of action: to them time is a continuous, homogeneous medium which they can use: it can be divided and quantified, just as lumber or medicine can be parceled out and sold. In short, time provides opportunities that can be seized by a human subject. This pro-active vision of time contrasts with Darl’s contemplative view of time as the site of self-dissolution and mortality (“unraveling into time” [“Darl,” 121]). Significantly, Darl’s monologues sometimes start with an economic apprehension of time and then drift into a melancholy contemplation. In the following passage, time is first viewed as the homogeneous and continuous medium of economic exchange, in which a given commodity (lumber wood) is in the process of changing hands:

Beyond the unlamped wall I can hear the rain shaping the wagon that is ours, the load that is no longer theirs that felled and sawed it nor yet theirs that bought it and which is not ours either, lie on our wagon though it does . . . (“Darl,” 46)

The syntax emphasizes the smooth transition between the various phases: the noun phrase “the load” is connected with various relative clauses characterizing the past status of the commodity, its present status and its future status. The connection of all relative clauses to the same noun phrase suggests that the time of economic transaction is continuous and unified. Within this economic world-view, “the load” is a commodity which has a substance, a substantial and permanent identity even if it changes hands.

Then Darl’s economic analysis of the present status of the “load” is abruptly replaced by a different apprehension of time in which “the load” is no longer regarded as a permanent substance, but rather as a transitory phenomenon which has not substantial being and which will be replaced by equally insubstantial states of affairs:

And since sleep is is-not and rain and wind was, it is not. Yet, the wagon is, because when the wagon is was, Addie Bundren will not be. And Jewel is, so Addie Bundren must be. And then I must be, or I could not empty myself for sleep in a strange room. And so if I am not emptied yet, I am is. (“Darl,” 46-47)

The reader can sense how uncommon this discontinuous vision of time is: most sentences violate grammatical category rules, for instance

when verbal phrases are used where noun phrases are expected. In “And since sleep is is-not and rain and wind are *was*, [the load] is not,” the verbal phrase “is-not” is used in the place of the noun phrase “annihilation” or “nothingness”; similarly, the verbal phrase “was” is used instead of “things belonging to the past.” In this idiosyncratic vision of time, the notion of the past (“[the load] is not”) is not distinguished from that of complete annihilation (“is-not”), as if the whole world disappeared at every moment in time and had to be created anew the next moment. In this passage, the transition between one moment in time and the next is turned into an insoluble logical contradiction (“[the load] is not. Yet, the wagon is”) because the speaker does not assume that the load is a “substantial” entity, that is to say an entity whose being will endure through time. Darl’s vision is shifting from one vision of time to another but also from one ontology to another: the economic vision is one in which material goods remain substantially the same; this reassuring vision contrasts with a bewildering meditation on material phenomena which lack substance and change from a state of existence to a state of non-existence as time passes.

It is All Wood: Raw Material or Prime Matter

In *As I Lay Dying*, the motif of wood is pervasive: it is rough lumber that the Bundrens are transporting while their mother is dying; it is the material out of which boards, roofs, coffins, wheels, boxes or barns are made. Just as Aristotle uses the word *hyle* (ὕλη) to refer both to wood and to prime matter, Faulkner’s text uses the term “wood” to represent both wood and formless matter. To Cash, the carpenter, prime matter is material that can be given a form. Out of wood, Cash manufactures artefacts that Aristotle would call “compounds”: a combination compounding prime matter (wood) and a substantial form (the coffin, the roof), the substantial form being the object of knowledge. In Aristotle’s hylomorphism, being (*ousia*) is conceived as a compound of prime **matter** and substantial form. It is because prime matter is combined with a knowable and namable form that material objects can be the objects of ontological knowledge. We can answer the question: “What is this?” by “This is a coffin.”

In contrast to his brother Cash, Darl will identify stable objects of knowledge (compounds of prime matter and form) but then, will deviate from the ontological approach. And then an aesthetic approach to prime matter arises in the text. In the passages describing Cash’s carpentering,

or those depicting the coffin in the episode of the overflowing river, Darl's monologues allow the reader to catch glimpses of prime matter when it is not combined with any substantial and knowable form; in other words, the poetic text allows us to catch a glimpse of formless matter: "Between the shadows spaces [the boards] are yellow as gold, like soft gold, bearing on their flanks in smooth undulations the marks of the adze blades" ("Darl," 3). Prime matter has color ("yellow") rather than delineable contours; the wooden boards are likened to uncountable material ("gold," "soft gold") rather than to countable objects; a synesthesia conjures up a mosaic of sensations appealing to the sense of touch as well as to the sense of sight and the metaphor of human "flanks" conjures up an image of bruised human flesh.

In the episode of the river, the wooden coffin is again personified, or rather compared to a recumbent human body: "In the wagon bed it lies profoundly, the long pale planks hushed a little with wetting yet still yellow, like gold seen through water, save for two long muddy smears" ("Darl," 90). In fact Darl uses the metaphor of wood to describe most human bodies: "His eyes are two bleached chips in his face" ("Darl," 84); "He is coming up the road behind us, wooden-backed, wooden-faced, moving only from his hips down" ("Darl," 121); "motionless, lean, wooden-backed, as though carved squatting out of the lean wood" ("Darl," 133). [Anse] looks like "a figure carved clumsily from tough wood by a drunken caricaturist" ("Darl," 94). In these passages, the whole physical world, organic beings and inanimate things, wood, corpses, living bodies, seem composed of one and the same primordial matter—they seem to be one and the same flesh, one and the same *hyle*.

Later, the lumber whose transport is worth "three dollars" is also described as prime matter: the "yellow, water-soaked lumber" is not described as being independent from the "shattered spokes" of the wagon. Moreover, the wood out of which lumber and wagon are made seems to merge with the rest of the physical world, with the "yellow road neither of earth nor water, dissolving into a streaming mass of dark green neither of earth nor sky" ("Darl," 29). The prime matter of the world appears through a negative revelation, when the boundaries between substantial forms dissolve and the limits between different heaps of prime matter begin to fade.

In Darl's monologues, prime matter is either the very object of Darl's vision, or the blank, formless surface on which short-lived forms appear. In the episode of the river crossing, a piece of wood floating in

the river abruptly turns into a wood panel where the image of Christ, a *vera icona*, appears: “[the log] surged up out of the water and stood for an instant upright upon that surging and heaving desolation like Christ (...)” (“Darl,” 85). Then on the very same panel-like surface, this image of Christ is superseded by an animal shape reminiscent of a pagan faun: “The log appears suddenly between two hills, as if it had rocketed suddenly from the bottom of the river. Upon the end of it a long gout of foam hangs like the beard of an old man or a goat” (“Darl,” 85-86). In the same episode, Cash’s body is likened to a wood panel on which a new face has been painted *a tempera*: “His eyes are closed, his face is gray, his hair plastered in a smooth smear across his forehead as though done with a paint brush” (“Darl,” 90). The echo between the aspect of the Christ-like log and the aspect of injured Cash may suggest that Cash is turned into a Christ-like character and that he embodies the mythical figure of the Man of Sorrows in this scene. Yet, it is equally tempting to regard Cash’s body and the wooden log as two images of the formless prime matter upon which anthropomorphic figures are merely projected by the human imagination.

The Spyglass of Melancholy

In the wake of Addie’s death, some narrators are unsettled either by this death or by its circumstances: the chain of thoughts represented in their monologues becomes a stream of consciousness filled with lyrical *non sequiturs* expressing extreme bewilderment. The economic vision of the world, in which measurable quantities can be exchanged for other measurable quantities (objects or money), is then no longer effective. Indeed, in these critical passages, the economic vision of the physical world is replaced by an alternative vision in which some unique, irreplaceable object is endowed with a fascinating, magnetic power. Even Vernon Tull, the epitome of the modern capitalistic ethos, becomes strongly affected by Addie’s death through his identification with young Vardaman. When he gets to the other side of the “swagging and swaying bridge,” he is symbolically holding Vardaman’s hand and is reflecting that the child’s vision has “more sense” than a grownup fellow’s (“Tull,” 80). This is when he looks back to the other side and becomes unsettled:

When I looked back at my mule it was like he was one of these here spy-glasses and I could look at him standing there and see all the broad land and my house sweated outen it like it was the

more the sweat, the broader the land; the more the sweat, the tighter the house, because it would take a tight house for Cora, to hold Cora like a jar of milk in the spring: you've got to have a tight jar or you'll need a powerful spring, so if you have a big spring, why then you have the incentive to have tight, wellmade jars, because it is your milk, sour or not, because you would rather have milk that will sour than to have milk that wont, because you are a man. ("Tull," 80)

The highly unusual comparison of the mule to a spy-glass recalls a metaphysical conceit: it draws the reader's attention to the sudden apparition, in Tull's imagination, of a panoramic vista which has an almost hallucinatory quality. The simile of the spyglass suggests that the mule literally *stands for* the rest of Tull's large estate and its total value. At first, what Tull is seeing is "all the broad land and my house sweated outen it like it was the more the sweat, the broader the land": indeed Tull's house symbolizes a certain amount of exchange value, which is proportional to the value of the initial landed property ("land") to which must be added the surplus value which Tull's labor power ("sweat") has created: the clear notion that labor produces exchange value is conveyed by the resultative turn of phrase: "my house [which has been] sweated out of it."

In the first stage of the hallucination, the house has the same semiotic status as a mathematical symbol: it refers to a measurable amount of exchange value, corresponding to a given amount of labor time. But then, Tull's monologue loses its consistency and begins to drift from the image of the neatly built house to a highly incongruous image: that of an air-tight bottle of milk. The signifier "tight" has triggered a chain of free associations and Tull's mind is wandering away from the picture of the "tight" house (the mathematical, monosemous symbol of economic value) to the picture of a "tight" milk jar refrigerated in cold water, an ambiguous symbol of Tull's marriage. Like the frail bridge over the overflowing river, Tull's hallucination is "swaying" between an economic and a lyrical vision of his household.

The image of the "milk jar" connotes motherhood, fecundity and abundance but also the "souring" of the milk, bitterness and incipient putrefaction. While the tight house was a mathematical symbol denoting market value, the tight milk jar is an ambiguous symbol pointing to the deep ambivalence of the lyrical subject toward marriage, imagined as the container of a foul liquid. As Tull's mind is thus wandering, the images

of Cora and Addie seem to merge, as the “souring milk” in the bottle echoes the “bubbling” corpse in the coffin. The reader notices a surprising kinship between Tull’s monologue and Darl’s when they both shift from a vision of the world based on measurable units and exchangeable quantities toward a vision revolving around a troubling and fascinating body. In Darl’s final monologue, the image of the “spyglass” recurs:

A nickel has a woman on one side and a buffalo on the other; two faces and no back. I don’t know what that is. Darl had a little spyglass he got in France at the war. In it it had a woman and a pig with two backs and no face. I know what that is. (“Darl,” 146)

Darl is defined in terms of what he knows or no longer knows: Darl no longer knows himself as a substantial person coinciding with himself, as the oscillation between the third person (“Darl”) and the first person (“I”) suggests. He no longer knows what a nickel stands for either (“I don’t know what that is”). Darl, as a narrator, now seems entirely cut off from the sphere of economic calculations but also from the sphere of symbolic correspondences. Importantly, Darl is simultaneously defined as the character who no longer knows what a nickel is and the one who knows what the image of the “beast with two backs” is in the little spyglass which Darl got from the European theatre of war: “In [the little spyglass] it had a woman and a pig two backs and no face. I know what that is” (“Darl,” 146). This spyglass is an apparatus in which a fascinating, obscene picture appears: the image of the primal scene.

The spyglass can be viewed as metaphor for the modernist text, when that text allows both narrator and the sympathetic implied reader to drift away from rational calculation and contemplate obscene, fascinating images of abjection (souring milk, the beast with two backs) as they disrupt the course of economic ratiocination. Two ways of apprehending the material world seem to be outlined: in rational calculation, the physical world is viewed in terms of homogeneous quantities that can be exchanged for other homogeneous quantities of equivalent value (tight house-sweat/ nickel-the value of a nickel); in the contemplation of the obscene image, the physical world is no longer seen as a set of replaceable objects at the disposal of a human subject. As Michel Gresset argued in his study of “fascination” in Faulkner’s

novels, Faulkner's fiction revolves around critical moments when the human subject senses that s/he is held in thrall by some fascinating object.

Because the motif of the obscene spyglass occurs both in a monologue spoken by sensible Tull and in a monologue spoken by insane Darl, I would argue that Faulkner's novel stresses the possibility of fascination and "astonishment" in every human subject by allowing every one of its narrators to drift away from economic calculation towards a contemplative form of knowledge, to shift from the position of an economic agent to the position of an overwhelmed spectator looking through the spyglass.

In T.S. Eliot's "Death by Water" in *The Waste Land* (1922), the mood of a drowned man is imagined as a negative, contemplative state which does not consist of sensory perceptions or economic calculations any more: "Phlebas the Phoenician, a fortnight dead, / Forgot the cry of gulls, and the deep seas swell / And the profit and loss." *As I Lay Dying*, like *The Waste Land*, is a text dealing with melancholy subjects who forfeit their concern with profit and loss, either for the duration of a nine-day journey, or who relinquish it for good, as Darl does. And by forfeiting their concern with profit and loss, the characters become modernist seers—seeing the material world from an aesthetic perspective, not with wonder but with fascination, a mixture of "horror and astonishment."

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