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The Poetics of Elements in Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*

Frédérique Spill

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That's the one trouble with this country: everything, weather, all,
hangs on too long.

Like our rivers, our land: opaque, slow, violent; shaping and
creating the life of man in its implacable and brooding image.

“Peabody,” 45.

Together with “The Old Man” sections of *The Wild Palms* (1939) or the stories compiled in *Go Down, Moses* (1942), William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* is one of the writer's books where the natural world plays a particularly important part.¹ This aspect of *As I Lay Dying* has not received as much critical attention as other characteristic features of the novel that are certainly more obvious;² yet there is no doubt that the phenomena of the physical world are part and parcel of the plot, which is best summarized in Anse's words, as reported by a secondary character named Moseley, through a rare enough occurrence of indirect speech, in his only monologue in the last part of the novel:

“We're doing the best we can,” the father said. Then he told a long tale about how they had to wait for the wagon to come back and how the bridge was *washed away* and how they went eight miles to another bridge and it was gone too so they came back and *swum* the ford and the mules *got drowned* and how they got another team and found that the road was *washed out* and they had to come clean around by Mottson, and then the one with the

¹ As noted by Jacques Pothier, Faulkner devoted two novels to the 1927 Great Flood of the Mississippi, following months of unusually heavy rains in 1926, *As I Lay Dying* and *The Wild Palms*.

² The 1996 volume of the Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha series is devoted to Faulkner and the natural world, but it contains no article that specifically focuses on *As I Lay Dying*. In a 1998 article entitled “Faulkner's Poetics of Heat: Summer's Curse,” Marie Liénard remarks how “in Faulkner's work, heat draws on the four elements to create a network of images” (54).

cement came back and told him to shut up. (“Moseley,” 118; my emphasis)

As suggested by this excerpt, the novel compellingly invokes the great forces of nature, which face the Bundrens with a seemingly endless series of hurdles and hitches, as emphasized by the combined use of parataxis and logical linking words (*so, then*). In the sequence of obstacles reportedly listed by Anse, the very reason for the trip—the promise made to a mother and wife that she would be buried in town with her kinfolds—is stifled and eventually silenced by the difficulty of its fulfillment, which, as pointed out by the repetition of words pertaining to water in the preceding quote, is mostly due to the excess of water. The fact that Anse’s tale should be interrupted, and rather briskly so, by “the one with the cement”—Darl, as it turns out—reveals that the father is about the only one that derives any pride from the family’s ordeal.

Though the most evident element, water is far from being the only one represented, if not given a voice to, in *As I Lay Dying*. The four natural elements are actually central to the novel and, more often than not, they are inextricably linked to the nature of Faulkner’s writing. In his analysis of the novel in *The Ink of Melancholy*, André Bleikasten remarks: “Everything takes place as if the elements were disputing Addie’s corpse: air (the possibility of the body being left to the buzzards), water (the immersion of the coffin in the river), fire (the barely avoided cremation during the barn fire), and the earth in which she is finally buried” (171). By focusing on a few aspects of the scenery³ that emerge from the fifty-nine interior monologues making up *As I Lay Dying*, the following analysis will center on the way elements keep interweaving with Faulkner’s tale of loss, mourning and survival.

Hills

Because they try hard to determine what is being told, why the successive voices in charge of the narrative often sound so contradictory and what to make of this impression, first readings of *As I Lay Dying* are likely to give the mistaken impression that, due to its monological format—by essence the most subjective form—, the outside world does

³ My hope in focusing on elements in *As I Lay Dying*, on some of their recurring manifestations and on parts of the scenery rather than dealing explicitly with the flood and the fire—that is: the bigger picture—is to analyze the novel in a more detailed and a more devious way.

not organize itself and coalesce into a landscape. Yet there is a landscape in *As I Lay Dying*, which actually conveys a very accurate sense of place. At the center of the picture, there is a hill,⁴ the hill on which Anse's farm was built long before he ever met Addie.⁵ This position allows Anse to look down upon the world around him, "gazing out beyond the crest of the bluff, out across the land" ("Darl," 11). Similarly, Tull envisions Anse "looking out over the land" ("Tull," 18).⁶ Both quotes highlight Anse's passiveness as well as his readiness to observe, if not oversee, others' work. Meanwhile, the Bundrens' living at the top of a hill further isolates them from the deeply rural community to which they belong. This feature contributes to making any of their ventures more difficult—or at least longer—since before any kind of undertaking, they first need to come down the hill. At the same time, it echoes the novel's focus on them: at the top of the hill, the Bundren family is also the center of attention. What's more, right from the start of the novel, their position at the top of the hill gives the Bundrens a heroic stature, which, as the plot will reveal, is not incompatible with their condition as poor whites.⁷

Coming down the hill and eventually getting back up determine the Bundrens' negotiations with their environment, both individually and as a family. Because Peabody is overweighed and has trouble moving, the hill on which the Burdens live appears like a mountain to him, a mountain onto which he has to be hauled: "I'll be damned if I can see

⁴ Faulkner's emphasis on hills appears as early as his second published short story, which is simply entitled "The Hill." It was first published in *The Mississippian* on March 10, 1922 and later reprinted in *Early Prose and Poetry*. It retraces the trajectory of a "tieless casual" who, taking a break from work and everyday life, first climbs up a hill, then walks down the hill, after experiencing some kind of epiphany about his precarious condition.

⁵ "They tell me you've got a house and a good farm" ("Addie," 99), Addie remarks when Anse comes courting her.

⁶ Likewise, Peabody pictures Anse "standing at the top of the bluff above the path" ("Peabody," 25).

⁷ In *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha County*, Cleanth Brooks was one of the first critics who acknowledged the Bundrens' heroism: "Few, if any, families in rural Mississippi would have attempted to do what the Bundrens did" (142). A few pages later, he concludes his analysis of the "Odyssey of the Bundrens" as follows: "Man's capacity to spend himself in a cause is always a remarkable thing and nowhere more so than when it springs from an unlikely soil and when it is not aware that it is remarkable" (166). The image of the Bundrens as "an unlikely soil" is particularly evocative.

why I don't quit. A man seventy years old, weighing two hundred and odd pounds, being hauled up and down a damn mountain on a rope. [...] 'What the hell does your wife mean,' I say, 'taking sick on top of a durn mountain?'" ("Peabody," 25-26). Earlier, the doctor's anticipation that he would have to transport himself up the hill is the occasion for a precise topographical description of the place: "Even with the horse it would take me fifteen minutes to ride up across the pasture to the top of the ridge and reach the house. The path looks like a crooked limb blown against the bluff" ("Peabody," 25). The slanting pasture and the path along the bluff at the top of the ridge make the Bundrens' place rather inaccessible.⁸

At the top of the hill, the house itself is slightly crooked, as pointed out by Darl in an early monologue: "Tilting a little down the hill, as our house does, a breeze draws through the hall all the time, upslanting. A feather dropped near the front door will rise and brush along the ceiling, slanting backward, until it reaches the down-turning current at the back door; so with voices. As you enter the hall, they sound as though they were speaking out of the air about your head" ("Darl," 13). There is, indeed, something precarious about the house itself: right from the start, the house and the household are exposed to "breeze[s]." Incidentally, much as in Edwin Arlington Robinson's 1894 villanelle "The House on the Hill,"⁹ the house will soon be abandoned to the winds, though it seems the Bundrens will eventually return. As for voices, they appear to be detached from bodies, as though carried along the winds up there, in a configuration that mirrors the succession of voices coming out of nowhere throughout the book.

That the hill on which the Bundrens live is often an obstacle is confirmed when Addie's coffin needs to be carried down the hill toward the wagon: "Cash begins to fall behind, hobbling to keep up, breathing harshly; then he is distanced and Jewel carries the entire front end alone, so that, tilting as the path begins to slant, it begins to rush away from me and slip down the air like a sled upon invisible snow, smoothly evacuating atmosphere in which the sense of it is still shaped" ("Darl," 57). Taking the coffin down the hill to the wagon—doubtless a solemn occasion in her sons' lives—is the unlikely pretext for an instance of

⁸ One may argue that so are their motivations. Moreover, that the path leading to their house should be described as "crooked" may be interpreted as a hint at the family's crooked ways.

⁹ Robinson's poem, with which it is very likely that Faulkner was familiar, is featured as an annex to the present essay.

comic relief as the three elder brothers compete for their dead mother's attention the way they would behave on a racetrack were she alive, as suggested by the recurrence of phrases involving precipitation, being distanced and trying to catch up. Moreover, this is the first of several instances when Jewel beats his brothers, as he ends up "carry[ing] the entire front end alone" ("Darl," 57). Incidentally, this is also one of the first occurrences of the form "shape" in Darl's discourse, in reference to the lingering trace or reverberation of a fleeting sensation.

As opposed to the top of the hill, "down the hill" also used to be the place where Addie "could be quiet and hate them" ("Addie," 98), separating herself, both spatially and psychologically, first from her schoolchildren, then from her own family, in order to vent her unmotherly feelings. "[D]own the hill" is her refuge away from "them." Here is the second sentence of her monologue: "It would be *quiet* there then, with the water bubbling up and away and the sun slanting *quiet* in the trees and the *quiet* smelling of damp and rotting leaves and new earth; especially in the early spring, for it was worst then" ("Addie," 98; my emphasis). Addie's perception of the world around her encompasses the four elements. What is striking is how her senses combine impressions of new life with death—pleasant sensations that cohabit with unpleasant sensations. Her wish for quietness, simply marked by the ternary repetition of the adjective "quiet," is all the more compelling as those words set the tone of Addie's posthumous monologue, fully expressing her overall desire to be left alone, which is far from being the case halfway through the novel when that query is heard. "[D]own the hill" was also where she waited for Whitfield "in the woods" ("Addie," 101). Dewey Dell's own disappearances in "the secret shade" ("Dewey Dell," 17) of the woods with Lefe and, later, "among the trees and undergrowth" ("Darl," 131) to change into her Sunday best before they arrive in Jefferson certainly echo her mother's earlier vanishings. Literally though, Addie's monologue can hardly be considered posthumous—an adjective with a rather interesting etymology as it derives from the Latin *postumus*, the superlative form of *posterus* ("coming after"), but it owes its classical spelling with "h" by association with *humus* ("ground," "earth"), referring to burial.¹⁰ As long as Addie is denied the long-awaited quietness of the earth, why should she stop complaining?

¹⁰ In that respect, Addie's situation would be best described as *antehumous*.

“‘How many more hills now, Darl?’ Vardaman says” (“Darl,” 132). As pointed out several times, the Northern Mississippi country the Burdens drive across is by no means a flat land. “When we come to the foot of the hill pa stops and Darl and Dewey Dell and I get out. Cash cant walk because he has a broken leg. ‘Come up, mules,’ pa says. The mules walk hard; the wagon creaks. Darl and Dewey Dell and I walk behind the wagon, up the hill. When we come to the top of the hill pa stops and we get back into the wagon” (“Vardaman,” 114). While emphasizing the repetitiveness of their trajectory¹¹ as well as the variety of obstacles and necessary accommodations, this thorough description of the family’s movements in a little boy’s eyes offers a reminder of the whole situation: horseless Jewel has gone on his own; Anse is the only one that never walks; Cash is hurting; Darl, first in the list of siblings, is of primary importance for Vardaman.

When Jefferson looms in the horizon for the first time, it is, of course, “[f]rom the crest of a hill”: “as we get into the wagon again, we can see the smoke low and flat, seemingly unmoving in the unwinded afternoon” (“Darl,” 131). This long-postponed vision, whose stillness contrasts with the tumults of the journey that now comes to an end, makes Darl conclude: “Life was created in the valleys. It blew up onto the hills on the old terrors, the old lusts, the old despairs. That’s why you must walk up the hills so you can ride down” (“Darl,” 227).¹² “Conclude” is a particularly apt word here since this reflection emerges from Darl’s last monologue as a free man, as a sane man. What is man’s life, but an unoriginal repetition of much-experienced—hence “old”—passions, a vain succession of ascents and descents across a series of anthills in the eyes of Eternity?¹³

¹¹ See also: “‘Here’s a hill,’ pa says. ‘I reckon you’ll have to get out and walk’” (“Darl,” 121).

¹² There are several instances where finitude is evoked in the form of an abstraction from matter, a negation of elements: “How do our lives ravel out into the no-wind, no-sound, the weary gestures wearily recapitulant: echoes of old compulsions with no-hand on no-strings: in sunset we fall into furious attitudes, dead gestures of dolls” (“Darl,” 207).

¹³ Who would believe me if I told them that, as I was writing this paper, I listened to Californian metalcore for the first time in my life? Though not quite academic, it seems to me the situation is worth a footnote: as the phrase “the eyes of Eternity,” which I’m not sure is quite appropriate, came to me, I checked its usage and frequency on the internet. That is how I ended up finding out that Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying* inspired the name of a metalcore band in the

Rains

As I Lay Dying contains innumerable references to water that highlight both its ordinariness and man's, as well as nature's, vital need of it: Gaston Bachelard calls water "the universal liquid" (60); in a poem entitled "The Sleeper," Edgar Allan Poe refers to it as "the pure element." In his second monologue, Darl remembers experiencing the taste of water as a boy: "When I was a boy I first learned how much better water tastes when it has set a while in a cedar bucket. Warmish-cool, with a faint taste like the hit July wind in the cedar trees smells. It has to set at least six hours, and be drunk from a gourd. Water should never be drunk from metal" ("Darl," 8). The sweet sensations related to the memory of using a dipper, which triggers Darl's awareness of the Big Dipper, are rare enough in a novel that contains few guiltless pleasures. Cash's monologue on the necessity of beveling contains a remark about wood's resistance to water: "The water will have to seep into it in a slant. Water moves easiest up and down or straight across" ("Cash," 48). Later, he gives Darl instructions about how to make good cement: "'You dont want too much water, or it wont work right,' he says" ("Darl," 120). Then pouring water on his homemade cast is meant to relieve his pain: "'You want some water poured on it?' we say. 'Maybe that will ease it some'" ("Darl," 123). While Cash's accident is remembered in terms of "slip[ping] quick on wet planks" ("Tull," 52), both his painstaking effort at work—"Cash is eating. About his head the print of his hat is sweated into his hair. His shirt is blotched with sweat. He has not watched his hands and arms" ("Dewey Dell," 36)—and his suffering¹⁴ are indicated by an outpour of water; indeed, his siblings often refer to Cash as sweating, for various obvious reasons.

As far as water is concerned, there is one simple elemental phenomenon that is endowed with particular purport in the novel: rain.

early 21st century. What's more, though quite inaudible to my inexperienced and rather sensitive ears, I discovered that the lyrics of one of their songs, entitled "A Breath in the Eyes of Eternity," could well pass for a paraphrase—a rather explicit one, though—of one of Darl's more metaphysical moments. But since I'm not sure I can quote from them, I'll let my curious reader make up his own mind.

¹⁴ See for instance: "Cash begins to sweat again. His teeth look out" ("Vardaman," 113).

“Looks like more rain.”

“It does for a fact.”

“Yes, sir. It will rain some more.”

“It come up quick.”

“And going away slow. It dont fail.” (“Tull,” 50-51)

Such commonplace exchanges revolving around the impending rain and its possible consequences are scattered throughout the first part of the novel: “It’s fixing to rain tonight, too” (“Tull,” 18; see also 20, 21); “it is going to rain and the air is empty for the rain” (“Vardaman,” 32). Such phrases almost operate as a refrain throughout the first part of *As I Lay Dying*. In an early monologue, Anse confirms the nearness of rain, which he foresees in an almost Darl-like vision: “And it fixing to rain, too. I can stand here and same as see it with second-sight, a-shutting down behind them like a wall, shutting down betwixt them and my given promise” (“Anse,” 22). Even before it actually starts raining, rain has already become an obstacle to Anse’s “word” to Addie, who has not died yet. Similarly, a few chapters later, in his specific poetry fraught with colors and sound effects, Darl anticipates the thunderstorm: “The sun, an hour above the horizon, is poised like a bloody egg upon a crest of thunderheads; the light has turned copper: in the eye portentous, in the nose sulphurous, smelling of lightning” (“Darl,” 24). There are too many such hints at the impending rainstorm and at the strange stillness that precedes it to list them all. Here’s one more though: “When I reach the spring and get down and hitch the team, the sun has gone down behind a bank of black cloud like a topheavy mountain range, like a load of cinders dumped over there, and there is no wind” (“Peabody,” 25). What most of those quotations have in common is their dramatic dimension, conveyed—and this is true whoever the narrator is—in poetic grandiloquence. The sudden opaque graying of the atmosphere, streaked by an increasing number of flashes of lightning, certainly contributes to dramatizing the moment of Addie’s demise, endowing the novel with a

mythical scope¹⁵ that, of course, reaches a peak in the consecutive experiences of flood and fire.¹⁶

Tull's remark "[a]bout all the sorrow and afflictions in this world; how it's liable to strike anywhere, like lightning" ("Tull," 41) foreshadows the way the Bundrens' familiar world, about to split open, seems doomed to fall apart. The fact that the perception of the impending storm should be filtered through the consciousness of different character-narrators indicates both the continuation and the accentuation of the phenomenon: "It had been a misdoubtful night, with the storm making" ("Tull," 40); "I got to get back down that bluff. I don't aim for that storm to catch me up there" ("Peabody," 43). As a result, while being a rather ordinary element of everyday lives and Mississippian summers, rain is soon endowed with inordinately menacing undertones: "it was *threatening* rain again" ("Samson," 66; my emphasis); "a part of water, of the waiting and the *threat*" ("Tull," 79; my emphasis).

Mixing the four elements (drops; the ground; a sigh; the image of a fired gun), Darl's description of how "[i]t begins to rain" is the occasion for a moment of sheer beauty: "The first harsh, sparse, swift drops rush through the leaves and across the ground in a long sigh, as though of relief from intolerable suspense. They are big as buckshot, warm as though fired from a gun; they sweep across the lantern in a vicious hissing" ("Darl," 44). When taken a close look at, this passage appears to develop as a close succession of seven-syllable lines, mostly made of one-syllable nouns, adjectives and verbs (at least in the first part of the

¹⁵ "We drove all the rest of the day and got to Samson's at dust-dark and then that bridge was gone too. They hadn't never see the river so high, and it not done raining yet. There was old men that hadn't never see nor hear of it being so in the memory of man" ("Anse," 111). Several character-narrators make it clear that such a flood constitutes an unprecedented event in the area.

¹⁶ That's how Faulkner remembers the genesis of *As I Lay Dying*: "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). In his extended analysis of the novel, André Bleikasten remarks, "Water rather than fire seems to be the dominant element in *As I Lay Dying*. For it is water that translates most appropriately into the register of the perceptible the obsession with chaos and death which wells up from the whole novel. Water is not simply the prime agent for metamorphosis; while allowing changes of form, it also contains the threat of a regression to the formless" (*Faulkner's As I Lay Dying* 112).

quote) that somehow figure the falling raindrops. The occurrence of two and three-syllable words in the second part of the quote conveys the long-expected “relief from intolerable suspense.” Now the floodgates are opened, the world and its familiar landscapes can drown, and its people with it.

As a consequence of the deluge, which is both physical and emotional,¹⁷ the members of the Bundren family all appear to be irreparably wet. Tull describes Vardaman as “dripping onto the floor” (“Tull,” 41).¹⁸ As, impervious to the rain, he works all night long to finish his mother’s coffin, “Cash is wet to the skin” (“Darl,” 44), “soaked, scrawny, tireless” (“Darl,” 45). While Jewel “looks down at Cash, dripping too” (“Darl,” 90), idle, useless Anse is repetitively described with “his face streaming” (“Darl,” 45), as in the two following examples: “Pa looks at him, his face streaming slowly. It is as though upon a face carved by a savage caricaturist a monstrous burlesque of all bereavement flowed” (“Darl,” 45); “Upon his face the rain streams, slow as cold glycerin” (“Darl,” 45).¹⁹ This constant pouring seems to threaten the neatness of the characters’ forms, evoking images of deliquescence.

¹⁷ Further drawing on the symbolism of water, Darl evokes “the furious tide of Jewel’s despair” (“Darl,” 57).

¹⁸ Tull also compares Vardaman with “a drowned puppy” (“Tull,” 41), which further highlights the sense that he has been abandoned and that, as a result, he changed into a pitiful creature.

¹⁹ In the list of wet objects in *As I Lay Dying*, “the wet hem of her (Dewey Dell) dress” (“Darl,” 163, 164) should also be mentioned. Contrary to her brothers who are soaked, only a part of Dewey Dell is wet, “[a]s though the clotting which is you had dissolved into the myriad original motion, and seeing and hearing in themselves blind and deaf; fury in itself quiet with stagnation. Squatting, Dewey Dell’s wet dress shapes for the dead eyes of three blind men those mammalian ludicrosities which are the horizons and the valleys of the earth” (“Darl,” 164). In *The Ink of Melancholy*, André Bleikasten remarks that this is “one the novel’s most troubling visions” (171), but he fails to volunteer an interpretation, though he remarks that Darl’s perception of his sister’s body after they failed crossing the river evokes a “correspondence between gynocosm and macrocosm” (171) similar to Darl’s comparison of Dewey Dell’s leg with “that lever which moves the world; one of that caliper which measures the length and breadth of life” (104). The link between wheel and caliper, between mother and daughter, both associated with very terrestrial images is obvious enough, though Bleikasten emphasizes that “Addie’s earth is the dark domain of the dead rather than the womb of the living” (171).

Deliquescence defines the process by which a substance absorbs moisture from the atmosphere until it dissolves in the absorbed water and forms a solution; by extension, the term designates an object's tendency to melt or dissolve, therefore losing its shape. The very recurrence of the term "shape," either as a noun or as a verb, particularly in Darl's monologues can therefore be accounted for by the latter's keen awareness of his world's proclivity to lose its familiar contours. The widespread process of deliquescence or dissolution is also conveyed by the repetition of gerund forms and by the lexicon of slow, yet inexorable, disappearance (fading, yellowing, vanishing) throughout *As I Lay Dying*. Armstid's invitation for the Bundrens to "come in and dry and eat" ("Darl," 106) can therefore be interpreted as a confirmation of their obvious dereliction and of the urgent need for them to take care of themselves and satisfy their primary needs.²⁰ The overall impression that, as a result of the heavy rains that forever prolong their mourning by engendering obstacles, the Bundrens are unmoored and losing their shape gradually extends to the world around them:

He (Vernon) looks about quietly, at the position of the trees, leaning this way and that, looking back along the floorless road shaped vaguely high in air by the position of the lopped and felled trees, as if the road too had been soaked free of earth and floated upward, to leave in its spectral tracing a monument to a still more profound desolation than this above which we now sit, talking quietly of old security and old trivial things. ("Darl," 83)

The familiar world is no longer recognizable in this scene of desolation; trees have forsaken the firm verticality that, according to Anse, justifies their—and man's—motionlessness.²¹ Quite on the

²⁰ It is however remarkable that Jewel's outline appears to be sharpened rather than threatened by the wetness. Indeed, Darl remarks how Jewel's "*damp shirt lap[s] flat to him when he moved*" ("Darl," 106).

²¹ Throughout the novel, the roads Anse is so resentful to, are but the surface of what Darl once refers to "the ultimate earth" ("Darl," 29) and the distance separating Addie from it. Hostile to effort and motion, Anse is obsessed with roads: "because the Lord put roads for travelling: why he laid them down flat on the earth. When He aims for something to be always a-moving, He makes it long ways, like a road or a horse or a wagon, but when He aims for something to stay put, He makes it up-and-down ways, like a tree or a man" ("Anse," 22). Anse, who'd rather sit watching around, has the notion—and the plot actually

contrary, they now seem to point to the way out of there. The road, now endowed with the liquidity of water, is but a ghost of itself. Phrases like “floorless,” “soaked free” and “floated upward” point to the sudden rootlessness of all things.²² It should also be noted that, in this quote, Darl continues his fragmentary list of obsolete values, once again marked by the repetition of the adjective “old”: “old” because a mother’s death radically questions things as they used to be; “old” for Darl particularly because he is forever aware of the impermanence of the world and its pointlessness.

Skies

Breathing is a motif that runs throughout *As I Lay Dying*. Addie’s life is prolonged by ten days, partly as a result of Dewey Dell’s desperate attempts to prolong her breath through her constant use of the fan, thanks to which she beats air in her mother’s face and body: “the fan still moving like it has for ten days” (“Darl,” 28). Yet the daughter’s efforts will fail to revive her mother: “the fan still moving steadily up and down, whispering the useless air” (“Darl,” 28). As suggested by the adjective “useless,” air is no longer needed. As often with Faulkner, instead of being recounted straightforwardly, crucial moments, like a mother’s death—or a mother’s burial, for that matter—, are projected onto objects, as in the following quote: “her arms outflung and the fan in one hand still beating with expiring breath into the quilt” (“Darl,” 29). It is the fan that is described as “expiring,” while, together with the adverb “still,” which refers to a continuation soon to be broken, Dewey Dell’s covering her mother’s corpse with her own youthful body can be construed a hint at the fact that she will now take over.

As a direct consequence of Addie’s death, one by one the Bundren children all seem to be prey to a sense of suffocation that, as suggested earlier, extends to the eerie stillness of the atmosphere right before the rainstorm. It is in the barn that right after his mother’s death Vardaman “can breathe again, in the warm smelling” (“Vardaman,” 32), as the pungent smells of the farm dispel the cold terror of the house. On his own

proves him right—that trouble comes from the road: “But it seems hard that man in his need could be so flouted by a road” (“Anse,” 23). Therefore, he’d rather not have to use roads, which explains why Peabody remarks that he “has not been in town twelve years” (“Peabody,” 25).

²² Parallels between Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying* and T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* have been drawn by early critics like Dickerson, for instance.

in the barn, Vardaman is able to expel his terror: “then I can cry then I vomit the crying” (“Vardaman,” 32), “vomiting the crying, and then I can breathe, vomiting” (“Vardaman,” 32). Breathing, crying, vomiting are simultaneous manifestations of Vardaman’s shock and subsequent helplessness. Once he is relieved, the little boy becomes obsessed with his mother’s breathing—a way for him to deny the fact that she has actually stopped breathing. His concern is that “she can breathe” (“Vardaman,” 39) in the box, which accounts for his tragicomical initiative, described by Tull as follows: “the top of the box [has been] bored clean full of holes and Cash’s new auger broke off in the last one. When they taken the lid off they found that two of them had bored into her face” (“Tull,” 42).

Dewey Dell is overwhelmed by similar impressions, which, just as in the case of her younger brother, are related to the barn and the nearness of the cow, a coincidence that would probably justify a development of its own:

The sky lies flat down the slope, upon the secret clumps. Beyond the hill sheet-lightning stains upward and fades. The *dead* air shapes the *dead* earth in the *dead* darkness, further away than seeing shapes the *dead* earth. It lies *dead* and warm upon me, touching me naked through my clothes. I said You dont know what worry is. I dont know what it is. I dont know whether I am worrying or not. Whether I can or not. I dont know whether I can cry or not. I dont know whether I have tried or not. I feel like a wet seed wild in the hot blind earth. (“Dewey Dell,” 37-38; my emphasis)

In Dewey Dell’s immediate response to her mother’s death, the adjective “dead” is constantly repeated, naked and ponderous. In Dewey Dell’s vision, which actually involves most senses (“further away than seeing”), death contaminates the whole world around her. As the image of the “dead air,” first introduced by Darl, reappears in her words, it “shapes the dead earth,” thus conjuring up images of the end of times.

Dewey Dell’s *Hilflösigkeit* or defenselessness is also manifest in her inability to make sense of her feelings, as suggested by the repetition of “I don’t know.” She is literally at a loss. What is also quite striking is the way distinct scenes and concerns jumble in her confusion. There are obviously several things she is “worrying” about, though she may not know how to deal with them: her mother’s death, of course, which makes her next in line and the only woman in the family; but also the condition

resulting from her being naked in “the secret clumps,” that is the seed growing inside her. The fact that she should “feel like a wet seed wild in the hot blind earth” compellingly conveys her regression into her dead mother’s fetus²³ as her body slowly turns into that of a mother. The ambivalence of her emotions is suggested by the almost oxymoronic combination of the adjectives “dead and warm” to describe the thing that, as she puts it, lies upon her.

What is more, mother and daughter are alike in their use of the adjective “wild,” which in both cases, alludes to their wild streak or innermost desire for being unbounded. In that respect, Addie’s repeated vision of wild geese in the middle of her nights close to a man she clearly would be better off without constitutes a particularly forceful image of her suppressed wildness: “Sometimes I thought that I could not bear it, lying in bed at night, with the *wild* geese going north and their honking coming faint and high and *wild* out of the *wild* darkness” (“Addie,” 101; my emphasis). Addie’s vision is contaminated by *wildness* in a way that recalls the overall *deadness* of Dewey Dell’s perception of the world after her mother’s demise. Though heart-rending, the second and last appearance of “the cries of the geese out of the wild darkness in the old terrible nights” (“Addie,” 101) in Addie’s only monologue almost comes as a relief as, as in Darl’s case, the reference to “the old terrible nights” suggests that those nights are now over and part of the past. Bird for bird, it is, of course, tempting to envision the buzzards, which Vardaman is “chasing [...] all day in the hot sun until he was nigh as crazy as the rest of them” (“Armstid,” 111), as the ultimate and rather morbid transformation of Addie’s geese into scavengers hoping to feast on her dead hopes.

The Blaze

Since one element has hardly been evoked so far, but for the mention of lightning, it is time to discuss the blaze. Fire, in *As I Lay Dying*, first emphasizes the Bundrens’ strong family bond and sense of togetherness, despite their many issues. This is suggested by Armstid’s

²³ In *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, Jean-Bernard Pontalis and Jean Laplanche define helplessness, the Freudian *Hilflosigkeit*, as the infant’s “incapacity to help itself” (75). Helplessness is characteristic of structural trauma experience because what occurs is “a loss or separation occasioning a progressive increase in tension, until eventually the subject finds himself to be incapable of mastering the excitations and is overwhelmed by them” (190).

vision of the family sitting outside around “a little fire” they made, near Addie’s coffin, after turning down his invitation for them to come in: “So I left them there, squatting around a little fire, waiting; God knows what for” (“Armstid,” 111). Yet a few pages after this peaceful vision, “the small fire” turns into a devastating blaze.

Though Vardaman alludes a couple of times to something he saw in the night, but which he is not supposed to mention, the reader is directly propelled into the heart of the fire, as Gillespie’s barn, in which Addie’s coffin lies for the night, is ablaze. The scene is told through the eyes of the arsonist, Darl as it soon turns out, who focuses on Jewel’s heroic attempt to save his mother’s coffin from the flames as he saved her from the flood,²⁴ thus once again frustrating his own desire to put an end to Addie’s ordeal: “For an instant longer he runs silver in the moonlight, then he springs out like a flat figure cut leanly from tin against an abrupt and soundless explosion as the whole loft of the barn takes fire at once, as though it had been stuffed with powder” (“Darl,” 126). The poetics of elements in *As I Lay Dying* is in full swing in the evocation of the fire, which develops as an uninterrupted synesthesia, merging sensations, forms, colors and elements. In phrases like “the sound of the flames” (“Darl,” 126) or “[t]he sound of it has become quite peaceful now, like the sound of the river did” (“Darl,” 127), fire can actually be heard rather than seen or felt, its sound modulating with its intensity. As its singular music reminds Darl of that of the flooding river, water imagery comes back to the fore: “suddenly we watch the entire floor to the loft dissolve. It just turns to fire; a faint glitter of sparks rains down” (“Darl,” 127), “the hallway looks like a searchlight turned into rain” (“Darl,” 127). The fact that Faulkner’s description of the fire of the barn may have been inspired by Cubist painting has often been highlighted (see Branch, Pothier or Reid) but I’d like to suggest that, together with “the rain of burning hay” (“Darl,” 128; my emphasis), the raining sparks, or “flaming beads” (“Darl,” 128), somehow suggest a pointillist painting *à la* *Pissarro*.

As the fire illuminates the whole scene, a competition is engaged between fire and moonlight: “Pa and Gillespie and Mack are some distance away, watching the barn, pink against the darkness where for the

²⁴ Right before the dead mother’s only, central, unlikely monologue, Cora remembers Addie portentously saying of Jewel that “He is my cross and he will be my salvation. He will save me from the water and from the fire” (“Cora,” 97).

time the moonlight has been vanquished” (“Darl,” 127). The image of the moonlight’s defeat, as it is obliterated by the blazing barn, is a forceful one, which sadly foreshadows Darl’s own defeat. Finally, in the next chapter, the fire is the occasion for Vardaman to display his own elemental poetry, which is particularly moving for the immoderate devotee of Benjy Compson that I cannot help being: “The barn was still red, but it wasn’t a barn now. It was sunk down, and the red went swirling up. The barn went swirling up in little red pieces, against the sky and the stars so that the stars moved backward” (“Vardaman,” 130). As in the case of the idiot narrator in *The Sound and the Fury*, the child narrator refers to phenomena he does not quite understand through simple periphrases making repeated use of things or sensations he *is* familiar with: in this case, the barn, associated with the color red. The simple syntactic shift from affirmation to negation allows the reader to take stock of the extent of the damage. The form “swirling up” echoes the earlier image of raining sparks by inverting the movement: the flames first rained down on the barn; now the barn, which can no longer be identified as a barn, is fragmented into “little red pieces” that “swirl up” and make the actual stars recede before this astounding cloud of shining red pieces. At the end of his monologue, Vardaman observes, both perplexed and moved in a way he cannot explain, “The barn is still red. It used to be redder than this. Then it went swirling, making the stars run backward without falling. It hurt my heart like the train did” (“Vardaman,” 130).

I would like to conclude with the evocation of a casual remark by Tull, which occurs halfway through the novel: “Just going to town. Bent on it. They would risk the fire and the earth and the water and all just to eat a sack of bananas” (“Tull,” 81). This quote struck me as I was rereading *As I Lay Dying* through the lens of the four natural elements; indeed, Tull volunteers another summary of the plot, focusing on the Bundrens’ unflagging determination to fulfill Anse’s promise to Addie though the great forces of nature seem to be equally “bent” to impede their progress. The first conclusion I’d like to draw is that, though the road was long and their journey tumultuous, the Bundrens made it; they vanquished the elements and succeeded in giving Addie to “the earth

again” (“Peabody,” 27), allowing her to “lie in the same earth with”²⁵ her people, in the quietness she longed for. However, there are several reasons why Tull’s remark is strange: first, his use of the past auxiliary *would* imbues his statement with an unlikely proleptic dimension. How does he know? What shall we make of the fact he equals the triple risk the Bundrens take—fire, earth, water: in passing, his enumeration does not respect the sequence of events—with “a sack of a bananas”? Anticipating the unlikely denouement of the novel, shouldn’t this quote be interpreted as a rather unexpected authorial remark in the voice of a secondary character? That Darl sometimes conveys Faulkner’s *Grundsprache* has been noted; but that Tull should do so, highlighting the absurdity of it all, is much more surprising.

Without entering the details of eating bananas at the end of the road or welcoming “too soon, too soon” (“Dewey Dell,” 69), way too soon the “duckshaped” (“Cash,” 149) new Mrs. Bundren, the evocation of Addie’s disposal into “the ultimate earth” (“Darl,” 29) is unlikely enough to make a final note of it. Indeed, as the novel draws to a close, the drama and pathos likely to be associated with a mother’s burial are replaced with mundane remarks about how to dig “a hole in the ground,” “a damn hole in the ground” (“Darl,” 132) and about “forget[ting] our spade, too” (“Cash,” 135).²⁶ Just as the novel’s title takes the form of an unattached subordinate clause, the evocation of Addie’s long-delayed burial is eventually dismissed in an adverbial clause, whose purpose is actually to evoke the violence of Dewey Dell and Jewel’s response as Darl is being taken away to Jackson: “*But when* we got it filled and covered and drove out the gate and turned into the lane where them fellows was waiting, when they come out and come on him and he jerked back, it was Dewey Dell that was on him before even Jewel could get at him” (“Cash,” 137; my emphasis). The indefinite object pronoun *it*, which has long been used to refer to the unnamable corpse of the mother, now reappears to designate the hole into which “the handful of rotten bones” (“Darl,” 28) Addie has long started to turn into are at long last abandoned.

²⁵ This expression is Cora’s, though she uses in a way that confirms her total miscomprehension of Addie: “Refusing to let her lie in the same earth with those Bundrens” (“Cora,” 23).

²⁶ This offhand comment suggests that there are a number of things the Bundrens might have forgotten to take along with them, do or feel for that matter.

And so *it* stops smelling bad; and so Addie can return to her Anse-less prior self, transforming back into dust and mixing with the earth.²⁷ Then the Bundrens can start out again, and life can go on.

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²⁷ See *Ecclesiastes* 3:20: "all come from dust, and to dust all return."

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ANNEX

Edwin Arlington Robinson's "The House on the Hill" (1894)

They are all gone away,
The House is shut and still,
There is nothing more to say.

Through broken walls and gray
The winds blow bleak and shrill:
They are all gone away.

Nor is there one to-day
To speak them good or ill:
There is nothing more to say.

Why is it then we stray
Around that sunken sill?
They are all gone away,

And our poor fancy-play
For them is wasted skill:
There is nothing more to say.

There is ruin and decay
In the House on the Hill:

They are all gone away,
There is nothing more to say.

