'JUST A SHAPE TO FILL A LACK'
RECEPTACLES IN FAULKNER'S AS I LAY DYING

It is not surprising that a large part of the imagery in *As I Lay Dying* should find its best expression in the monologue of Addie Bundren, the character around whom all other characters revolve in the novel. This is certainly true for the kind of imagery that I would like to look into in this paper and that I have called for want of a better word 'receptacles', meaning things that contain other things, empty shapes that get filled. The most obvious example is of course the coffin which Cash builds for his mother and which becomes the central preoccupation of all characters after Addie's death.

But let us first turn to Addie's monologue in which this kind of imagery both originates and resolves itself. Speaking of her life with Anse, she says:

He had a word, too. Love, he called it. But I had been used to words for a long time. I knew that that word was like the others, just a shape to fill a lack, that when the right time came you wouldn't need a word for that any more than for pride or fear (136 my italics)\(^1\)

And a little later, still about Anse, after Darl's birth:

I would think Anse. Why Anse? Why are you Anse? I would think about his name until after a while I could see the word as a shape, a vessel, and I would watch him liquefy and flow into it like cold molasses flowing out of the darkness into the vessel until the jar stood full and motionless a significant shape profoundly without life like an empty door frame (137)

So Addie sees reality as a slow-moving continuum ('cold molasses') which fills with meaning the words man has invented to describe it. But these words have absolutely no significance by themselves. You use them for want of something better. Therefore, the reality of a person's existence cannot be truly encompassed by these words. For instance, Addie knows perfectly well that she is 'sinning' with Whitfield. That is, sin is the word that people use to pigeonhole, as it were, what to her is only the fulfilment of her nature. She is perfectly aware of the discrepancy between her reality and the words used to describe it. I would think of the sin as garments which we would remove in order to shape and coerce the terrible blood to the forlorn echo of the dead word high in the air (139, my italics). Therefore, her whole life has been spent in that uncomfortable area that cannot be described appropriately by words. Her life has been a long struggle for the recognition of her identity beyond words such as 'mother' and 'wife' (in this respect, remember her discussion with Cora Tull about her not being a good mother). She had refused to see her life limited by these words precisely because they assign very limiting roles to her

\(^1\) All references to *As I Lay Dying*, Penguin Modern Classics, Harmondsworth, 1973
Ironically, she can only achieve this identity in death. If she refuses the value of words, of rituals, of empty shapes, as they apply to her existence, she is also quite conscious of the power they have over other people. So, to assert herself, she uses her own coffin as the instrument of her revenge. That is why she is not at all disturbed by the sound of the saw just beneath the window of the room in which she is dying. Indeed, Darl perceives this right from the start: ‘Addie Bundren could not want a better box to lie in. It will give her confidence and comfort.’ (8) It is absolutely appropriate for Cash to be the builder of the coffin, because he too distrusts words at the end of the book, he is the only one who ponders on the right society has to declare a man insane. He is the real professional who never uses one word too many.) Even before dying, Addie’s body has also become an empty frame, her face is ‘like a casting of fading bronze upon the pillow’ (43) She is wholly embodied in the coffin. When it is carried into the house, Darl describes it as follows: ‘It is light, yet they move slowly, empty. Yet they carry it carefully, lifeless, yet they move with hushed precautionary words to one another, speaking of it as though, complete, it now slumbered lightly alive, waiting to come awake.’ (64) And indeed, this empty receptacle, once Addie’s body is inside it, seems to acquire a life of its own. When the coffin is taken out of the house.

For an instant it resists as though volitional as though within it her pole-thin body Chung furiously even though dead to a sort of modesty as she would have tried to conceal a soiled garment that she could not prevent her body soiling. Then it breaks free rising suddenly as though the embrace of her body had added buoyancy to the planks or as though, seeing that the garment was about to be torn from her she rushes suddenly after it in a passionate reversal that flouts its own desire and need. (77)

Addie’s fundamental energies, her will to live are being transferred from the body to the coffin. It now becomes the place where all the contradictions of Addie’s life are staged. The coffin becomes the necessary ‘garment’ that conceals, but as the same time that defines the contents. It cannot quite contain Addie’s ‘desire and need’ to lead a natural life. The garment is ‘soiled’. It is as though the coffin revealed all that she has tried to keep secret all her life. In a way, the coffin is much more alive than she has ever been allowed to be.

Vardaman, who identifies his mother with the fish he has caught, is not surprised when the coffin escapes the grip of his brother while crossing the river. He tells Darl ‘You know she is a fish but you let her go away.’ (120) And throughout the episode, the members of the family never refer to the coffin as ‘it’, but as ‘her’.

Even in her coffin Addie keeps her roles of wife and mother. She wears her wedding-dress, but note the nice irony, she is put ‘reversed’, ‘head to foot’ (70) just as she has deliberately reversed the significance of the coffin from a symbol of death to the instrument of the assertion of her identity (this strange position is also clearly symbolical of the uncomfortableness of her own life). Cash, her first child, the one she has most loved when she was carrying him, is put to rest on the coffin, as a child would be soothed in his mother’s lap.

The problem of identity and of the distinction between appearance and reality is central in *As I Lay Dying* and the various shades of attitudes are re-
presented in the different characters I have already mentioned the no-nonsense approach of Cash who is completely immersed in reality. The one character to whom the problem is most painful is, of course, Darl. He too is able to see beyond appearances. When he was a child, he used to ‘get up [when everyone was asleep] and go back to the [cedar] bucket [which holds drinking water]. It would be black, the shelf black, the still surface of the water a round orifice in nothingness, where before I stirred it awake with the dipper I could see maybe a star or two in the bucket, and maybe in the dipper a star or two before I drank’ (12). This experience is very close to the function Addie assigns to words reality is frozen for a moment, indeed the bucket even seems to hold the whole cosmos for a few seconds and this seems to give Darl some sense of comfort in front of an incomprehensible world. Contrary to Addie who seems to have been able to achieve, however painfully, a compromise between her attitude and her individual assertion, Darl’s faculty of perceiving and piercing through appearances is his mental undoing. For instance, he cannot reconcile the image of his perfect mother with her adultery. ‘And that may have been when I first found it out, that Addie Bundren should be hiding anything she did, who had tried to teach us that decent was such that, in a world where it was, nothing else could be very bad or very important, not even poverty. And at times when I went in to go to bed she would be sitting in the dark by Jewel where he was asleep. And I knew that she was hating herself for that decent and hating Jewel because she had to love him so that she had to act the decent’ (101).

But Addie still managed to live, because through that deceit, she could satisfy her natural instincts, whereas Darl is too busy thinking and trying to analyse the deceit. He does not physically attend his mother’s death, but it is he who describes it. He can see through the walls of the barn in which he is staying, but as the same time this launches him on a long meditation about being and non-being, in which he peels off several external layers of reality (the walls of the barn, the wagon, and finally the envelope of the body to discover the ‘I’).

In a strange room you must empty yourself for sleep. And before you are emptied for sleep, what are you? And when you are emptied for sleep, you are not. And when you are filled with sleep, you never were. I don’t know what I am. I don’t know if I am or not. Jewel knows he is, because he does not know that he does not know whether he is or not. He cannot empty himself for sleep because he is not what he is and he is what he is not. 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 the wagon though it does, since only the wind and the rain shape it only to Jewel and me, that are not asleep. And since sleep is is-not and rain and wind are 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 (65)²

² Quentin Compson, in *The Sound and the Fury*, recollects an experience that is quite similar to Darl’s. As he is falling asleep, his perception of himself and his life becomes blurred to the point where, as Darl, he does not know whether he is alive or not. ‘I seemed to be lying neither asleep nor awake looking down a long corridor of grey half-light where all stable things had become shadowy paradoxical all I had done shadows all I had felt suffered taking visible form antic and perverse mocking without relevance inherent themselves with the denial of the significance they should have affirmed thinking I was I was not who was not was not who’ (*The Sound and the Fury*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1971, p 154)
Ultimately, as I have already said, this superior sanity leads Darl to what is commonly considered as insanity. His position becomes more and more uncomfortable, as the journey progresses to Jefferson. Dewey Dell knows he knows she is pregnant and Jewel knows that Darl knows that Jewel is the product of adultery ("Your mother was a horse, but who was your father, Jewel?" [168]), his attempt to make an end to the whole absurd thing by setting fire to Gillespie's barn, violent and uncontrolled as it is, is one of the rare 'sane' acts in the whole book, but people see it as the act of a demented arsonist. Darl has become totally schizophrenic (his 19th and last monologue is in the third person), but he is also the only character who can perceive the preposterousness of the whole situation — looking at his brothers and sister in the wagon, he asks himself: 'Is that why you are laughing, Darl?' (203) and indeed laughing wildly, he answers 'Yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes' (203) As Cash concludes: 'This world is not his world, this life his life' (208).

Dewey Dell's experience of her own pregnancy leads her to a meditation on being and the individual's place in the world. And again she makes repeated use of images of containers. As they are approaching New Hope, she thinks: 'That's what they mean by the womb of time, the agony and the despair of spreading bones, the hard girdle in which lie the outraged entrails of events' (93). It is appropriate that she should see, under these very circumstances, the world as a womb or a girdle. But she is too dumb to make sense of it: she voices her bewilderment in the following, extremely morbid passage: 'It's like everything in the world for me is inside a tub full of guts, so that you wonder how there can be any room in it for anything else very important. He is a big tub of guts [meaning Doctor Peabody] and I am a little tub of guts and if there is not any room for anything else important in a big tub of guts how can it be room in a little tub of guts?' (49). This induces in her a further meditation very similar to Darl's, but much less articulate.

The air shapes the dead earth in the dead darkness, farther away than seeing shapes the dead earth. It lies dead and warm upon me, touching me naked through my clothes. I said: You don't know what worry is. I don't know what it is. I don't know whether I am worrying or not. Whether I can or not I don't know whether I can cry or not. I don't know whether I have tried to or not. I feel like a wet seed wild in the hot blind earth. (53)

But whereas Darl goes straight from there to insanity, Dewey Dell, whose perceptions are only momentarily heightened by her pregnancy, will make up a whole plan to get rid of her child. The central ploys of this plan are a newspaper package and a basket in which she carries respectively her Sunday clothes so as to look better when she meets the doctor in Jefferson (the importance of appearances again) and Cora Tull's cakes that she sells to buy medicine. Like her mother before her, she too has found a solution of a kind in dissimulation and deceit.

These are two examples of people who can pierce the receptacles that contain experience. But there is a category of people who are content with those empty shapes and do not try to go beyond the surface of the screen of words which, to them, are reality. These people are extremely comfortable in their closed world.
of false values and are the people Addie hates most I mean Cora Tull and Anse Whitfield also belongs to this category his monologue is a great piece of humour and irony on the part of Faulkner (how on earth can Addie have fallen for such a conceited man?)

Cora lives in a world of strong religious beliefs She preaches all the time, using what Addie calls 'high, dead words', like motherhood, honesty, pride, etc., but she is wrong in her judgments most of the time She is unable to see past the screen of words that make up her world As Addie is dying, all she can think of is her eggs and cakes, injecting here and there a few profound-sounding religious pronouncements What matters to her is not the content, but the container as her husband Vernon himself perceives

I could ( ) 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, well-made jars, because it is your milk, sour or not because you would rather have milk that will sour than to have milk that won't because you are a man (108-109)

Anse also belongs to the world of words he uses them when and as they suit his purpose, irrelevant of their real meaning (the way he uses the word 'love' to satisfy his sexual needs), he can talk people into doing things they don't want to do (the way he gets a team of mules from the Snopeses or his new wife at the end of the novel) For most of the novel, these words come out of a toothless mouth, as empty as the words it utters And in the end, his mouth is filled by false teeth, as false as the words he probably used to get himself a new wife

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