Being, Knowing, and Saying in the
"Addie" Section of Faulkner's
As I Lay Dying

Constance Pierce

The "Addie" section of Faulkner's As I Lay Dying is about Being and the non-Being that occurs when people become conscious of being and when words try to give that consciousness shape; that is, in a turn on the Heideggerian vision in which language is the "house of Being," the "saying" that transforms and negates "knowing," which has already transformed and negated the "Being" that spawned it. It is a hard concept to discuss, prone to tautology and qualification ad absurdum, because the philosophical concept on which it rests renders our terminology for describing states of Being and consciousness inaccurate—a condition for which we find consolation only in the organic relationship it bears to the stuff and method of Faulkner's novel itself. The simplest illustration, and even here we are tempted to put most terms in quotation marks, is this: a person's Being, or what Addie seems to be longing for as Being, is what he is before he begins to think about, or objectify, it (Addie Bundren before she is aware of being Addie Bundren).

In this case, Being is an unselfconscious and therefore unfragmented response to the world—perhaps in the direction of what Sartre might call "Being-in-itself." When a person begins to perceive himself as an entity (the Addie who beats students and "takes" Anse) he has already left Being and translated it into thought—a thing of a different nature, which involves re-creating Being as an idea of the "real" self underlying all our social, articulated selves. Hence perceiving kills its catalyst and is in turn killed by the act of naming the perception: Addie
calling the objectified thought of herself “Addie.” Complicating it all is
the argument that what is not perceived is not; thus Being is caught in a
bind. To Be, it must be perceived; to be perceived is not to Be. To turn
around the Cartesian dictum: I think, therefore I am not. Thus there
can be no Being, no subjectivity here. As Nietzsche points out, “The
‘s’ubject’ . . . is something added and invented and projected behind
what there is.”¹ What we end up playing around with—and what Addie
lives—is the world of object only. Yet we define things by confronting
their opposites. As Faulkner says in Absalom, Absalom!, “Virginity must
be destroyed to have existed at all.”² The subject (Being), or the oppo-
site by which Addie defines the object (her conscious life), is a mental
concept (and thus non-Being), a necessarily futile attempt at capturing
the unconscious, attached to nothing real.³ Consequently, for all the
strength of her will (something in the vein of what Sartre calls “Being-
for-itself”), Addie is unable to find in life a state of Being, of wholeness,
of stasis into which she can escape from the victimizing forces of
nature, language, and consciousness and from the fragmented mosaic
of selves that have resulted from her will’s repeatedly having gone up
against these forces. In short, she comes to see that there is no place in
life—indeed no “self” in life—where one can simply Be.

Addie is at the center of As I Lay Dying, and it is in her lone
monologue that we catch the essentials of the problems of being,
knowing, and—particularly—saying: “Words are no good . . . words
don’t ever fit even what they are trying to say at.”⁴ The “say at” contains
a sophisticated perception of the inadequacy of language. Addie knows
we can never hope to create what we “are” (that is, the Being she thinks
we have beneath our social fictions), or even what we think, in words,
the arbitrary symbols conceived by people who have never experienced
the idea or act they are trying to tag; we can only aim in its general
direction, “say at” it. Further, if language is inept and if it is necessary
for thought, then even thought is invalidated. There is no way for
Addie to even trust what she thinks. Perhaps sensing this, she opts for
feeling and doing; for her, for most of her life, these are “knowing.”
Chasm between being and knowing aside, she grasps the inevitable gap
between feeling or deed and representation of feeling or deed: “words
go straight up in a thin line . . . and . . . doing goes along the earth,
clinging to it, so that after a while the two lines are too far apart for the
same person to straddle from one to the other” (p. 165).

This realization is welded to the specious dichotomy between being
and death (death here encompassing both perception and language, as
well as physical death) that accounts in part for Addie’s
fragmentation—her loathing of the human world of death-word in which she has to exist (or of consciousness—knowing, saying, aloneness—perhaps close to what Heidegger means by absence) and her longing for a state of unconsciousness (or even pre-consciousness), including all her notions of being and wholeness. She has been wrenched into self-consciousness, at whatever age, by her aloneness (which has forced her to objectify herself in perceiving the wholeness she lacks) and kept there by sexual desire, by duty, by the necessity for words. The pain of conflict between these elements (and the impossibility of merging her life with that of any other human in a bond that has no need of language) sends her through a series of reversals in which she trades one inadequate "answer" to how one is to be and perceive the world for another—violent blood action for motherhood, motherhood for revenge, revenge for control of nature in the guise of acquiescence to nature, and finally actual acquiescence to nature and to death. Her monologue charts a quest for being-as-self and, finally, for salvation from life.

Initially this longing for unconsciousness is a longing for a romantic ideal. Addie believes, when she goes to her spring of water (the Freudian metaphor for the unconscious, appropriately enough) for renewal, that there is a state of being in which thought and, more importantly in her case, feeling can be transferred without corrupt language in order to "violate" human aloneness and create a wholeness apart from the fractured world of the self-conscious. It is an almost idealistic yearning for a child's, or maybe an animal's, uncomplicated vision, a yearning that presupposes a subject which might be able to merge with perception without the dissonant intrusion of objectified self and the language through which we use others and ourselves. But as Heidegger points out, "When we go to the spring ... we are always already going through the word "spring" ... even if we do not speak the word and do not think of anything relative to language." He We are locked in a world of consciousness and language, like it or not. Nonetheless, Addie tries to mitigate this fact. She sees the spring as a refuge from her selfish students and from the lie of words. There she is "quiet," absorbed in her hate, out of language, out of thought. She is her hate; therefore she thinks she is, that she is Being. But it is the hate which has Being; Addie, unperceived by herself, can only be what she calls words: a "vessel" for the emotion. (At best she may have achieved what Sartre calls the "pre-reflective cogito," the implied consciousness of being conscious of an object; in any case the "I" which she would link to Being in some world outside the conscious one is lost to the moment.
It has Being only as object in Addie's retrospection.) In her delusion she has already objectified herself, given herself life.

The greatest irony in the monologue is that Addie goes through countless difficulties trying to give herself life, to connect Being with life, with blood, with doing, when all the while Being, in eluding perception, must necessarily be connected with death. But early on Addie seems to intuit that the state she is seeking cannot really occur in oneself (an idea which she later rejects, and later still reclaims in conceding Being to nature), and she tries to give herself Being in others (not realizing that they also must turn her to object, since they "feel" her through words). Nevertheless, she carries out a series of doomed undertakings in which she tries to use acts to circumvent those words. For instance, she believes that by beating her pupils she can make herself felt in more than a physical way: "we had had to use one another by words like spiders dangling by their mouths from a beam, swinging and twisting and never touching . . . only through the blows of the switch could my blood and their blood flow in one stream" (p. 164). Here "Being" for Addie is merging with someone else without words, giving herself Being in another. The "flowing" is delusion, as she discovers when motherhood gives her a better sham of having connected without language; but beyond this the matters of language and Being are more complex than she thinks—and so is her own relationship to language. Words are her Judas, but they are also her Christ. In fact, the structure of her monologue may be seen in light of this paradox. In the first half (before Darl's birth), she fights words; they are the villain that betrays her, the barrier between herself and others, the agent that seals her aloneness. In the second half, when her need for salvation is more desperate, she learns to turn them to her own ends—for revenge and for controlling (or at least trying to control) the power of what has been as persistent an enemy as language: her own biology and her inevitable place in the biological scheme of things.

Addie's feelings toward the sexual force within her are ambivalent. She connects it with the freedom she feels at the spring, Freud's symbol for the womb. (Indeed one could argue that the womb is a place where one might live and Be, since one at least pulsates there in unconsciousness; perhaps to that symbolic end Addie, after her marriage, certainly wants to reclaim her own often-violated womb.) But she fails to note the limitations in the womb/spring early on, just as she erroneously assigns notions of freedom to the natural forces symbolized by the wild geese she hears in the night. For much of her life, she certainly believes sexual merging to be the way toward Being. Here her ideas seem
similar to those we find in the works of D. H. Lawrence, where sex is the loss of a consciousness (a losing of external, will-controlled self) which, for the moment before it is lost to perception and evaporated into the stars, seems to be moving toward something like what Addie means by Being. Lawrence’s characters both revere this experience for its promise of connection and fear it, for they understand that it is a kind of death—an understanding that ultimately holds for Addie. But the initial hints that “living is terrible” which come with pregnancy do not quite take, and Addie continues for a time to pursue the possibility of escaping words and finding Being in the sexual union, until she discovers (after her affair with Whitfield) that Being cannot be grasped any more firmly in sex than in any other life context. If one has Being in the loss of consciousness of sex, it is not perceived and thus is not. One comes back into consciousness leaving whatever “Being” that may have occurred in the past tense. All sex comes to, Addie finally learns, is the had-been-without-having-been of pregnancy. Thus the sexual force the geese represent is neither liberating (unless one sees death as freedom, as Addie eventually does) nor even sufficient to ease her aloneness; in fact, it becomes her warden. Even so, the geese, with their animal unconsciousness, continue to be a powerful symbol for her. Beyond appealing to her initial rapport with nature and to her sexual urges, they, flying high in the night sky, signify her later desire not to Be, to be “earth-free”—a longing common to many of Faulkner’s characters (Januarius Jones, Bayard Sartoris, Mink Snopes, even Darl). She wishes to escape the complications of her life, and ultimately the most oppressive of these is her own burdensome link with the onrushing processes of nature, not the failure of language that dominates the first half of her monologue.

But in “taking” Anse in response to the call of the wild geese, Addie is hoping to find a medium for touching that evades “saying,” and she is seeking Being in “doing,” as she had with her pupils. She is not yet aware that to Be is not to Be, that if one is going to live in the world, there “is” only consciousness, object, aloneness, fragmentation—at best, representation of Being. Her marriage is one more doomed experiment. She has wanted her consciousness raped, destroyed, and out of that rape (the dominion of the “terrible blood” of biological determinism, the sinister nature of which she has not yet recognized) merge in wholeness with Anse. But Anse, for all his seeming unconsciousness, cannot operate outside of language. His “love” is only the word—as Addie sees it, “just a shape to fill a lack” (p. 164). This discovery and Cash’s birth begin her loss of romantic ideals.
Finding herself pregnant, she realizes that "living was terrible"; yet she clings to those die-hard ideals in believing "this was the answer" (p. 163), that some sort of wholeness (in this case, motherhood) is possible. This "insight" is an ironic prefiguration of the knowledge that will soon shatter her idealism more or less completely: that life is terrible in that it is fundamentally biology, with no concern for our aloneness or anything else but keeping the pulse of nature going; and motherhood is the answer to that pulse. We must replace, the species must go on. But at the moment of Cash's birth, language is still her nemesis. In fact, the birth crystallizes this for her: "That was when I learned that words are no good. . . . I knew that it had been, not that they [her pupils] had dirty noses, but that we had had to use one another by words like spiders . . ." (pp. 163–64). In giving birth, she has actually brought something into "Being" (as she perceives it) and mocked the pose of words. But this "Being" is not her own, and she fools herself in thinking that her "aloneness had been violated and then made whole again by the violation" (p. 164). (One gathers that she means her loneliness had been violated and her control, integrity, autonomy made whole.) Unable to help comparing the mutual, wordless "love" she shares with Cash to Anse's dead word ("Cash did not need to say it to me nor I to him" [p. 164]), she believes this wholeness inviolable: "time, Anse, love, what you will, outside the circle" (p. 164). She believes she has exorcised the tyranny of language, claimed Being at last.

But Addie is always finding her answer only to lose it. The book is full of turning points for her (marriage, Cash's birth, Whitfield) and Darl's conception is a crucial one. The integrity of her "circle" is broken by Anse and the empty word of love, but moreover, by "words older than Anse or love" (p. 164)—the biological rhythms of nature. Darl is not only a claim on her attentions that shatters her wholeness with Cash, but proof that her body works in league with some force outside herself, independent of her will. And worse, she begins to suspect that this force may well be the unconscious state of Being she has been seeking. All this calls up a major question of identity—an intensifying of the fragmentation she has always felt. She begins to suspect that her Being races along in its own way, that it is available to "her" (as a conscious entity) only as object. Becoming it means losing what she has come to see as herself. In short, if she wants to know, she cannot Be. Her choices are terrifying: an "identity" falsified by language and consciousness to the point where it is unfathomable, or no identity at all. If she is to Be (that is, not Be) she will have to be her death-bound biology, earth-mother in the most horrifying way, as indeed she has
always been since her father "planted" her. She must realize all this, for she begins to make her funeral arrangements; yet her will does not let her relinquish her idea of Being either easily or graciously, and she seeks revenge on the order of things and a measure of control. She grasps now that language is the lesser enemy, that words, though dead, are "quick and harmless," that it is the "doing," the living in nature, that is terrible because it makes one feel and thus believe in its significance, then proves itself an impostor, a false guide toward a Being. She resolves to use language to kill (i.e., control) Anse, the symbol of her betrayal. Her romanticism is dying, being replaced by an even intenser will (born of her sense of threat) to bring the elements of her life under her dominion. She revenges herself on Anse by securing his word that he will bury her in Jefferson, knowing that he is bound to the word. Further, she "kills" him by merging him with the word for himself. Lying in bed hearing the inevitable life/death rhythms of land "that was now [her] blood and flesh" in a much more insidious way than she yet understands, she thinks

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; and then I would find that I had forgotten the name of the jar. (p. 165)

The repetition negates the person to whom the name is attached and solidifies the name as reality. Through this incantation, Addie is able to cancel all: Anse, his shape in her vaginal space where the terrible doing has occurred, even the children ("I would think Cash and Darl that way until their names would die and solidify into a shape then fade away" [p. 165]). She at once kills them and frees them metaphorically to Be and not to Be, for her fantasy "Being could be claimed only in that darkness we flow out of, only in that empty door frame. In a sense she is taking from Anse what he would not give her: "not-Anse" (p. 166). Her resentment lies not only in his empty "love" and his intrusion of Darl in her life, but in what she sees as his betrayal of himself in never grasping the difference between a concept of Being and his dead name, of his only being his name, of his using himself "with a word" (p. 166). And her most intense revenge will come from Anse's not knowing that she is taking revenge: "He did not know that he was dead" (p. 165). She has her revenge in watching Anse foolishly "living" in the word that has annihilated him. (In fact, Anse never suspects there
might be a reality outside the word; he always operates on the principle that saying something makes it so, while those around him shake their heads in wonder.) Addie seals the distance between them ("I would be I; I would let him be the shape and echo of his word" [p. 166]) as though she'd never longed to bridge it, then moves on to other things.

In "killing" Anse, it is as though Addie has obliterated her past and all her suspicions about the nature of Being. She is ready to seek all over again, more desperately than ever, some reality in sexual merging, in the "terrible doing" that is as close to Being as she is going to be able to come in life. It is a last-ditch effort to find some contradiction of what she suspects: that we have no underlying Being, that there is nothing to us but the fictions we create, through language, about our "selves" and our actions. In effect, she is trying to contradict Nietzsche's observation that "both the deed and the doer are fictions." As Addie must see it now, her error was not in choosing sex, but in choosing Anse and a world bound by language and its falseness. Her only hope is to try to acquiesce to the biological force, to her "duty to the alive" (p. 166). But duty ties her to consciousness and, further, she gives only a semblance of acquiescence, for her will is too strong for her to abdicate control. With her past mistakes clearly in mind, she wants to cut herself off from anything that may get in the way of her aim: society, culture, language, religion—whatever could dissipate the wholeness of what she thinks to be her acquiescence. Thus she chooses an adulterous relationship with a minister, throwing herself beyond redemption for one last duel with the word—in this case, The Word, in its highest morbidity.

Despite what she has been shown about the inevitability of fragmentation, she seeks a perverse wholeness in committing adultery with a man of God: "the sin the more utter and terrible since he was the instrument ordained by God who created the sin, to sanctify that sin He had created" (p. 166). Sin, for Addie, is the falseness, "the clothes we both wore in the world's face, of the circumspection necessary because he was he and I was I" (p. 166). In other words, clothing is comparable to language, a barrier that insures aloneness. Moreover, Addie "would think of the sin as the 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" (p. 167). With the clothes/falseness removed, doing/experience/feeling (which she can't fully perceive as fiction) can replace language; in fact, perhaps Addie is trying to deify the "terrible blood" of sex and life by forcing it "up" to displace the dead word of God by eradicating the Word, which would conflict with the doing,
through "utter and terrible" sin. But beyond this I believe that perhaps unconsciously she wants to bring the terrible blood under her control, to fit it to the shape of the dead word and therefore nullify it as she has nullified Anse. She still does not know intellectually what she knew sensually at the opening of her monologue: that wholeness lies only in the order of things—in nature (with its rotting leaves and new earth [p. 161] containing simultaneously the end and beginning of life) or in the self preordered by the word. Any attempt to create a personal wholeness must necessarily be in conflict with those orders and, ironically, must result in fragmentation.

In any case, she is still onto the scent of wholeness (either through merging or through distancing herself from that which splinters her) and she is lulled for a time by "the dark land talking the voiceless speech" (p. 167) in antidote to the villainous word. Even when Reverend Whitfield no longer comes to her, she is not particularly disturbed, for she is convinced that she has experienced something honest which approached Being and placed her more in (and in control of) the nature she admired as the world antithetical to that of language. She has assumed a completeness in herself here, returned to that state of being made whole, through violation, in her aloneness (which is no longer a fragment of self-and-other wholeness, but a unit itself because of its autonomy). And, obviously, her adultery is a further negation of Anse, the emasculate "steer" (p. 69), the instrument of her greatest betrayal, from whom she wants to be further removed and remade a virgin. She no longer has sex with him and it is "as though nothing else had ever been. My children were of me alone, of the wild blood boiling along the earth, of me and of all that lived; of none and of all" (p. 167). There is the semblance of some kind of transcendental unity here in Addie's latest delusion of wholeness that supposedly wipes aside Anse, Whitfield, words, all, leaving an uncorrupted self. As if in a self-satisfied dream, she feels she has merged with nature in a facile one-is-all, all-is-one embrace, which is laughable in light of her willful methodology. And, predictably, her equilibrium is again reversed: "Then I found that I had Jewel. When I waked to remember to discover it, he was two months gone" (p. 167).

Not only has her newest "circle" been broken, but Addie, who has so desperately wanted life to be more than it can possibly be, has fooled herself for the last time. She who has tried so diligently to escape falseness is, with the need to cover Jewel's parentage, locked forever into a lie, a life that is as dishonest as all Anse's words; she has once again been done in by the very nature she thought would save her. The
“truth” that has been pursuing her through all her pathetic delusions is finally clear. She knows “at last what [her father] meant” by “the reason for living is getting ready to stay dead” (p. 167): that life is meaningless, since we can never get a hold on it; that nature, which is all that “is” outside thought and language, is a mechanism that controls us from inside and, in its implications of death, claims Being as its own; that there is no possibility of wholeness outside nature and inside consciousness; that death—the only place the for-itself can become in-itself, as Sartre notes—and the Absence in life are the realities; that unconsciousness is our inevitable goal, chosen or not.

She is defeated, ready finally to acquiesce all—even the control—to the natural force that will lead her to death, the only wholeness possible. “Then there was only the milk, warm and calm, and I lying calm in the slow silence, getting ready to clean my house” (p. 168). She relinquishes her notion of “being” anything more than a pulse in nature. She is out of the wild blood of sex and will, away from its sounds that have been every bit as confining and duplicitous as the human word. The milk, proof of nature’s indomitable force, flows out of her as calmly as sap deserting a tree, draining her of all involvement with life save the inescapable duty that has always bound her: duty to not ask for “not-Anse” (both to let Anse use himself with a word and to grant him access to her bed); duty to the wild blood of what she saw as her own personal desires, but which turned out to be those of nature; duty to “clean her house” before she can die. She cleans house and makes things “right” the way women have traditionally: through loveless sex, the harshest atonement, guaranteed to tame and nullify any blood, however wild: “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” (p. 168).

The end of Addie’s monologue refocuses on sin and salvation: “one day I was talking to Cora. She prayed for me because she believed I was blind to sin, wanting me to kneel and pray too, because people to whom sin is just a matter of words, to them salvation is just words too” (p. 168). Addie’s sin and salvation have been tangled in the blood and flesh of doing. Her “sin” is in never having been able to Be in life—more a sin of the nature of things than her own—and in the ruthlessness of her failed attempts. No word could ever absolve her from that, only the flesh into which her wild blood finally boiled away. Jewel, the child whose father will never “plant” a disturbing other, is her pearl of great price, the salvation for which she sacrificed all—her marriage, her
other children, her hold on life. He is the result of her greatest struggle with nature and dead words; he is evidence of the lengths to which she was willing to push her quest for self. In that sense, he represents her grandest moment, as well as grandest failure. He is her salvation from life, for his birth releases her from the world of word and will; and he is her salvation from sin in that he embodies the unity his parents were seeking and brings Addie to death, and Being, at last. Thus Jewel will, as she proclaims, save her from the water and the fire (p. 160), both the literal flood and Darl’s barn burning and the figurative, inevitable “sin” we all commit in the dishonesty and helplessness of our living in a world of language and biology.

Heidegger’s claim in *Identity and Difference* that man is essentially the relationship of responding to Being seems applicable here, even though Addie’s initial concept of Being could not include Heidegger’s notion that the response must be filtered through language, the “house of Being,” that allows for thought, perception, and perspective. Addie has rejected such ideas, and until Jewel’s birth her response to the mythological “self” of her world picture is deluded and chaotic. This is mostly because her “knowing” (as well as her biology) has been determined by both the personal and collective past, by what Nietzsche might have seen as “a groping on the basis of previous ‘inner experiences,’ i.e., of memory . . . [which] also maintains the habit of old interpretations, i.e., of erroneous causality—so that the ‘inner experience’ has to contain within it the consequences of all previous false causal fictions.” All this would do a great deal to explain Addie’s many false “answers” and the general muddle of her life. But Addie’s dilemma, however muddled, is tremendously appealing, since self is such a tenuous identity for us all and since our egotism (grounded or not) demands that we rage against determinism, whether linguistic or biological. We have such a burning need to Be, to be concrete; but all Addie—any of us—can Be, given the world view of *As I Lay Dying*, is a miastic process of self-consciousness, or consciousness of what we think is self. Our stasis is lost in an imperceptible split second when perception traverses the place where Being, could it Be, might lie.

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3 This is superficially the opposite of what Sartre prescribes in *Being and Nothingness*, where Nothingness (which is not) gets its reality from Being; but it all comes to the same thing (nor no-thing) in the end.
5 Translated from *Holzwege* (Frankfurt am Maine: Vittorio Klostermann, 1963), p. 286.
7 The passage is open to a number of interpretations. It is even possible that Addie has some latent notion that she can merge what the “blood” represents with language to revitalize language, the human quality we have (mistakenly?) revered for setting us somewhat outside Darwin’s deterministic natural order, the place where biology and culture might have a chance of meeting.
8 Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, p. 266.