

The Spectral Road: Metaphors of Transference in Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*

PATRICK O'DONNELL

WILLIAM FAULKNER'S intense concern with both the social and ontological implications of language is nowhere more evident than in *As I Lay Dying*. Perhaps, too, it is in this work that Faulkner is most aware of both the connection between language and metaphysics, and the difficulty involved in using language to observe its own operation as the vehicle for expression of being, word, or act.¹ In one sense, the novel creates a "hermeneutic circle," wherein the attempt to interpret its world is circumscribed by the means for understanding it—i.e., language. In just this way, the significance of the Bundrens' journey is only revealed within the confines of the journey itself as it moves haltingly toward Addie's burial. The irony of this situation informs everything about the novel, from its narrative structure, to its use of "voice," to what I am most concerned with here, its metaphoricity²—

¹ James Guetti, in *The Limits of Metaphor: A Study of Melville, Conrad, and Faulkner* (Ithaca, 1967), discusses the difficult relationship between language and meaning in Faulkner's work, particularly in *Absalom, Absalom!*, and the failure of Faulkner's metaphors to embody the "ineffable." Guetti notes, in Faulkner's view, "the greatest success of language itself is to create a potential meaning that must remain unrealized, a tension between order and disorder that cannot be resolved but only repeated, and repeated. Language may be defined in this way, however, only because no meaning is ever achieved, because no metaphor is ever constructed" (p. 138). My view of language and metaphor in Faulkner is informed by Guetti's, but diverges from his position. While I, too, see the relation between language and meaning as problematic, I regard the metaphors in Faulkner's language as "constructed" and suggestive of meaning. But these metaphoric constructions shift and break as they yield significance and simultaneously deny the possibility of transference.

² For the purposes of this essay, I use the word "metaphor" to stand for any trope of comparison. I take my lead from several important theoreticians of metaphor who are concerned not so much with its historically precise rhetorical function as with, Paul de Man notes, its function as a mental and verbal structure that mimes the activity of the "mind" or "subject," that activity being "the central metaphor, the

by which I mean its exhibition of metaphor on the surface as, traditionally, a rhetorical device and, more deeply, as an epistemological conveyance of the novel's concern with the "meaning of meaning."³

As I Lay Dying is clearly one of Faulkner's most heavily metaphorical fictions. For one critic of Faulkner's artistic evolution, the binding power of metaphors in the novel, which creates coherence between disparate elements of the world, "can establish in consciousness a relationship of virtual presence between subject and environment expressed perfectly in language."⁴ That is, the novel's metaphors form a network of correspondences and cross-references that gives the novel the texture of a systematic world, a world wherein journeys—like metaphorical language—lead toward certain ultimacies of desire, purpose, and expression. However, at the same time, the fractured metaphorical links of the novel compel one to question the validity and strength of this "virtual presence"—created by the binding power of the metaphors.

In the novel, Faulkner relies on the ambivalence of metaphor, the progression toward ultimacy and meaning, projected in the Bundrens' journey, moves forward by contraries. The fading, circuitous roads of the novel can be seen as metaphors for the act of metaphor in which meaning is borne or transferred from one point to another,

metaphor of metaphors." See de Man, "The Epistemology of Metaphor," in Sheldon Sacks, ed., *On Metaphor* (Chicago, 1978), p. 23.

³ See Stephen M. Ross, "'Voice' in Narrative Texts: The Example of *As I Lay Dying*," *PMLA* 94 (1979): 300-310, for a discussion of how Faulkner's presentation of "textual voice" in the novel complicates conventional notions of mimesis, language, and fiction, to the extent that what the novel "signifies" is the "problematical status of verbal representation in general and of mimetic voice in particular" (p. 305). André Bleikasten, in *Faulkner's "As I Lay Dying"* (Bloomington, 1973), comments on the spiral structure of the novel which simultaneously is centrifugal and centripetal, a journey fixed around a central event, yet with its discussions and interruptions, always moving away from the event (p. 47). Bleikasten's understanding of the novel's structural paradoxes parallels my comprehension of the shifting, divergent metaphorical movements of the novel. Arthur F. Kinney, in *Faulkner's Narrative Poetics: Style as Vision* (Amherst, 1978), extends this perception to include all of Faulkner's fiction as structurally dichotomous and ironic: "[the novels] remain mysterious, open, suspended in final significance . . . their concentric circles of meaning take us ever outward from the core event of the book" (p. 34). In *The Novels of William Faulkner* (Baton Rouge, 1964), Olga Vickery also notes the dual structure of the novel, each episode progressing "linearly" toward Addie's burial while referring "centrifugally" to the relationships between Addie (as the hub or center of the novel) and the speaker involved (p. 55). Vickery sees the double structure as complementary, while Bleikasten and Kinney see it as ironic and paradoxical. If trope echoes structure, then my assessment of the novel's de-centering metaphors is in agreement with Kinney's and Bleikasten's structural analyses.

⁴ Gary Lee Stonum, *Faulkner's Career: An Internal Literary History* (Ithaca, 1979), p. 112.

they suggest that the unfolding significance of the journey turns upon itself and falls into question, making the outcome of the journey ironic. Similarly, the novel's many vessels and containers can stand for the idea of metaphor as a significant shape embodying meaning. However, the shapes, frames, and containers of *As I Lay Dying* seem to form themselves around a lack, absence, nothingness, as if the transcendent realm of significances that narrates a world of purposeful actions had disappeared. The ironic and complex metaphorical motions of the novel define its subject as a reflection upon the meaning of both funereal and metaphorical journeys. My intention here is to test the metaphorical ambivalences of *As I Lay Dying*. In so doing, I suggest that Faulkner, by means of the metaphors he creates, questions the tenuous connection between fictional language and the apparent "world" to which it refers, or between the unfolding of a comic journey and the journey's end.

Traditionally, metaphor has been viewed as a trope of resemblance. According to Paul Ricoeur, "the dynamic of metaphor [rests] on the perception of resemblance."⁵ The use of metaphor creates identity and cohesion, so that "the splitting of meaning" that historically occurs when language evolves from its simple, concrete roots and lends itself to abstraction, returns, through metaphor, to "the original unity" of language and world.⁶ Metaphor's ability to connect the concrete and the abstract, to create analogy, even to structure discourse, confers upon it this effective power of "binding" and establishing coherences, identities, and resemblances. At the same time, the use of metaphor involves "the apprehension of an identity within the difference between two terms."⁷ The act of metaphor in the oldest sense, as a "transfer" of meaning or quality between one term and another, designates the inherent differences between the terms, so that identity and difference are named at the same time. One can see the operation of "sameness-within-difference" that metaphor facilitates as fundamental to the structure of any discourse, where meaning arises through the work of resemblance, transference, and differentiation.

This view has been altered somewhat by more recent considerations of metaphor, and it is both observed and challenged by Faulkner's use of metaphor in *As I Lay Dying*. The traditional view as-

⁵ *The Rule of Metaphor: Multidisciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language*, trans. Robert Czerny (Toronto, 1977), p. 24.

⁶ Owen Barfield, *Poetic Diction: A Study in Meaning* (London, 1928), p. 70. Quoted in Susanne K. Langer, *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art* (New York, 1953), p. 238.

⁷ Ricoeur, p. 26.

sumes that metaphor is a stabilizing force in language, that it provides moments of cohesion and concretization in the flow of discourse. But because the relationship between signifier and signified, "vehicle" and "tenor," or image and idea has been so thoroughly questioned by modern rhetorical theory, the totalizing concept of metaphor has come under close scrutiny. In the "post-romantic" consciousness, according to Manfred Frank, we can see "the emancipation of metaphor from the law of analogy" as we discover, increasingly, that what words refer to and signify is more a matter of context and intertext than of their "relationship to some fixed, fundamental" universe of meanings.⁸ As it "transfers" meaning, the act of metaphor can cause us to be conscious of the essentially arbitrary relations metaphors create, as well as of the fragile structures defined by the contexts they build. Metaphors, like the texts in which they appear, present the possibility of "an open-ended, non-centered play of metaphorical textual displacements."⁹ In these considerations, metaphors are not kernels or knots of meaning, rather, they are signs of the *relationality* of language conceived of as a series of semantic shifts. They reveal the unceasing flux of relations which is language struggling and desiring to achieve what it cannot: a perfect cohesion between medium and message such that discourse ceases to question its own ability to mean. Metaphors thus serve a double task. They allow the flow of relations and emerging significances to continue because these assemble identities and differences, however, at the same time, they force the discourse where they appear to question how meaning is conveyed by metaphor, particularly in that literary language where the abundant use of metaphors becomes self-conscious.

The metaphors in *As I Lay Dying* are observed by a reader who is also privy to fifty-nine monologues of fifteen speakers. Within the framework of a completed journey, the varied, repeated metaphors which these speakers provide may represent some "ultimate fusion,"¹⁰ forming a "living network of symbols, a full and vibrant image of the world, an epiphany of reality."¹¹ This fusion can be seen as the result of "a repetition as binding" that will "allow us to grasp the text as a total metaphor."¹² In this view, *As I Lay Dying* can then "mean" it-

⁸ "The Infinite Text," *Glyph* 7 (1980) 95, 93

⁹ Eugenio Donato, "Topographies of Memory," *Sub-stance* 21 (1978) 38

¹⁰ John K. Simon, "The Scene and Imagery of Metamorphosis in *As I Lay Dying*," *Criticism* 7 (1965) 9

¹¹ Bleikasten, p. 43

¹² Peter Brooks, "Freud's Masterplot: Questions of Narrative," *Yale French Studies* 55/56 (1977) 296. It should be noted that in this extraordinary article on narrative operations, Brooks's comments refer generally to narrative, not specifically to Faulk-

self as a metaphor the "total metaphor" of the novel carries us from the tangible events of the journey to the unseen, unspeakable burial of the mother who is the source of life and meaning. The novel becomes a metaphor for death, in which all meaning and motion, all the diverse, metaphor-filled, Addie-filled perceptions of fifteen voices focus around an ultimate, significant act—Addie's burial. The novel thus allows the satisfaction of closure, along with the promise that, despite the inherent ironies of the Bundrens' mental and physical meanderings, meaningful action in this world recurs as a new Mrs. Bundren appears at the end, and a new journey is undertaken.

However, the novel's metaphorical ambivalences, while they partially affirm these critical views of the novel's coherence, also undermine them, suggesting Faulkner is undertaking to try the power and limits of metaphorical language. Addie's and Darl's monologues, in particular, reveal the complexity of these metaphorical trials. The voice of Addie tells us that a word, "love," is "just a shape to fill a lack," a "vessel" or "jar" of "significant shape profoundly without life like an empty door frame"¹³ Though this is the view of only one character, the perception might be extended to all the vessels and shapes of the novels, the rhetorical figures and tropes that promise significance but, in the end, stand empty, void of life and meaning. The journey is completed, Addie is buried, thus, the novel may, at one level, reflect "a triumph of fraternal feeling" as the family joins together in burying Addie.¹⁴ Or it may embody the desire for the merging of "word and act,"¹⁵ as the language through which each Bundren articulates his/her understanding of "mother" or "journey" is finalized and directed toward the completed act of burial. But the disruptive, fragmented tropology of *As I Lay Dying* undermines any unproblematic reading of the novel's drive toward closure as a final, significant act that triumphantly concludes this particular episode of the Bundrens' perambulations in the world and leads to a new journey homeward with the new Mrs. Bundren.

Reading the novel exposes one to a barrage of analogies that asks

ner, and that he sees the "text as total metaphor" as the result of an intricate series of metonymic displacements. The final metaphoric "fusion" of the text is complicated by the metonymic associations and signifying chains which, in Brooks' psychoanalytic view, defer the desire for the "death" of the text and the halting of signification.

¹³ (1930, rpt New York, 1964), pp 164–65. All references are to this edition and will be cited by page in the text.

¹⁴ Irving Howe, *William Faulkner: A Critical Study*, 3d ed (1952, rpt Chicago, 1975), p 189.

¹⁵ Vickery, pp 267–68.

him to undertake a restless search for that never-revealed significance which will "glue" the shifting, dispersed shapes and vessels of metaphor together. What is known in the novel's world is only known because it moves, it slides, motion is life and, as Darl says during the disastrous crossing of the river, where animals and men only occasionally touch bottom, "*it was only by means of that slipping contact that we could tell we were in motion at all*" (140). This traversal literally refers to the act of fording a river, but it also refers, metaphorically, to the act of signification. It is part of a chain of analogies that represent modes of transmission: roads, rivers, coffins, and meaningful gazes. The novel encourages a collective reading of these manifestations of transference, not only as literal vehicles for journeys, but as metaphorical commentaries on linguistic operations. Indeed, all of the novel's metaphors of transference work on these two levels. They define concretely a particular consciousness or mode of perception, specific anxieties about the progress and ends of the journey, memories of Addie, or concretizations of desire. But each metaphor is also a description of its own "metaphoricity," which is its work as a rhetorical, semantic device that conveys meaning, or makes problematic the conveyance of meaning. Darl's image of "slipping contact" suggests that as men ford rivers—by the sliding movement of feet along the river bottom, against the steady, impervious onrush of the current—only so is motion or forward progress known. In essence, motion, certainly the substance of the journey as well as, to some extent, its end, is only made apparent by slippage, counterturn, or movement that calls into question the "reality" of the journey's progress. As "metalinguistic" commentary, the metaphor suggests that the "work" of language is carried forward only through the constant slippage, elision, and erosion of Faulkner's language, or only by the failure of figures in language to stand still for any one thing in particular. For Faulkner, these metaphorical gesticulations define the act of signification, which never arrives at the ultimacy it foreshadows.

One may take the crucial image of the road in the novel as an example of Faulkner's metaphorical technique. The road to Jefferson is a type of vehicle, it is the pathway along which Addie's coffin is transferred from the Bundren farm to the cemetery. From the perspective that the novel's metaphoric network is revelatory of a structured world of significances tending toward some final end, the road would represent a sign of linkage and connection, a metaphor for the act of metaphor as it joins and binds. While moving along the road, the Bundrens successfully pass through the trials of fire and water as they complete their journey, causing the community, represented by

Tull, Samson, and Armstid, to gather around them in mutual effort. The metaphor of the road appears to be an image of coherence as it defines the relation between the inception and *telos* of the journey. Near the end, Darl observes that the road to Jefferson runs parallel to "the massed telephone lines," gives a view of "the clock on the courthouse [that] lifts among the trees" (219), and stops "where the square opens and the monument stands before the courthouse" (221). This road is, again according to Darl, "like a spoke of which Addie Bundren is the rim" (102) — it parallels the conduits of communication (the telephone lines), and it gives a prospect of the orderly progression of time that lends to human experience a meaningful historicity (the courthouse clock). It ends in the public square, a gathering place of the community, in sight of a heroic monument and the courthouse itself, that law-giving edifice that confirms the social order. From their backwoods point of origin the Bundrens have somehow managed to progress along a road to this place where information is exchanged and around which the community molds itself. The purpose of their journey thus becomes part of a celebration of the communal desire to signify and organize itself as an entity that has a meaningful shape within historical and temporal horizons. In this sense, the journey becomes "a parable of creation, the motion of travel implying a process in which the separate inert elements of the world combine into living forms"¹⁶. The journey inspires the creation of the small Bundren community taking on a purposive task, and even the inert Anse is spurred to action in his "courtship" of the second Mrs Bundren. The smaller community is analogous to the community of the world, which exists because it has order, information, and social purpose — it generates significance. The image of the road, here, serves as a metaphorical conveyance that leads to the creation of meaning.

Furthermore, the novel's roads and paths are often envisioned by Darl who, ever concerned about matters of progress and connection, tries to make sense out of the journey. The perceptions of the road which Darl, the predominant speaker of the novel, conveys within his nineteen monologues suggest his concern with connection and completion, and his desire that the journey generate its own significance.¹⁷ But his descriptions of the road are also replete with images of blockage, interruption, erosion, and spectrality, suggesting a more

¹⁶ Richard P. Adams, *Faulkner Myth and Motion* (Princeton, 1968), p. 72.

¹⁷ The number of Darl's parts in *As I Lay Dying* should be compared to those of the other speakers to see how much he dominates the novel. Darl has 19 parts, Vardaman 10 parts, Tull 6 parts, Cash 5 parts, Dewey Dell 4 parts, Cora, Anse 3 parts, Peabody 2 parts, Addie, Jewel, Whitfield, Samson, Armstid, Moseley, MacGowan 1 part each.

crucial, ironic understanding of order and disorder, progress and repetition in the world he inhabits. His negative perceptions agree with Dewey Dell's vision of the road as "empty with waiting" (114) and Anse's judgment that the road in its "horizontal" is a perversion of the earth. In its creation, the road "switched the land around longways" (35) and conveyed to Anse a series of disasters, from the drafting of Darl into the Army to the appearance, at Addie's deathbed, of Peabody, about whose fee Anse is anxious. Darl's conception of the road is essentially in accord with Anse's, who surmises that "the Lord put roads down for traveling. . . . When He aims for something to be always amoving, He makes it longways, like a road or a house or a wagon, but when He aims for it to stay put, He makes it up-and-down ways, like a tree or a man" (34-35). Anse's perception reveals an anxiety about traveling and the road, a well-founded fear that journeys mean constant movement, labor, and uncertainty, and a concurrent desire that things "stay put." Journeys are necessary, even for the lazy Anse or the anxious Darl, but they create a desire for the satisfaction of the journey's sensible completion—a task undertaken and well done, then a lapse back into stasis.

Darl's desire that the journey's end be meaningful is reflected in his first words, which describe the path he and Jewel traverse as they come in from the fields. The path "runs straight as a plumbline, worn smooth by feet and baked brick-hard by July, between the green rows of laid-by cotton, to the cottonhouse in the center of the field, where it runs and circles the cottonhouse at four soft right angles and goes on across the field again, worn so by feet in fading precision" (3). This circuitous passage is filled with metaphoric resonances that echo throughout the novel. To some degree, it inscribes the geometry of *As I Lay Dying*. The path is "straight as a plumbline," the anterior referent an architect's or builder's tool used to determine the straightness of a vertical measurement. The vision of a road running straight to a structure that is the house of the dead (the future repository of the "laid-by" cotton) anticipates several other similar images. Most notably, it parallels the image of the road as a "line" leading straight to the cemetery with Addie's coffin "tied" to one end of it (Darl speaking here of yet another road) similar to the road along which Darl and Jewel travel to haul a load of timber that, in Darl's perception, "vanishes beneath the wagon as though it were a ribbon and the front axle were a spool" (38). It is as if the road, line, or ribbon is taken up in the act of traversal, as it both connects and differentiates object and intention. This movement signifies a transference taking place, and the road is the conduit of that transference.

Another metaphoric parallel to Darl's image of the cottonhouse path occurs in the scene at Tull's ford when the overturned wagon is held fast in the torrent by a rope which Jewel, still standing on the ford (and thus on the old road passing along the river bed), has managed to seize. Tull observes "the rope cutting into the water, and we could feel the weight of the wagon kind of blump and lunge lazy like . . . Like it was a straight iron bar stuck into the bottom and us holding the end of it . . . There was a shoat come by, blowed up like a balloon . . . It bumped against the rope like it was a iron bar and bumped off and went on, and us watching that rope slanting down into the water" (148). Like the path Darl describes, the rope that stays the coffin is a plumbline, a straight extension of the road. It is an iron bar that arises from the chaos of the flooded river and signifies the continuance of the journey, since by it Addie is not allowed to slip away into the flood. The "iron bar" of rope allows for the emergence of discrete objects—the momentary appearance of the shoat out of the undifferentiated mass of water—analogueous to the operation of language as the differentiating function of an otherwise silent, monolithic existence. The current of the river is seen by Darl as "silent, impermanent and profoundly significant, as though just below the surface something huge and alive waked for a moment of long alertness out of and into light slumber again" (134). In opposition to the road, which connects things, the chaotic, flooded river threatens to obliterate the pathways and bridges between points, to destroy the topographical or linguistic networks of correspondence in the world, as it conceals its own monstrous, nihilatory significance. The rope holds back from this ceaseless onrush of "sleeping significance" the significant object of the coffin, it is part of the road that is the linkage which makes possible the subsequent transference of Addie's casket. The metaphor of transference reflected in the "iron bar" of rope is thus opposed to the apocalyptic log that rushes toward the coffin in the river, uncannily phallic, with its "long gout of foam [that] hangs like the beard of an old man or goat" from its end (141), which, as an embodiment of the river's destructive force, threatens the success of the journey. Seemingly, the metaphors of rope and road convey to us the sense that, despite disaster, the journey is progressing slowly, straight as a plumbline, through the river instead of over or around it, toward the completed accomplishment that will confer upon the journey its meaning.

A second look at Darl's conception of the path to the cottonhouse reveals that it "turns and circles the cottonhouse at four soft right angles" and that it is "worn smooth . . . in fading precision." Imme-

diately, the metaphoric significance of the road, previously discussed, is deeply questioned. Like this path, the road that runs straight to Jefferson through the flooded river is, paradoxically, roundabout. When Jewel walks through the windows of the cottonhouse to the other side "with the rigid gravity of a cigar store Indian dressed in patched overalls and endued with life from the hips down" (4), and ignores the circular path that Darl takes, his rigid physicality and Darl's impractical decision to follow the path despite its twistings is underscored. For Darl, the road only leads back upon itself. In addition to the circularity in the "four soft right angles" formed by the path to the cottonhouse, Darl sees it also when he views the road alternately as the spoke of a constantly turning wheel of which Addie is the hub, a ribbon winding back onto a spool, most dramatically a "looping string" that, like time and the river, is a "doubling accretion" (139), a phenomenon that embodies the illusion of progress while it endlessly repeats itself. Like the circling vultures with which Vardaman is obsessed, "ceaselessly interrupting the straight line of the Bundrens' progress," the road acts as "an emblem of the book's structure."¹⁸

To Darl, who is most conscious and conscientious about the journey's progress, the road ultimately leads nowhere in its twisted straightness. Coming into Jefferson, he observes the vultures circling "with an outward semblance of form and purpose, but with no inference of motion, progress or retrograde" (216). From his vantage point sitting backwards on the end of the wagon, Darl notices "the muleboards diminishing, becom[ing] more starkly reaccruent 3 mi. 2 mi." (216), going down a hill into town, he sets a riddle "We descend as the hill commences to rise" (219). The images suggest paradox and repetition. The road does not progress but appears to rise as it falls, the distance to Jefferson diminishes, but Darl notes the backward accretion of mileage designated by the signs leading away from Jefferson. The sense of transference and completion is subverted here in the semantic puzzle of diminishing reaccruence, as it is in the final outcome of the journey. Darl has been too concerned about forward movement. He is obsessed with having to go *somewhere*, designated and specific, despite his insights about the failure of this desire, hence, his despairing act of giving the journey a contrived ending by burning the barn in which Addie's coffin rests. The failure of completion, connection, and signification is represented by his final doomed words "Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes," while the second Mrs. Bun-

¹⁸ Bleikasten, p. 46.

dren appears as merely a substitution for the first, indicating the endlessness of the journey Darl envisions in his madness the figures of a coin and a view in a French spyglass of "a woman and a pig with two backs and no face" (244) The transference of meaning and the act of signification is nullified by these images of perverted and incestuous repetition without difference, as Darl suffers a form of semantic death. The coin has "a face to each backside and a backside to each face" (244), an image wherein obverse and reverse become functions of continual exchange, losing their distinction as the boundaries and markers of significant shapes The spyglass portrayal of bestiality depicts an act that can never, unthinkably, lead to any productive conclusion or issue, the shoat in the flood reappears, not caught up now momentarily by the iron bar of signification, but part of a spectacle "with two backs and no face," lost in an unimaginable merging of identities where there can be no transference of sexual or semantic significance. Thus Darl's road ends in this paradoxical, static, and perverse vision of ceaseless flux and repetition.

The complexities of the road metaphors are deepened by Darl's perception that the path to the cottonhouse is "worn so by feet in fading precision" He observes near the outset of the journey "a white signboard with fading lettering New Hope Church 3 mi. It wheels up like a motionless hand lifted above the profound desolation of the ocean" (102) Tull says of the washed-out bridge near his farm where the Bundrens will ford the river that it was "shaking and swaying under us, going down into the moiling water like it went clean through to the other side of the earth, and the other end coming up outen the water like it wasn't the same bridge a-tall and that them that would walk outen the water on that side must come from the bottom of the earth" (130-31) Both are images of fading and breakage—metaphors in which the power of metaphor to convey meaning becomes inoperative Darl's path is, ironically, a worn-out metaphor The signs along the road direct one down a path "empty with waiting" (according to Dewey Dell) toward a "profound desolation" (according to Darl) as they fade. Tull's metaphoric bridge between shores and points of reference is dysfunctional, whatever follows it tions of baptism and rebirth, as no change in the consciousness of any character results from this immersion Nothing is transferred or transformed as a result of this "crossing." Everything remains altogether different and utterly disconnected, even though the bridge itself is "whole."

In a crucial passage, Darl makes this observation of the "old" road that designates the ford in the river

He [Cash] looks about quietly, at the position of the trees, leaning this way and that, looking back along the floorless road shaped vaguely high in the air by the position of the lopped and felled trees, as if the road too had been soaked free of the 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 [136]

Here, the road has become a "spectral tracing," "floorless," "shaped vaguely," "soaked free of earth," as Darl tries to imagine how it appears where the ford might be. Its position is designated by "lopped and felled trees," the dead markers of a ghostly road, no longer a connecting or binding entity, but a sign of that which has been covered over by the river. Like the other fading metaphors, Darl's spectral road is only an indicator of desolation. It does not act as a conveyance of men or meaning, but only traces out the lost significances that cannot be named and about which men can only sit and tell stories of some mythic "security." Because of these lost significances they may only talk in ancient, worn trivialities. The road signifies its own obliteration as it fades and disappears, as such, it can only be demarcated by fading or dead signs and by the endless movement of the Bundrens' wagon upon its surface. In its own labyrinthine fluidity it winds and rewinds, erodes, and provides only the "slipping contact" which Darl, again, says exists between men and earth as the sign of life, motion, and knowledge. "*I felt the current take us and I knew we were on the ford by that reason, since it was only by means of that slipping contact that we were in motion at all*" (140). Language and metaphysics converge in this complex image, which suggests that the act of analogy, transference, and metaphor—the work of language—is known only by its motion and erosion, which is a kind of failure to mean, to come to a conclusion. In the world of the novel, this entropic notion of metaphor is all that "means," and it seems preferable to the undifferentiated flood of the murderous river or the hell of repetition into which Darl is cast at the end. Put in other terms, Faulkner denies the reader the satisfaction of a cohesive, purposive world at the same time that he celebrates, in an appropriately millennial frame of reference, the ability of existence to speak itself in terms of its arbitrariness, its ceaseless movement *toward* stasis, decomposition, and disconnection. These seem at the root of the differentiating principle that founds his universe. One cannot hope that the road will lead anywhere, one can only see, by its tracing of what it once was (unspeakably whole, rising above the flood) that it still exists as a broken means of transference.

Addie's coffin is transported along this broken road and is seen as an object of mystery and horror to the farmers who observe its passing. The vessel of the coffin contains the concealed Addie, who is the lifeblood of the Bundren family and its motivating force, even in death. The druggist Moseley describes the coffin when it comes into Mottson as "a piece of rotten cheese coming into an ant hill" (193), an image that suggests the grotesque magnetism of the coffin as an entity around which force and power are focused. Conveyed along the road of the novel, the coffin acts as the locus of its plot and purpose. In one sense, it signifies a successful transference, a completion, since it does reach its destination, though it entombs Addie, the source of significance, who is buried only as a result of the scattered, overdetermined desires of her straying family. The coffin would then seem to be the origin of power and revelation. It contains the mystery of death and the enigmas of life, being, and non-being—incarnated in Addie's existence and represented by her monologue on matters of generation, suffering, renewal, and death.

Vardaman bores holes in her coffin with an auger in order to allow whatever living-dying entity he thinks lies within to breathe, and twice opens the windows to the dead Addie's room for the same purpose. His act, which results in the disfigurement of the corpse's face with two holes corresponding to its unseeing eyes, may be viewed as an attempt to reveal the mysteries and auguries the concealed presence in the coffin has to offer. In his imagined reconstruction of the coffin's making, Darl envisions the casket as a completed and perfected composition which holds within its frame a sleeping presence. "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, completed, it now slumbered, lightly alive, waiting to come awake" (75). Even before Addie is in the coffin, Darl suggests that it is the receptacle of some living, significant presence. The language of the passage is similar to that in which Darl conceives of the river as a surface covering something alive but unformed, only known as it "wakes" occasionally and ripples the surface. The coffin seems a significant shape fashioned with "the tedious and minute care of a jeweler" (74), containing some form of "awakeness" which later is snatched from the flow of the river by the care of Jewel's hands. The carefully made artifact of the coffin can be seen as "a product of love, of preserving form, and in its craftsmanship a predication of human dignity."¹⁹ It may contain "the word" or sig-

¹⁹ Calvin Bedient, "Pride and Nakedness: *As I Lay Dying*," *Modern Language Quarterly* 29 (1968) 72

nificance that form defines, only spoken or conceived because of "the spatial form of every narrative structure," without which words and significances would become "impeccable," transformed into "an overflowing river," or lapse into "the dark voicelessness of the land"²⁰ Seen in this manner, the coffin becomes another metaphor of metaphors transferred and composed around a meaningful presence.

In one metaphorical movement, Addie seems to reflect Darl's desire that she be a source of concealed significance. Within the coffin, Addie is veiled so that, as Tull says, "the auger holes in her face wouldn't show" (83) As he struggles with his brothers to move the unbalanced coffin from the house to the wagon, to Darl, the veiled Addie seems alive in death "For an instant it resists, as though volitional, as though within it her pole-thin body clings 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" (91) And, as the inertia is broken and the coffin moves freely, "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" (92) Darl's image of Addie in the coffin is one of secreted knowledge, guilt, and desire, a concealment that reveals the nature of Addie's existence, as if her being-in-the-world was entombed and preserved beneath the surface of the feminine coffin with its "bleeding plank[s]" (62) "bearing on their flanks in smooth undulations the marks of the adze blade" (4). In death, as in life, Addie's presence is concealed, yet the source of revelation. She is the blood and life that generates the Bundren family, the creative principle of house, land, and world, wherein she is the silent, orderly center, depicted in the image of her nursing of Jewel "With Jewel . . . the wild blood boiled away and the sound of it ceased. Then there was only the milk, warm and calm, and I laying calm in the slow silence, getting ready to clean my house" (168).

However, in the continual play of metaphorical possibilities which the novel enacts, the image of the coffin as presence signified often is expunged by its portrayal as "just a shape to fill a lack," a shell surrounding nothingness, like Addie's view of the spoken word. For Cash, who does not dwell upon what lies within it, the coffin is an artistic frame that will outline perfectly the "composition" defined by its borders, just as, in Darl's reconstruction of the scene, a window sill frames the dying Addie's face when she looks out to see Cash making the coffin

²⁰ Paul R. Lilly, Jr., "Caddy and Addie: Speakers of Faulkner's Impeccable Language," *Journal of Narrative Technique* 3 (1973) 80

He looks up at the gaunt face framed by the window in the twilight. It is a composite picture of all time since he was a child. He drops the saw and lifts the board for her to see, watching the window in which the face has not moved. He drops a second plank into position and slants the two of them into their final juxtaposition, gesturing toward the ones yet on the ground, shaping with his empty hands in pantomime the finished box. For a while still she looks down at him from the composite picture, neither with censure nor approbation. Then the face disappears [47]

Addie in the window is a prefiguration of Addie in the coffin, and in this scene of "pantomime" what is notable is the gesturing emphasis put upon the shaping, construction, and composition of the coffin, together with the total absence of sound or word. In her monologue, Addie says that a word, Anse's name, is an overflowing vessel or "a significant shape profoundly without life like an empty door frame" (165). The image corresponds to the scene of Addie framed in the window while Cash imagines her "framed" in the uncompleted coffin, suggesting that the act of framing or shaping infers the limits of art and language, and that what is within is "empty," a lack of presence. Faulkner's irony will not even allow for the perfectibility or preservation of the frame surrounding a lack: the coffin is continually defiled in the novel, when Vardaman drills holes in it, when it is scarred and smeared by the ravages of the river, when it is scorched by the fire. It is ever off-balance because Addie has been laid within backwards since her family will not allow her fanned-out dress to be ruined by correct placement within the clock-shaped coffin. As a metaphor of metaphor, the image of the coffin, like that of the road, suggests that no stable significance dwells within or is revealed, that the "frame" of metaphor is all, and that it is imperfect, ever-changing, subject to the erosion time and transference bring.

In a reversal of his own desire and need, Darl intuits that the coffin is made of boards that "look like long smooth tatters torn from the flat darkness and turned backside out" (71). The image is one of inversion as the inside of the coffin becomes the outside in Darl's mind. Its exterior becomes a mere repetition of its interior, like Darl's coin, all surface, endlessly repeating its own inversion. The coffin reveals itself not to be the tabernacle of some sacred or obscene presence, but only the receptacle of "flat darkness." Indeed, *As I Lay Dying* is filled with figures of inversion and repetition associated with the coffin. Darl depicts Cash making the coffin as an obsessed Vulcan at his forge, hewing out the artifact in a sulphurous atmosphere and subject to torrential rains, "the immediate air in reverberant repetition" (72),

so soaked that he looks "as though he had been abruptly turned wrongside out, shirt and all" (73). Peabody notes that the boards of the coffin "look like strips of sulfur" (42), as if it was made out of the annihilating, reverberant atmosphere in which Cash works, while Tull reports the fact that Addie's body is reversed inside. In a double inversion, Darl observes the fire he has started at Gillispie's and the "conical façade" of the barn with its "square orifice of doorway broken only by the square squat shape of the coffin" (209). This portrayal of a frame within a frame is analogous to Addie's image of the empty shape of a doorway. The coffin is set within the "orifice" of the doorway, its square opening like another broken vessel that contains the voiceless absence contained by the coffin. The image echoes Darl's vision of a bucket of water as "a still surface . . . a round orifice in nothingness" (11). Minutes later, Darl sees the doorway disappear in a rain of fire as Jewel attempts to save the coffin. "We watch through the dissolving proscenium of the doorway as Jewel runs crouching to the far end of the coffin and stoops to it. For an instant he looks up and out at us through the rain of burning hay like a portiere of flaming beads" (211). The moment is apocalyptic, and some revelation seems at hand, the language of the passage suggests that Darl, at least, is on the verge of discovering what coffin and mother "mean." The doorway seems like a curtain hiding some mystery, a stage set for revelation, in its burning it is a veil like the one that covers Addie's face. But this metaphorical movement toward disclosure is simultaneously countered by a movement toward dissolution, it is only in the "dissolving proscenium" and in the disappearing, flaming "portiere" that Addie's casket is framed, as if revelation is dissolution—the conveyance of meaning caught up in its own dissolving the instant meaning is produced. The coffin is preserved, but Jewel is forced to bear the marks of this negative revelation. In the metaphoric counter-current that characterizes the tropological discourse of *As I Lay Dying*, like the broken road which is only known by slipping contact or the river which evidences itself through sleeping wakefulness, the coffin reveals its significance within the language of erosion. Appropriately, we are never given an account of Addie's burial, we never see the final concealment or disclosure of that which is signified and has borne significance within the novel. The burial occurs as an ellipsis, the end of transference and motion thus never allowed to take place in the endless metaphoricity which is the novel's deforming force.

These, as well as other metaphors of transference present within *As I Lay Dying*—eyes and vessels, Jewel's horse and Vardaman's fish

—reveal the operation of all tropes which, according to Paul de Man, are “always on the move, more like quicksilver than like flowers or butterflies, which one can at least hope to pin down and insert into a neat taxonomy—but they disappear altogether, or least appear to disappear.”²¹ In the novel, Faulkner’s effort is to create an intricate metaphorical labyrinth of rhetorical relations that always point to their own relationality. This shifting, fluid linguistic network expresses both the desire to signify the depths and heights of some transcendent value or meaning and the doubt that it can do so. The tropology of the novel, pervasively self-reflexive as it dwells upon the journey of words and beings to meaningful ends, purports that language denies the possibility of this ultimate significance while ever working *toward* signification. It is like the words that Addie says are “just gaps in other people’s lacks, coming down like the cries of the geese out of the wild darkness in the old terrible nights” (166). In her image, language is gap-filled, composed of disconnected voicings and evanescent cries that arise from and fade into the “terrible night” of silence. The desire and labor of language do not end in Faulkner’s view; significance is never “achieved” because the end of the desire to signify is stasis, silence, and death, and Faulkner is far too interested in the cacophony of unstilled voices (the matter of *As I Lay Dying*) to let things rest there.

Of the novel’s speakers, only Darl and Addie seem aware, on some level, of the metaphysical implications Faulkner’s presentation of metaphor elicits. After crossing the river at Tull’s ford, Darl watches Jewel and Tull search for Cash’s lost tools in the water:

From here they do not appear to violate the surface at all, it is as though it had severed them both at a single blow, the two torsos moving with infinitesimal and ludicrous care upon the surface . . . As though the clotting which is you had dissolved into the myriad original motion, and seeing and hearing 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 valleys of this earth [156]

In Darl’s vision, it seems that motion is stopped, that being is “clotted” as it dissolves into “the myriad original motion,” and that there is a kind of metaphorical and semantic halt to the flow of language, come to rest in a static scene of men joined in labor to the original, elemental flow of the universe. But the polarities and shiftings of the passage

²¹ “The Epistemology of Metaphor,” p. 16.

create a torrent that breaks through the placid surface of Darl's image. There is a "clotting" of presence and being, but it is "dissolved" into a "motion", seeing is blind, hearing is deaf, fury is quiet, Tull and Jewel seem to move only upon the surface, yet they are part of the depths. Life and death merge in the scene. Blindness, deafness, clotting, stagnation, and severance are put alongside motion, origin, and fury, even the regenerative, ludicrous image of the pregnant Dewey Dell's breasts, as "horizons and valleys of the earth," partake of surface and depth simultaneously. The language of the passage attempts to pin down a moment of simple presence and fails in its unstoppable figurative movement, yet this failing, Faulkner strongly suggests, is all that language can and must do. As Darl's and Addie's complex digressions on the topic tell us, *As I Lay Dying* is about the attempt of a mutable, evanescent language to define, through the vehicle of figure, what "being" is, and what in a tale of life-dying it is that signifies.

What signifies is motion. Or, more precisely, what is "meaningful" in the world of the novel is noise and movement—any disruption of the placid surface of silence as a text and a journey are born out of jarring incongruities, comic reversals, or unfulfilled desires. In a concrete sense, as the scene toward which the entire novel gestures is not portrayed—Addie's burial—so Faulkner avoids the "death" of his own novel in favor of its ungrounded, unending "life" of incomplete journeys and fractured relations. "Being" in *As I Lay Dying* is a continual outpouring of words that cannot stop short of deathly silences, as reflected in Addie's crucial metaphor arising from the contemplation of Anse's name: "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 overflow." But in the moment of motionlessness, the instant when surface and depth are one, where meaning may be contained in the shape of a word, the word is forgotten and erased: "and then I would find I had forgotten the name of the jar" (165). To Addie, simple "being" is the resolution of the terrible rift between language and its ends, yet an equally terrible acknowledgment of that resolution's impossibility. Addie thinks of "how words go straight up in a thin line, quick and harmless, and how terrible doing goes along the earth" (165), of how words seem "like spiders dangling by their mouths from a beam, swinging and twisting and never touching" (164). In her conception, and in her role as the embodiment of death, silence, and the desire for meaningful ends, language is cut off from being, language does not lead anywhere, as "doing" does, but is just a series of dangling, shifting relations separated from some other, more

vital realm of quiescent action. She does not seem to understand, as does Darl in his severely limited fashion, that "doing" in the world of the text is also a matter of language, or else incommunicable.

In his meditation on sleep and emptiness, Darl reflects upon the incongruity of the position that says words cannot signify, yet words in motion are signs of "being" desiring to signify itself. "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" (76). Darl's words ceaselessly shift between "emptiness" and "filling," "is" and "was," "am" and "am not," so that his being in sleep, in past and present, in a strange room is defined, eradicated, confirmed, and denied by the voice through which he speaks. There is no sense of fusion here between word and being, only the continual movement of sliding differences and arc-like polarities, a state of affairs that Darl cannot ultimately accept. The metaphoric pressures of Faulkner's novel ask us to accept this unaccountable proposition within the context of a world that labors under the fiction of significant ends (Cash completing the coffin, Anse getting his teeth) while ever moving toward the unseen significance it never achieves.

The tragicomedy of *As I Lay Dying* employs these semantic ironies and incongruities because they are what give rise to journeys and novels. These disruptions keep sojourners or readers moving in their search for ends and means, conveyed by the meaningful voices of "being" undergoing, and undoing, its own scrutiny. The novel explains, to some extent, Faulkner's repeated hope "to put everything into one sentence—not only the present but the whole past on which it depends and which keeps overtaking the present, second by second"²². The expressed desire is twofold: to contain all time and motion within a single semantic vessel, and yet, because it must express everything, to create an infinite sentence, one that continually moves and expands, never able to speak the place of its beginning. That language cannot do what Faulkner asks in his fiction is both beside the point and the point, for it is this tension between the unspeakable finality of word or sentence and its striking out toward significance, its embodiment or conveyance of *that* as an overflowing vessel or a broken road, which defines his understanding of language and being. Only by this ironic indirection does Faulkner allow us to take our

²² Malcolm Cowley quoting Faulkner in *The Faulkner-Cowley File: Letters and Memories, 1944-1962* (New York, 1966), p. 12.

passage along the crossings and byways of *As I Lay Dying* to the paradoxical revelations of its concealing figurations.

I wish to express my thanks to J Douglas Canfield for his advice on Faulkner and to Jerrold E. Hogle for his conversation and work on the theory of metaphor

Announcement

The first issue of *University of Hartford Studies in Literature* in 1984 will be a double-issue on "Literature and Religion," forthcoming in the spring To commemorate Leonard F. Manheim (1902-1983) and his pioneering work in interdisciplinary studies, the second issue in 1984 will publish essays on the present state and prospects of interdisciplinary criticism

In the future, *University of Hartford Studies in Literature* will continue its interdisciplinary focus We welcome all criticism and scholarship that reflect on their interdisciplinary foundations and consequences Moreover, we define literature broadly to include "texts" that may not be considered literary in traditional or belletristic definitions The questions we ask about contributions, and that authors may want to ask before submitting papers, are

- (1) What in the literary text led you to apply the methodology of, or knowledge gained from, an extra-literary discipline such as psychology or philosophy or sociology?
- (2) Why is the discipline you have chosen as a critical vantage especially apt for analyzing the part or whole of your literary text?
- (3) In what ways has the literary application or context modified your notion of the discipline? For example, have you changed your ideas about the discipline's range, or its explanatory power, or its limitations in interdisciplinary criticism?

