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WILLIAM FAULKNER FIRST ENCOUNTERS

CLEANTH BROOKS

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4 • AS I LAY DYING

As I Lay Dying is one of Faulkner's most accomplished works. He frequently referred to it as a tour de force, but his descriptive phrase was not very happily chosen. The novel is much more than a clever trick, a mere exhibition of skill. Faulkner probably meant to allude to the comparative ease with which he says he wrote it.

As I Lay Dying engages some of his most profound observations about human nature. This shortest of his novels makes an impact quite out of proportion to its length. The plot is one of Faulkner's simplest: as the novel opens, Addie Bundren is on her deathbed; she dies, the funeral service is held, her husband and children load her coffin onto a farm wagon, and what turns out to be a ten days' journey to the spot where she had insisted that she be buried begins. On that journey, they encounter all sorts of difficulties, but nothing deters them until Addie's body is at last underground.

In doing this, the Bundrens are not, as some careless commentators have thought, following the custom of the country. Their neighbors are actually appalled, and in view of what happens to an unembalmed body after a week's travel under the summer sun, their noses are gravely offended. But Faulkner's purpose is not to provide horror for horror's sake. He is a realist in this novel, as he is so often elsewhere, but we are mistaken if we read the tale of the Bundrens as an

exposure of squalor and degradation. In *As I Lay Dying* the author provides his reader with an examination of quixotic idealism, including its folly as well as its genuine heroism. For the Bundrens' journey is indeed a quixotic quest. But the elaboration of these matters must wait upon some account of the way in which Faulkner has presented his characters.

If the plot of the novel is very simple, the technique of presentation is not. Nothing is told by the author in his own person and on his own authority. Instead, the novel is broken into fifty-nine segments, each assigned to a character in the novel. We are not told to whom the character is addressing his comments. Sometimes, in fact, he simply seems to be talking to himself.

Naturally, Faulkner is careful to have each person speak in character, but, since few of the people who figure in *As I Lay Dying* are very literate, Faulkner often endows them with a vocabulary that they do not in reality possess. This is a literary convention that the reader has to accept, and that acceptance, once made, pays handsome dividends. We are thus enabled to penetrate much more deeply into the complexities of their minds than we could otherwise, for we must remember that Faulkner has in this novel denied himself the privileges of an omniscient author.

On the other hand, when a character tells what he actually said to another person on this or that occasion, he always falls back into his vernacular speech. Thus, Vernon Tull will say to his wife Cora: "... I will help [Anse Bundren] out if he gets into a tight, with her sick and all. Like most folks around here, I done help him so much already I cant quit now." Yet, a few lines earlier in this segment, this same unimaginative man can produce a bit of description like this: "[Anse's] eyes look like pieces of burnt-out cinder fixed in his face, looking out over the land." Or Dewey Dell Bundren, who addresses her father, her brothers, and everyone else in the authentic hill dialect of north Mississippi, is capable, when she tries to express her own feelings to herself, of using a very different sort of utterance. The girl is desperate with worry over her

unwanted pregnancy: "I dont know whether I am worrying or not. Whether I can or not. I dont know whether I can cry or not. I dont know whether I have tried to or not. I feel like a wet seed wild in the hot blind earth."

Faulkner's technique of presentation bears directly on an important theme in this novel: the ultimate isolation of every human being from the rest of humanity. Perhaps in no other work does Faulkner stress so powerfully the final aloneness of the individual. Addie Bundren, for example, feels cut off from her husband and even from most of her children. She apparently had no close friend in the community in whom she could confide. Dewey Dell, her daughter, has no one about her to whom she can speak of her anxieties. Addie's son, Jewel, is close-mouthed, hugging his own problems to himself. The reader's sense of each character's isolation is strengthened by the fact that in reading the story of the Bundrens the reader is always inside some individual's mind—that person's memory of what was said or done on a particular occasion or his reflections on it or his inner meditation on his or her own plight.

Like *The Sound and the Fury*, this novel is centered on a family. Though the Bundren family represents a very different social class from that of the Compsons, there are a few resemblances. Addie Bundren, the strong-minded mother, is a very different sort of woman from the weak, complaining hypochondriac Mrs. Compson, but these two women in their very different ways exert an enormous influence on their families. Mr. Compson and Anse Bundren, though they stand at polar extremes in birth, breeding, and personality, are alike in failing to cope with their families' problems. In spite of obvious differences, there are also some resemblances among the children of the two families. Darl, who goes mad in the end, has much of Quentin's introspection and special insights. Whereas Jason Compson merely thinks of himself as practical, rational, and firmly based in reality, Cash Bundren is in fact a patient, practical man. Jason's claim to these virtues is fraudulent; he is at the mercy of his

passions and impulses. Vardaman, the young Bundren boy, resembles, even if only remotely, Benjy Compson. Vardaman presumably will some day grow up, whereas Benjy never will.

Dewey Dell is too much the primitive, untutored girl to have any close likeness to Caddy Compson. She lacks Caddy's spirit and therefore feels even more desperately isolated than Caddy ever does. Jewel Bundren has no remote counterpart among the Compson children. He is high-spirited, resolute, instinctively brave, even foolhardy. As we shall find later, he is no son of the phlegmatic Anse Bundren. He is indeed his mother's child, with all of her contempt for mere words and her dedication to deeds. No wonder that he is her favorite child. Jewel is one of the least articulate characters in this novel, and significantly, Faulkner assigns only one segment to his thoughts. We see much of him and hear of him in some detail from other characters, but Faulkner, probably very wisely, does not permit him to try to express his thoughts and feelings directly to the reader.

Interestingly enough, Faulkner allows only one segment to Addie Bundren, though she seems to be fully articulate. Before her marriage to Anse she was a schoolteacher. Her one passage of direct speech is quite long and highly interesting.

Why did her creator not allow her a fuller utterance? Perhaps because Faulkner knew that a powerful human force can often be presented most effectively through an indirect method—letting that force remain almost as invisible as the wind and, like the wind, become apparent only by its influence as seen in tossing trees and unroofed barns. Addie, dead in her coffin, is, in a very real sense, the most dynamically alive being on the Bundren wagon.

To give Addie few words of direct expression is in conformity with her character. She is a bitterly disappointed woman, who feels that she has been cheated by the words offered her throughout her life, and thus feels a contempt for words. In the one passage assigned to her, she tells us how she came to distrust words:

I learned that words are no good; that words don't ever fit even what they are trying to say at. . . . And so when Cora Tull would tell me I was not a true mother, I would think how words go straight up in a thin line, quick and harmless, and how terribly 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; and that [the words] sin and love and fear are just sounds that people who never sinned nor loved nor feared have for what they never had and cannot have until they forget the words. (Pp. 163, 165-66)

In spite of her contempt for words, how well this woman can use them! In another passage she rises to poetry when she says that the "words that are not deeds . . . are just the gaps in peoples' lacks, coming down like the cries of the geese out of the wild darkness in the old terrible nights, fumbling at the deeds like orphans to whom are pointed out in a crowd two faces and told, That is your father, your mother" (p. 166).

Addie's distrust of words is an aspect of her total philosophy of life. She has not only been radically disappointed in her life, but also isolated from almost all the rest of humankind. She is a woman of furious intensity who is still unfilled, and now she is hopeless of finding any genuine fulfillment. Her husband, Anse, is surely the most contemptible character that Faulkner ever created. Her lover and the father of her son Jewel, the Reverend Mr. Whitfield (we never learn his first name), also proves unworthy of this fierce devotee to utter truth, though Addie does not live to hear her lover's final shameful retreat into vapid words.

When Whitfield learns that Addie is dying, he sets out for the Bundrens' to conduct her funeral service. He decides that at the service he must make a public confession of their adultery, but as he nears the end of his journey, he is told that Addie is already dead—and realizes that she has kept secret their guilty relationship. At once he tells himself that

God in His mercy has reprieved him: he will not need to confess to his parishioners, including Anse. God will accept his earlier sincere resolution to confess as sufficient, "will accept the will for the deed." Thus the unspoken words will be enough. Addie's cynicism is fully confirmed.

In dismissing words as meaningless, Addie has also given up what she regards as a spurious spirituality. One might call her basic philosophy a kind of transcendental materialism, for she has simply inverted the Christian doctrine. Since the soul is nothing, the body itself must be everything, and so, transcendently important, for only the tangible is truly real. Addie tells Cora that "he" will save her from the fire and the flood. The conventionally pious Cora thinks at first that Addie is referring to Christ, but soon realizes that Addie is referring to her son Jewel, who in the course of the journey actually does save her decomposing body from both perils. Yes, the only savior in whom Addie can believe is not the Son of Man, but a son of man and flesh of her own flesh. Just as she can accept salvation only as something material and bodily, so with eternal rest. There is no Heavenly Father to whom to return. Thus, her overpowering wish is for her mortal body to rest beside that of her earthly father. If this wish also involves a slap at Anse and his people—in death at least she will be rid of their presence—that but adds to the vehemence of her wish. This act of separate burial has become terribly important to her. The possible contradiction involved in investing material things with an idealistic aura does not trouble her.

Some commentators on Faulkner have mistakenly interpreted Addie's demand of her family as vindictive in motive: she means to punish Anse and her children by imposing this burden upon them. But Addie, having spent her life with the fatuous trifler Anse, knows that it will cost Anse nothing. He will see to it that others do the work and take the risks. And surely she knows that if the task is to be accomplished, the burden will principally fall, as it does, on Jewel, her favorite child, possibly the only person whom she truly loves. Addie

is a strong-willed woman, of the breed of Medea and Clytemnestra. If she really wanted to punish her husband, she would know how to do it in some way that would fully involve him.

Why, however, did the Bundrens honor her request? Or rather, when confronted with the difficulties that later developed, especially the river in flood and their team drowned in attempting a crossing, why did they nevertheless carry out her wish to the very letter? Let us deal with the easiest cases first. Vardaman, as a young child, had no voice in the matter. Jewel, who adored his mother, genuinely wanted to carry out her wishes, and when the difficulties of the journey developed, they did not daunt him but became exhilarating challenges.

As for Cash, it never occurred to him to do other than to accept what his mother asked. Cash is an unimaginative, apparently unemotional man, but there is no reason to believe that he did not truly love his mother. A son was supposed to love his mother, was he not? He had already expressed his love for Addie in his own way by working hard on her coffin to make it perfect, showing it to her as she looked through the window. In the ordeal of the river crossing, Cash's endurance and fortitude match Jewel's heroic action.

Dewey Dell also apparently loved her mother. At one point she says: "I heard that my mother is dead. I wish I had time to let her die. I wish I had time to wish I had." The girl would like to be able to mourn her fittingly, but she is now overwhelmed by the urgency of her own plight. She also has a pressing need of her own to get into town where, she believes, she can procure something to end her pregnancy.

Anse, as the reader discovers at the close of the novel, also has his own selfish reasons for getting to town. Yet, what about his reiterated assertions to all and sundry that he is determined to carry out Addie's wishes? Are we to dismiss them as completely empty? I think we should, for Anse knows full well that his promise to Addie will ultimately cost

him nothing. His parade of virtue before his neighbors entails no real effort on his part, and even his neighbors can be trusted to help out. Haven't they always done so in the past?

The journey did in fact cost Anse the team of mules that were drowned, but by picking Cash's pocket of the money he had saved and by throwing in Jewel's horse as part of the deal, Anse manages to buy a team from Flem Snopes. Thus, he considerably lightens the expense to himself. Jewel is shocked when he hears what his father has singlehandedly done. His horse was his most prized possession, but he acquiesces. Jewel has moral courage as well as animal courage, and he truly wishes to honor his mother's wish.

The one Bundren who does not endorse the journey and at least twice tries to put an end to it is Darl. When the wagon bearing Addie's coffin tips over in the flooded river and the coffin is about to be swept away, it is saved by Cash and Jewel at great risk to themselves. Darl is on the wagon with Cash, but he contributes nothing to the rescue. Tull says, "Darl jumped out of the wagon and left Cash sitting there trying to save [the coffin]." Whether or not Tull is just to Darl, there is no question that later on Darl set fire to the barn in which Addie's coffin had been placed when the family camped out for the night. This attempt to destroy his mother's corpse was foiled when Jewel managed to get out of the burning building just before the roof fell in.

Why does Darl try to rid the Bundrens of their mother's corpse and thus stop the journey to her chosen burial place? Because he regards the whole enterprise as folly. Buzzards have begun to follow the evil smell that the coffin exudes. The people of the countryside are outraged by what is going on. Common sense and community opinion are certainly on Darl's side. The reader may well agree that Darl is right.

Yet on the whole, Darl's intelligence seems to be of a distinctly uncommon kind. He is highly intuitive. For example, he "knows" somehow that his sister has taken Lave as a lover and that Anse is not Jewel's real father. The high-strung, inarticulate Jewel is repelled by Darl, as well he might

be, since Darl continually tells him, apparently with a certain satisfaction, that Addie is going to die, or taunts him with loving his horse more than he loves his mother, or asks him who his father really is.

Darl's role is that of the keenly interested though detached observer. In fact, he represents the artist in his role of sensitive and knowing commentator on the people around him. More specifically, he is the *poète maudit*. None of his siblings, with perhaps the exception of the child Vardaman, feels close to him. They certainly do not understand him. He makes them uncomfortable with his uncanny knowledge of their secret thoughts and desires. Two of his siblings, Dewey Dell and Jewel, actually hate him. The attentive reader will not be surprised that it is this pair who, once their mother is safely buried, actually leap upon Darl and throw him to the ground to make sure that he cannot get away from the officers who have come to take him to the state's insane asylum.

Darl is an extremely good reporter of the Bundrens' activities. He is, however, much more than the merely accurate reporter. He can make the scene he describes come alive for the reader. No wonder that Darl is assigned nineteen of the fifty-nine segments of the novel—almost twice as many as Vardaman, who is easily second in the number of segments assigned to him.

Because Darl does observe so much and because his intuitions are so shrewd, some readers may assume that he is the hero—as well as the “intelligence”—of the novel, the character that they most admire and whose views and responses they may fairly claim reflect their own. Darl does indeed have his admirable traits, but there are less admirable ones in his very complex personality. He comes close to cruelty in his dealing with his brother Jewel. He shows less than a brother's concern with his sister's plight. Toward Addie, that fierce but much suffering woman, he shows far less tenderness than Jewel, who at his mother's death suffers a frantic, inarticulate grief.

Darl possesses the attractiveness of the artist, for Faulkner has dowered him with his own great gift of verbal expression. But he also has something of the artist's cruelty, what one is tempted to call a dispassionately technical interest in what he is rendering, a certain unfeeling dissection of the feelings of others. In creating Darl, Faulkner probably drew a bit on his own artistic personality; and if so, he included that part of himself that could express such sentiments as these: “[A writer] will be completely ruthless if he is a good one. . . . If a writer has to rob his mother, he will not hesitate; the *Ode on a Grecian Urn* is worth any number of old ladies.”*

Darl, though only partially literate, is also something of a modern intellectual, a sceptic and a quasi-existentialist. In one of his meditations he says to himself: “I dont know what I am. I dont know if I am or not. Jewel knows he is [i.e., that he exists], because he does not know that he does not know whether he is or not.”

Quite so. Jewel lacks Darl's self-consciousness and therefore never questions his own existence. Darl is all self-consciousness. He is a strange fish in this family of Mississippi hill folk. No wonder that his family and the whole community believe that he is a little “queer,” as they call him, or an oddity. As such in this simple-minded and traditional society, he constitutes something of a subversive and even disruptive force. Faulkner was himself enough of an oddity in his essentially traditional society to be able to treat Darl with sympathy, though he is also well aware of how even Darl's family must view him.

The “modernity” of Darl accomplishes something quite important. It is a means for bringing the modern and the traditional worlds into juxtaposition. The matter is important, for Faulkner hints at or perhaps openly expresses such a confrontation in nearly all his Yoknapatawpha novels. He

*James B. Meriwether and Michael Millgate, eds., *Lion in the Garden: Interviews with William Faulkner, 1926-1962* (New York, 1968), p. 239.

uses local material, but he is almost always concerned with universal, even timeless, issues.

Early readers of *As I Lay Dying* sometimes made the mistake of assuming that it is a realistic and sociological study of deprived and somewhat depraved rustics. But *As I Lay Dying* is much more than that. Thus, Darl is intellectual and self-conscious man, sensitive, introspective, and questioning. Jewel is the unreflective man of action. Cash is the unimaginative, patient, methodical, quintessentially sober man. Faulkner has been content to treat Vardaman simply as the typical child in all the pathos of his inexperience and ignorance, and Dewey Dell as simply instinctual womanhood. But lest the reader assume that Faulkner is willing to reduce women to stereotypes, let him remember the presence of Addie. She is in some respects the most complicated and powerful character in this novel. Jewel may be her favorite child, but many of Darl's traits clearly derive from her.

Perhaps a more useful way in which to see how Faulkner uses limited and local material as his means for dealing with universal humankind, is to regard *As I Lay Dying* as a pastoral. We must begin, however, by dismissing any notion that a pastoral is necessarily about shepherds singing and dancing in a charming Arcadian landscape. Pastoral—I borrow the concept from William Empson—mirrors a more complex world, typically the world of the sophisticated reader, in a much simpler world. Since human beings are essentially the same the world over and through all the ages, the pastoral mode constitutes a means for dealing with universal problems by gaining a fresh perspective on them, as well as a proper aesthetic distance from them.

To be more specific, we have on the wagon carrying the Bundrens a representative microcosm of our far more complicated society. Some of life's perennial issues are there: among them, death ending a frustrated life, sibling rivalry, the strongly mixed motives which set us in motion toward our various goals, the consequences of a promise taken seriously, family pride, family loyalty and disloyalty, honor, and the

nature of heroic action. I will limit my discussion here to no more than two of these: the interrelated matters of honor and heroism.

The reader rather expects that a Quentin Compson or almost any other descendant of the old Southern gentry will prove to be sensitive, sometimes hypersensitive, on the subject of his honor. But few readers will expect to find a concern for honor in such folk as the Bundren males. But the poorer Southern whites often fiercely defended their honor, for their personal honor was often the only thing that they could claim to own. The Bundrens, to be sure, were not abjectly poor. They owned a good house and a good farm. Anse was proud to possess not only property but, as he told Addie before their marriage, also a "good honest name."

One need not, of course, take Anse's pretenses to honor or anything else very seriously. But with Jewel or Cash, say, respect for the pledged word is a matter of deadly seriousness. They even embrace the traditional Southern code of male honor—pride in one's independence and valor in defending it. Witness Jewel's immediate response to what he deems an insult to his family. As the Bundren wagon nears the end of its journey, the smell emanating from the coffin causes some people whom they pass on the road to exclaim: "Great God, what they got in that wagon?" Jewel retorts with the ungrammatical but sufficiently insulting phrase, "Son of a bitches." Jewel is immediately challenged with the question: "What did you say?" Darl, well aware that the situation has suddenly become serious, explains to the stranger, "He dont mean anything, mister," but Jewel swings at the stranger, who draws his knife. Darl then intercedes once more: Jewel is ill, he is not himself, he explains, and then adds, "He thought you said something to him." This explanation opens a way for mutual accommodation, but in what follows the touchiness of the code of honor is nicely illustrated.

Darl promises that Jewel will take back the offending words but insists that the retraction must not be made under duress, for when the stranger demands that Jewel take back the

words, Darl says, "Put up your knife, and he will." The stranger does so, and now Darl conjures Jewel to tell him "[he] didn't mean anything." "I thought he said something," Jewel says. "Just because he's—" But Darl hushes him and says: "Tell him you didn't mean it." And Jewel at last makes the necessary concession by saying that he didn't mean it. The angered man then remarks: "He better not. Calling me a—" But the Bundrens must not seem to concede too much and it is now Darl who quickly asks: "Do you think he's afraid to call you that?" Whereupon there is a slight retreat on the other side as the stranger cautiously replies: "I never said that." Jewel follows up the advantage with: "Don't think it, neither." But Darl, now that honor has been saved, orders Jewel to shut up and urges his father to drive on. This code of honor is quite as elaborate as that humorously described in the fifth act of Shakespeare's *As You Like It*. It has its own degrees corresponding to such niceties as Touchstone's "Reproof Valiant" and his "Countercheck Quarrelsome."

This contretemps, in terms of the plot of the novel, has little importance. But it reveals how protective of their honor people of the Bundrens' class can be. Even Darl shows that he is thoroughly familiar with the code and makes sure that the Bundrens in apologizing do not go too far in their concessions.

For the most part, Darl, like Shakespeare's Falstaff, recognizes the hollowness of honor. He understands all too well the motives that prompted Addie to demand to be buried among her own people, and when the costs of the journey become staggering, he denies the claims of the dead over the living. He regards it as ridiculous to take the long, round-about journey, crossing a river in flood at the risk of life and limb, not to mention the consternation and disapproval they awake in the community through which they move.

Darl truly has traits of an artist and poet. But he is no sentimentalist, no idealist. His gaze is direct and incisive, and it can be withering. Like many a modern intellectual, he is antiheroic. He knows too much to believe very strongly in

anything. Darl's affinities are not with any visionary romantic, but rather with Stendhal's Julien Sorel or Joyce's Stephen Dedalus.

Yet to say this is not to deny that a great deal of the poetry in *As I Lay Dying* occurs in the passages assigned to Darl. But then there is a great deal of poetry throughout the novel. Vardaman's thoughts and feelings, those of Dewey Dell, of Addie, of even the stolid and prosaic Vernon Tull can on occasion move into measured eloquence. This is how Tull describes the flooded river in which the Bundrens lose their team of mules and almost lose Addie's corpse when her coffin nearly slides off the wagon.

The water was cold. It was thick, like slush ice. Only it kind of lived. One part of you knowed it was just water, the same thing that had been running under this same bridge for a long time, yet when them logs would come spewing up outen it, you were not surprised, like they was a part of water, of the waiting and the threat. (P. 131)

It would be a mistake to believe that we are to regard these eruptions into poetry as faults, as poetry out of place, as prettified speeches put into the mouths of prosaic people. They are not rhetorical embroideries upon ordinary speech, but penetrations into the depths of people's souls—the articulation of genuine feelings with words that do justice to the authenticity of those feelings. The poetry is no mere prettification, but a revelation of something really there. To see this is to approach an appreciation of the real significance of the novel.

At first glance, the characters would seem to represent most unpromising material: limited, rather coarse, only semi-literate country people. But Faulkner has deliberately chosen them, and not for their value as local color. He is not primarily concerned with their quaint and sometimes comic eccentricities, but with what they reveal about mankind everywhere and at all times.

Matthew Arnold wrote that "no one can deny that it is of advantage to a poet to deal with a beautiful world." But T. S. Eliot, by way of comment on this passage, puts the poet's true advantage in very different terms: it is "to be able to see beneath both beauty and ugliness; to see the boredom and the horror, and the glory."² This seems an excellent statement of what Faulkner has been able to do.

Very well, but to which of these qualities is it that Faulkner's gaze has been able to penetrate? To the boredom, the horror, or the glory of the life of the Bundrens? The perceptive reader will doubtless find all three. But in that case, how is the reader to relate them to each other? Are we dealing with comedy or tragedy? Do we want to praise Cash for enduring agonizing pain without complaint, almost as a suffering animal might? Or do we want to shake him hard for being so stupidly docile? Dr. Peabody, setting Cash's broken leg, asks his patient whether his manipulation of the leg hurts him, and Cash answers, "Not to speak of," though sweat drops "big as marbles" run down his drawn white face. The physician's next comment mingles pity, admiration for Cash's fortitude, and more than a bit of exasperation at Cash's acceptance of Anse's treatment of him. Peabody says: "About next summer you can hobble around fine on this leg. Then it won't bother you, not to speak of. . . . If you had anything you could call luck, you might say it was lucky this is the same leg you broke before." To which Cash replies: "That's what paw says."

If such a passage raises problems of what attitude the reader is to adopt, it is only one of many. Dewey Dell's encounter with McGowan, the druggist's clerk, is another. The treatment he prescribes for the girl's pregnancy resembles the kind of cruel humor that one finds in some medieval fabliaux. Are we to pity the plight of this ignorant and almost

inarticulate girl, or must our sympathy be qualified by our difficulty in believing that she could possibly be *that* stupid?

The ending of the novel may itself raise a further conflict of attitude. What are we to say when the unspeakable Anse, fresh from burying his wife and equipped with his new false teeth, returns to the wagon to introduce to his four remaining children (Darl having now been hustled off to the insane asylum) their new stepmother, a "duck-shaped woman . . . with them kind of hard-looking pop eyes"? Are we to take this as farcical humor? We have certainly moved far past the bounds of realism here. Could even Anse have arranged a marriage so expeditiously? Or even have been fitted with a set of false teeth in an hour or so?

I suggested earlier that *As I Lay Dying* might best be regarded as a kind of parable, a fable in which various universal types of human beings interact with each other in an endeavor that, in varying ways, involves all of them. But the reader may feel that Faulkner's story of the Bundrens' adventure is a very special kind of fable, a tall tale of the old Southwest, filled with quite unbelievable happenings and marvelous feats, but also with the boisterous frontier humor often found in such tales. In short, the reader may be driven to wonder whether this short novel possesses any unity of tone whatever. Whether it does will, of course, have to be determined by each individual reader. What follows represents one man's attempt to judge this point. But to present that judgment may be of some service if only to help the unpersuaded reader define why he believes that the novel finally falls apart.

The basic issue, as I believe Vernon Tull might put it, is as simple as this: are we to laugh or cry over the Bundrens' exploit and its sequel? Both are possibilities. The surface of the Bundrens' life shows squalor, crassness, selfishness, and stupidity, but beneath the surface there are depths of passion and poetry that are terrifying in their power. The very drabness of the surface is the guarantee of the genuineness of the passion below. These people are not rhetoricians who talk

²*The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism: Studies in the Relation of Criticism to Poetry in England*, ed. T. S. Eliot (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1933), p. 98.

themselves into their transports. One of them has the poetry of madness; one of them, the poetry of the child. But the others are almost inarticulate, and the two brothers who dare most and suffer most lack the wordiness that their mother despised.

Faulkner has been concerned in all his books with what the human being can endure, what he can dare, what he can accomplish. The story of how the Bundrens managed the burial of Addie Bundren affords him a very special vantage point from which to contemplate the human capacity for both suffering and action. The heroic adventure involves a mixture of motives and a variety of responses. There is the child who only partially comprehends what is occurring and responds with astonishment and fear to what he sees. There is the young woman so much obsessed with her own problems that she can reflect upon the adventure only as a possible answer to her own need. There is the parasite Anse who does not even know that he is asking his children to be heroes and if he could understand it would not care. There is Darl who knows too much and feels too intensely to be able to take in more than the nauseating horror and fear that the act costs. There is the patient Cash, who never sees that he is doing more than his bounden duty. There is Jewel, perhaps the least reflective member of the group, violent and even brutal, whose heroism is so pure and unselfconscious that he is not aware that it is heroism. It burns like a clean flame that exhausts itself in the process, leaving no sooty residue.

As a commentary upon man's power to act and to endure, upon his apparently incorrigible idealism, the story of the Bundrens is clearly appalling—appalling but not scathing and not debunking. Heroism is heroism even though it sometimes appears to be merely the hither side of folly. Man's capacity to spend himself in a cause is always a remarkable thing and nowhere more so than when it springs from an unlikely soil. For a summarizing statement on this novel, one might appeal to one of the choruses in *Antigone*: "Wonders

are many, and none is more wonderful than man." *As I Lay Dying* provides a less exalted but not unworthy illustration of Sophocles' judgment.