

To Robert Penn Warren

by Cleanth Brooks

WILLIAM FAULKNER
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ceed. To be sure, he has put a great deal of poetry into the book; but the poetry has been introduced in a very special way: before each block of dramatic matter, Faulkner has given us a long section of bardic prose on the courthouse, the scene of Nancy Mannigoe's trial; the statehouse, in which the Governor meets Temple and Gavin Stevens to hear Temple's plea for Nancy; and the jail, where Temple goes to see Nancy for the last time. These three sections are brilliantly written, particularly that entitled "The Courthouse," which gives us the early history of Faulkner's Jefferson. But though they evoke a general background rich in history for the events that take place in the play, they do not solve Faulkner's specific dramatic problems. The use of this material in just this fashion constitutes the most daring but perhaps the least successful solution of the structural problems attempted by Faulkner in any of his novels.

There is much that could be said for the ethical and psychological insights given us in *Requiem for a Nun*, and a great deal has to be said for the fine last scene. Here Nancy, illiterate and humble yet quietly confident, addresses herself to the problem of evil and the problem of suffering, and tries to answer Temple's anguished question: "Why do you and my little baby both have to suffer just because I decided to go to a baseball game five years ago? Do you have to suffer everybody else's anguish just to believe in God? What kind of God is it that has to blackmail His customers with the whole world's grief and ruin?" (p. 277). Nancy's answer is that God "don't want you to suffer. He don't like suffering neither. . . . He don't tell you to suffer. But He gives you the chance. He gives you the best He can think of, that you are capable of doing. And He will save you" (p. 278).

Nancy has faith, the kind that moves mountains, and for some readers she will have established the fact that she killed Temple's baby indeed because she loved it. But for others the credibility of Nancy's motive is more difficult. Their difficulty will be not so much with Nancy's theology, which is probably sound enough, but with the dramatic presentation, which may not be quite full enough, articulate enough, convincing enough to bring the whole work to success.

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Odyssey of the Bundrens

(AS I LAY DYING)

THE AUTHOR'S FONDNESS for *As I Lay Dying* is easily understood. The writing in this novel is as good as Faulkner has ever done, and the book constitutes a triumph in the management of tone. Faulkner has daringly mingled the grotesque and the heroic, the comic and the pathetic, pity and terror, creating a complexity of tone that has proved difficult for some readers to cope with. To ignore this complexity is to find in the novel simply an exploitation of horror for the sake of its shock value or for the sake of a grotesque comedy. Even the reader who is able to see that the novel concerns itself with a heroic action is likely to have his difficulties. Appreciating the heroic, he may wonder whether his comic response is appropriate, or, sensing the comic value of the absurd and anticlimactic incidents, he may come to doubt his earlier intimations that the action was in fact heroic.

The heroic act, because it does involve the violation of common-sense notions and conventional responses, is always, at some level, vulnerable to the comic squint. That which is larger than ordinary life is likely to seem exaggerated and fantastic, and thus always risks inviting the mock-heroic attitude. The journey which the Bundren family undertake to bury Addie is preposterous, and they persist in it in obvious violation of common sense.

In view of the prevailing tendency to "sociologize" Faulkner, it

may be just as well to say here and now that Faulkner is not portraying a quaintly horrifying Southern folkway. Few, if any, families in rural Mississippi would have attempted to do what the Bundrens did. Consider how all the non-Bundren characters within the novel regard the expedition. They are shocked and horrified—the women especially. Lula Armistead exclaims: "It's a outrage. [Anse] should be lawed for treating her so" (p. 475). Rachel Samson bursts out to her husband: "You and [Anse] and all the men in the world that torture us alive and flout us dead, dragging us up and down the country—" (p. 420). Samson thinks to himself: "I got just as much respect for the dead as ere a man . . . and a woman that's been dead in a box four days, the best way to respect her is to get her into the ground as quick as you can" (p. 419).

A primary question, therefore, must be why the Bundrens carry out their strange and difficult task, for it not only cuts across the community's sense of what is fitting, but runs counter to the shiftless husband's lethargy and irresponsibility, is opposed by at least one of the brothers, and involves the whole family in hardship, loss, danger, and injury. The reader will not find an obvious answer. When neighbors remonstrate with Anse, he replies that "it's Addie I give the promise to. Her mind is set on it" (p. 418), though we do not take very seriously Anse's concern for his wife. Early in the novel we learn of other motivations for taking Addie's body to Jefferson: Anse longs for a set of store-bought teeth and Darl imagines Anse saying, when Addie dies, "God's will be done. Now I can get them teeth" (p. 375). The daughter, Dewey Dell, who knows she is pregnant, is desperately anxious to get into town so that she can buy an abortion drug. And there are things in town which tempt even the moderate Cash and the child Vardaman. Did the Bundren family, then, simply drift into its heroic action? Did they accomplish it unwittingly and for the least heroic of motives?

One would like to postpone for the time answers to such questions, but I suggest that as we look about for answers, we will be forced to consider the possibility that one of Faulkner's principal themes in *As I Lay Dying*—perhaps the principal theme—is the

nature of the heroic deed, with an examination both of what fosters it and of the various things that would inhibit it, including not only common sense, selfishness, and cowardice, but romantic self-consciousness.

Yet we should not dismiss out of hand the claims of honor, heavily as we may be constrained to qualify them in view of Anse's character. The code of honor receives heavy stress in this novel. The need of the male to prove himself—we have commented upon it in earlier chapters—comes to a high focus in this story of the Bundren family. It is not enough simply to bury the mother reverently and with some show of decent grief; the promise she has exacted must be honored to the letter: come fire or flood, hell or highwater, her body must be taken to the spot which she has designated as her final resting place, and no circumstance, not even the most frustrating, is allowed to cancel the obligation. By any rational test, the undertaking is quixotic, but in carrying it out, two of the children, Cash and Jewel, exhibit true heroism—Cash in his suffering, Jewel in his brave actions. Both brothers go far beyond the claims of rationality and common sense. Their brother Darl, of course, does not. His role is that of the critic of the action, who does not believe in honor and has the supreme lucidity of the mad.

The general importance of honor in the novel deserves stress, especially since many readers associate a concern for honor only with Faulkner's aristocrats and are not sufficiently aware of the sensitivity on that score exhibited by Faulkner's poor whites. An episode late in the book will illustrate, and the comic overtones need not obscure the seriousness of the issues here for the Bundrens. The wagon with its stinking burden is just approaching Jefferson. A passer-by, shocked by the odor, exclaims: "Great God, what they got in that wagon?" (p. 507). Jewel whirls toward him with the cry: "Son of a bitches." It is a term which cannot be ignored, and for a moment it looks as if Jewel and the stranger will fight: Jewel swings at him and the stranger promptly draws a knife. It is interesting to see what happens. Darl apologizes for Jewel by explaining that he is ill and not himself. When this excuse does not suffice, he adds: "[Jewel] thought you said some-

thing to him" (p. 507). 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" (p. 508). The stranger does so, and now Darl conjures Jewel to tell him "you 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—" (p. 508). 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. The code involved 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 "Re-proof Valiant" and his "Countercheck Quarrelsome."

The episode is significant in another way. Though we are by this time in the novel perfectly aware of the hostility that exists between Jewel and Darl, and though in another hour or so Jewel will be leaping upon Darl to turn him over to the officers, at this moment Darl is quite as much involved as any other member of the family in preserving the family honor and seeing to it that no stranger takes liberties with it. Even Darl, who does not believe in the quixotic journey and who sees the absurdity of any literal fulfillment of the promise made to his mother—even Darl responds automatically to a defense of the family honor.

Because Darl is by far the most articulate of the Bundrens, because his speech is endowed with a certain poetry, and because he voices what is probably the reader's own revulsion against the Bundrens' foolish and horrible journey, it is very likely that Darl

will appear to be the representative intelligence of the novel and the mouthpiece of the author. By contrast, the decent, patient, un-imaginative Cash—the good workman, proud of his work and careful of his tools—may well appear as dull and unfeeling, hopelessly prosaic. Nor is the typical reader likely to find Jewel other than antipathetic. For Jewel is the high-strung man of action, impatient, ardent, flamboyant, and heroic, but only in some kind of terribly brainless way. Yet the reader will be mistaken if he accepts Darl's account of things as necessarily true and if he sees in Darl's judgments and valuations necessarily those of the author. The novel is not nearly so simple.

With regard to the burial journey, Darl, the lunatic, is indeed the only one of the three older brothers who is thoroughly "sane," and in general he is the one who knows the truth—about Dewey Dell's secret thoughts, about his mother's special attachment to Jewel, and about the various secret motivations of the members of his family. But Darl's truth is corrosive and antiheroic, and in its logic perhaps finally inhuman. Does he really grieve for his mother at all? It would be hard to say. In a sense, he knows too much about her and too much about the absurdity of reality to have any emotional commitment.

Darl represents, among other things, the detachment and even callousness which we sometimes associate with the artist. Darl is pure perception. He intuitively almost immediately Dewey Dell's pregnancy, and his sister, realizing this, resents and fears him. Darl sees through his father's clumsy pretenses. He chides Jewel for his childishly immoderate attachment to his horse. Twice he tries to stop the outrageous journey to the Jefferson cemetery. In general, in spite of all his poetry, he is a rationalizing and deflating force—the antiheroic intelligence.

Vernon Tull puts the issue to his wife in forceful, if homely, terms in telling her how in the flooded river "Darl jumped out of the wagon and left Cash sitting there trying to save [the coffin] and the wagon turning over, and Jewel that was almost to the bank fighting that horse back where it had more sense than to go" (p. 448). Tull teases her for having said that "Darl is the queer one, the one that ain't bright," remarking that Darl was "the only

one of them that had sense enough to get off that wagon. I notice Anse was too smart to been on it a-tall." Indeed, though we are disposed to think of Darl as being the poet of the group, it might be argued that Jewel represents more truly the poetic temperament, though his is the poetry associated with high-hearredness and the heroic gesture—the poetry of action rather than that of contemplation.

It is important to notice the author's own detachment in this matter. Though Darl, with his gift for language and his penchant for almost clairvoyant observation, must represent much that is dear to Faulkner himself, Faulkner is, as we shall see, perfectly willing to judge against Darl on point after point. Indeed, Faulkner, probably more than any other author of our time, is willing to see the limitations of the artistic temperament and to refuse to believe that it has a monopoly upon truth. Or perhaps Darl as artist has too much truth—sees the complexity of human motivations so thoroughly that all action is paralyzed and all risks rendered quixotic because no motivation is so pure and no goal so desirable as to be worth the necessary risk.¹ There are passages in the novel that would seem to support this interpretation, and yet there are other passages in which Darl's prophetic and preternatural vision gives way to a bitterness and pettiness as in his baiting of his brother Jewel.

Yet Darl, even if we are not to assume that he has all the truth, certainly does possess some of the truth, and Faulkner avails himself of Darl's imagination nineteen times in the novel. Far more passages are given to Darl than to any other character in *As I Lay Dying*. Moreover, it is in these passages—in which we are within Darl's mind—that Faulkner employs some of his most interesting technical devices and departs furthest from a merely naturalistic presentation of events. The scene of Addie's death, so meticulous in its detail, so convincing in its realism, is actually a fictitious construct imagined by Darl as he rides on the wagon with Jewel, miles from home. (This is not to say, of course, that Darl's vision of what happened was necessarily untrue.) So also is the fine scene in which Darl imagines Cash working into the

1. See below, Notes, p. 398.

night through the rainstorm on their mother's coffin. Even after Darl has suffered his breakdown and is on the train headed for the state insane asylum, laughing with the laughter of the mad, his description of the scene in which two deputies sit by him on the train is brilliantly done. Such clarity of vision is not impaired by Darl's madness and may even find in that special kind of madness its necessary condition.

That this last section is attributed to Darl may at first glance seem a mistake for it begins: "Darl has gone to Jackson. They put him on the train . . .," and Darl is spoken of in the third person throughout. But then one suddenly realizes that the attribution is correct: at this point the disintegration of Darl's personality has become complete. Darl now sees himself as object as well as ego—as object rather than ego.

The one woman who occupies a seat in the Bundren wagon, the daughter of the family, Dewey Dell, does not oppose the journey. One might suppose that, like Faulkner's other women characters, she would be too "practical," too concrete and immediate in her relation to reality, to approve of something so quixotic. But the contradiction is only apparent, for Dewey Dell's motive in urging the journey is practical. She knows that she is with child; she must find a way to prevent the birth of the child; and the trip to Jefferson offers an opportunity to solve her urgent problem.

The last of the Bundren progeny is the child Vardaman. Like Jewel and Cash, Vardaman runs counter to the claims of common sense; but he does so in the way in which a child, confused and disturbed, would. He is suffering from a traumatic shock. Because the two exciting experiences, the catching of the big fish and his mother's death, happen so close together, the events somehow coalesce in his mind and he can say "my mother is a fish."² Vardaman bores holes in his mother's coffin in order to give her air. His attempt to liberate her from the coffin is "crazy" of course, but it has nothing to do with Darl's kind of madness.

Though only Darl opposes the journey, its successful prosecution depends upon the positive efforts of two of the children, Cash and Jewel. They are willing to pay the price for honoring their

2. See below, Notes, p. 399.

mother's request. Anse, it is true, appears to honor it. He evidently enjoys refusing to let his neighbors talk him out of the trip to Jefferson with his wife's body. He explains to Tull, "I give my promise. [Addie] is counting on it" (p. 438). Anse can enjoy this display of his nice sense of honor, for he thinks that it will cost him nothing. (He does lose a team of mules in making the journey, though he induces Jewel to make up part of the cost of replacing it.) Anse is the selfish man who has a lifetime habit of leaning on other people. Anse knows that he can depend on his children to make good his promise. His statement to Cash, "There is Christians enough to help you," is characteristic. In this general connection it is interesting to note what Darl has to say about him. Darl imagines his father leaning above his mother's deathbed and pictures him thus: "his humped silhouette partaking of that owl-like quality of awry-feathered, disgruntled outrage within which lurks a wisdom too profound or too inert for even thought" (p. 372).

One is tempted to say that in this novel Addie and Anse have exchanged roles. It is Anse who has the profound inertia that Faulkner usually associates with woman, who is apparently unaggressive, pliant, and resilient, but with tireless persistence tends toward her elected goal and is never finally deflected from it. Addie one is tempted to call another example of Faulkner's masculinized women. Like Drusilla, but unlike Aunt Jenny, she insists upon the impractical and heroic gesture, and though she could hardly have foreseen how difficult the journey with her coffin would be, it is obviously her still-vital, implacable energy that enables her family to complete their mission and holds them together as a family until her body is finally deposited in the stipulated grave. But the word "masculinized" risks distorting Addie's character. She is completely feminine to the extent that she expresses herself in and through her children. She has fulfilled herself in breeding up and nurturing the children whom she is forcing to become heroes.

Addie is also feminine in Faulkner's sense in being completely committed to the concrete fact. She has seen through all illusions. She despises words. One thinks of the one long, terrible expression

allowed her in this novel in which she tells the story of her life. What Addie lacks, and what she yearns for, is some kind of communion. Even before her marriage to Anse, she has felt this emptiness of despair. She swiches the children she teaches, in a desperate attempt, as she puts it, to say to them: "Now you are aware of me! Now I am something in your secret and selfish life, who have marked your blood with my own for ever and ever" (p. 462).

Addie's malady is what a recent psychologist³ has called the loss of the experience of community. With Addie, the loss of community is at the same time a loss of communication. Language seems to her empty and drained and ineffectual. She relates: "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 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" (p. 465).

Since Addie does not believe in the spiritual—not, at least, in any of its conventional senses—she can make the assertion of her identity only in terms of the body. Her body then becomes of inordinate importance to her, first through her children—two of whom she jealously claims as a peculiar expression of her body, having no part of Anse but "being of [her] alone"—and now that she is dead, as a token of her final repudiation of Anse. Her dead body becomes a monstrous token—the only available token—of her fierce identity when, through the pledge that she forces from her shiftless husband, she manages to endow it with an almost vampire-like personal will. The body will die only on its own terms: it will not rest—or allow her family rest—until it has been delivered to its chosen resting place.

Addie's grim but exultant confession ends with a significant sentence: "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. 468). Addie's salvation was

3. See below, Notes, p. 399.

not of mere words. It involved the substantiality of the body. The Jordan which it had to cross in order to enter into salvation was the flooded river from which Cash and Jewel save her confined body. The fire of hell which she had to escape was the quite literal fire of the burning barn from which Jewel lugs the coffin. The salvation was a tangible one, not that of some wordy prayer that was to bring her before a heavenly Father but the actual placing of her now foul body beside the bones of her literal earthly father. When Cora Tull had reproached Addie for her partiality to Jewel, saying, "There is your sin. And your punishment too. Jewel is your punishment. But where is your salvation?" Addie had replied, "He is my cross and he will be my salvation. He will save me from the water and from the fire. Even though I have laid down my life, he will save me" (p. 460). Cora Tull, as she confesses later, did not at first understand what Addie was saying, supposing that Addie was speaking of God until she suddenly realized that "he" whom Addie trusts to save her was not God but Jewel. Addie's prophecy of course, is made good.

Cora says, "I realized that out of the vanity of her heart she had spoken sacrilege." And Cora begs her to kneel down and open her heart and cast out her vanity. "But she wouldn't. She just sat there, lost in her vanity and her pride, that had closed her heart to God and set that selfish mortal boy in His place" (p. 460). Cora is, to be sure, a conventional woman with fatuous notions and no real insights into Addie Bundren's situation. It is plain that she knows nothing of Addie's sin with Whitfield nor that Jewel is the son of Whitfield, and she lacks any real comprehension of Addie's spiritual agony and isolation. Yet Cora is here literally correct. Addie is guilty of blasphemy and sacrilege.

Addie has good reason for her disgust at mere words—not only from her experience with her husband but also from her experience with her lover. The passage assigned to Whitfield follows immediately after Addie's. In it Whitfield tells what went on in his mind when he heard that Addie was dying and when, as her pastor, he was summoned to her bedside. His colloquy with himself beautifully illustrates Addie's point about those who live by mere words. When the minister hears of Addie's impending death, he

wrestles with his spirit and finally gathers strength to make a full confession to the deceived husband; but in spite of his talk about feeling that he has now been received again into God's holy peace and love, it is plain that he continues to dread the confession that he must make. Thus, when he reaches Tull's house and hears that Addie is already dead, he is greatly relieved. He says to himself: "I have sinned, O Lord. Thou knowest the extent of my remorse and the will of my spirit. But He" (and the shift from second to third person is significant) "is merciful; He will accept the will for the deed, Who knew that when I framed the words of my confession it was to Anse I spoke them, even though he was not there. It was He in His infinite wisdom that restrained the tale from her dying lips as she lay surrounded by those who loved and trusted her Praise to Thee in Thy bounteous and omnipotent love; O praise" (p. 470).

Whitfield's confession,⁴ then, is only a matter of words. It is never fulfilled in deeds. Whitfield enjoys the credit of full confession and reacceptance without undergoing any of the suffering and opprobrium that would have ensued from an actual confession to Anse and Anse's neighbors. The point is underlined by Vernon Tull's comment upon the sermon that Whitfield preaches at Addie's funeral. In order to get to the Bundrens', Whitfield, coming on horseback, had had to cross the flooded river. Tull's comment alludes to this fact as he remarks on the discrepancy that he feels between Whitfield as voice and Whitfield as man: "His voice is bigger than him. It's like they are not the same. It's like he is one, and his voice is one, swimming on two horses side by side across the ford and coming into the house, the mud-splashed one and the one that never even got wet, triumphant and sad" (p. 404). Even Tull can sense that the sermon is sentimental rhetoric.

The various commentators on *As I Lay Dying* have made rather heavy work in dealing with Addie.⁵ She is sometimes seen as a "good" woman, much put upon, whose story is one of pathos and suffering, and sometimes as a wicked woman, deliberately punish-

4. See below, Notes, p. 400.

5. See below, Notes, p. 401.

ing the members of her family by playing a horrible joke upon them. Neither of these views is very perceptive. Addie is indeed a destructive force, but she is responsible for whatever of heroic temper the Bundrens achieve. She is a wicked woman, if you like (certainly a woman who has been warped and perverted), and she uses her energies for questionable purposes, but the Lady Macbeths and the Medeas—to name more celebrated and august members of Addie's sisterhood—have all been such mixed cases.

Though Addie Bundren has so small a speaking part in this novel, she possesses something of tragic complexity as well as tragic intensity. If she is perverted, her energy, her willingness to suffer, and her complete honesty with herself provide complicating virtues. In any case, she possesses a tremendous intensity, and her corrupting body is throughout the nine days' journey, in some sense, the most vital thing that rides upon the Bundren wagon.

Faulkner has employed various devices to suggest her vitality within the coffin. Anse will say not that Addie's mind "was" set on it but "is" set on it. The confused child Vardaman worries that she may suffocate in the box that Cash has made for her. The madman Darl tells Vardaman to put his ear to the coffin so that he can hear their mother talking—this eight days after her death—and Vardaman says that he can hear her, only he "can't tell what she is saying" (p. 495). Even the rather stolid countryman Vernon Tull at Addie's funeral has the feeling that "her eyes and her voice were turned back inside her, listening" (p. 404). Though Dr. Peabody, on the day of her death, says to himself that the still-breathing woman "has been dead these ten days" (p. 368), Addie maintains her vital power over her family for nearly another ten, until in fact she has finally been lowered into her grave.

In her increasing alienation from her husband, Addie sees as the difference between them the trickery of words and the implacability of deeds, but she soon comes to put the difference in terms of death and life. She says that she discovered that Anse was "dead." As she puts it: "And then he died. He did not know he was dead. I would lie by him in the dark, hearing the dark land talking of God's love and His beauty and His sin; hearing the dark voicelessness in which the words are the deeds, and the other

words that are not deeds, that 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. 466).

The romantic poets like Byron and Shelley, whom Addie may have read—she was a schoolteacher—would have understood very well what she was talking about. Byron, one remembers, yearned to find "words which are things." Addie resents mere words, for emptied of substance as they are, they stand as a fence between her and experience. She craves some more direct expression—the naked and bleeding deed: the welt raised by the switch on the limbs of schoolchildren, or the pain of childbirth, or the intimate communion that is possible between a woman and the child at her breast. She says, for example, that Cash, as a baby, "did not need to say it to me nor I to him" (p. 464).

It is a romantic and idealistic passion in which Addie is caught up. She was not for nothing the lost and lonely child of a father who used to tell her that the "reason for living was to get ready to stay dead a long time" (p. 461). Addie's concern for deeds and the fierce energy she associates with the earth may disguise her idealism, but it is idealism nevertheless, though of a passionate and devouring kind. What she has done is to transpose the spiritual (and, specifically, the Christian spiritual) into secular terms. Man must not simply vegetate—must not merely grow up like a plant and in due course flower, yield his fruit, and subside again into the nurturing soil. Addie believes that man must assert himself through some unique gesture to indicate that he has lived. She is in an agony to do so. Like the Ancient Mariner, she would gladly bite her arm and suck the blood in order to cry out in a language that will have meaning—a language of deeds and not words.

Other Faulkner characters exhibit this trait. Judith Sutpen in the novel *Absalom, Absalom!* tells Mrs. Compson that one tries to make some kind of impress upon life, then suddenly "it's all over and all you have left is a block of stone" upon which someone has scratched your name, and a stranger doesn't even know "what the

scratches were trying to tell. . . . And so maybe if you could go to someone, the stranger the better, and give them something"—she is bringing Mrs. Compson a letter—"something, anything, it not to mean anything in itself and them not even to read it or keep it, not even bother to throw it away or destroy it, at least it would be something just because it would have happened, be remembered even if only from passing from one hand to another, one mind to another, and it would be at least a scratch, something, something that might make a mark on something that *was* once for the reason that it can die someday, while the block of stone can't be *is* because it never can become *was* because it can't ever die or perish" (pp. 127-28).

Addie cannot be fully understood, however, unless we take into account her husband. Anse Bundren is one of Faulkner's most accomplished villains. He lacks the lethal power of a Popeye and the passionate intensity of a Percy Grimm, but the kind of force that he embodies has to be reckoned with. It is deceptively slight, as delicately flexible as a root tendrill but, like the tendrill, powerful enough to break a boulder. Anse resembles most nearly Flem Snopes—in his coolness, his sheer persistence, his merciless knowledge of other human beings and of how much they will put up with. A nice example is the way in which he gets from Dewey Dell the money her lover has given her for an abortion drug. The girl frantically tries to save her money. But Anse is like a ferret working his way toward the trapped rabbit. When Dewey Dell in her desperation tells her father, "If you take it you are a thief," Anse has his rhetoric ready at command: "My own daughter accuses me of being a thief. My own daughter." And reminding her that he has fed her and sheltered her, he laments that "my own daughter, the daughter of my dead wife, calls me a thief over her mother's grave" (p. 528). Besides, it is only a loan. "God knows, I hate for my blooden children to reproach me. But I give them what was mine without stint. Cheerful I give them, without stint. And now they deny me. Addie. It was lucky for you you died, Addie" (p. 529).

This scene stands as the prelude to Anse's coup which ends the novel. As the innocent but not imperceptive Cash describes it:

"Pa was coming along with that kind of daresome and hangdog look all at once like when he has been up to something he knows ma ain't going to like, carrying a grip in his hand, and Jewel says, 'Who's that?' " (p. 531). The luggage belongs to a duck-shaped woman with "hard-looking pop eyes," and Anse, his store-bought teeth now in his mouth, approaches the wagon and introduces his bride to her stepchildren: "It's Cash and Jewel and Vardaman and Dewey Dell," [he] says, kind of hangdog and proud too, with his teeth and all, even if he wouldn't look at us. 'Meet Mrs. Bundren,' he says' (p. 532).

Our attitude toward Anse—fury at his cheapness and pusillanimity, disgust for his essential callousness and cruelty, baffled admiration for the stubborn vitality which like that of some low order of organism allows him to fatten on what would starve nobler creatures and survive blasts that would kill more sensitive organisms, and, not least, a sense of simple awe at the sheer thickness of his skin—all of these attitudes qualify and determine the kind of comic figure that Anse is. But we must not underestimate him. He is not contemptible, a mere insect that one could and would like to squash underneath the foot. He represents a force probably necessary to the survival of the human animal though it is terrifying when seen in such simple purity.

The grim comedy that attaches to Anse does not, however, call in question the heroic quality of the Bundren adventure. Indeed, this novel beautifully exemplifies how comic elements such as Anse, the human buzzard, and horrifying elements, such as the actual buzzards, are in fact used to undergird the epic mode. The account of the river-crossing, surely one of the finest descriptive achievements in American literature, will illustrate.

Faulkner was skillful in his choice of the people who describe the crossing. It is a fine stroke to have Tull, the practical, earthy, and common-sense countryman, tell part of it. Tull is cynical about the Bundrens' motives for insisting on crossing the river: "Just going to town. Bent on it. They would risk the fire and the earth and the water and all just to eat a sack of bananas" (p. 438). But Tull can make us see the flooded stream: "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. 436).

But Faulkner also has Darl, whose perceptions are always instinct with poetry, describe the scene: "What had once been a flat surface was now a succession of troughs and hillocks lifting and falling about us, shoving at us, teasing at us with light lazy touches in the vain instants of solidity underfoot" (p. 444). And Darl, describing the catastrophe says: "Cash looked back at me, and then I knew that we were gone. But I did not realize the reason for the rope until I saw the log. It surged up out of the water and stood for an instant upright upon that surging and heaving desolation like Christ" (p. 445). Why like Christ? It would be hard to say, though the similitude seems inevitable and right. Is Darl remembering the passage in which the alarmed fishermen on Galilee see their Master incredibly walking upon the waves? But with the difference that this erect object, incredibly footing the water, moves toward them not to reassure but to threaten and astound? Perhaps so, or perhaps the force of the similitude is more general. The log, standing for an instant upright, is like Christ simply in its hint of supernatural portent, an astonishing assertion out of the mere flux of anonymity. (Later, Cora is to call the log "the hand of God.")

The passage that follows, which details the destruction caused by the log as it bears down upon the team and which depicts Jewel's surging horse and the mules for a moment shining black out of the water just before they are overturned—all of this is done with the fidelity that one expects from the dedicated observer, the habitual spectator, for that, as we have seen, is all that Darl is. Cash and Jewel agonize and struggle; Darl does not.

It is also a fine stroke on Faulkner's part to have the child Vardaman describe what happened just after the drowning of the mules and the coffin's slipping off into the water. Vardaman's account has the clarity of detail of the innocent eye, but also the confused subjectivity of Vardaman's anxiety. For the child it will be intolerable if Darl doesn't catch the coffin. Surely he will come

up with it out of the water. His failure to do so will be unbearable: "Then his hands came up and all of him above the water. I can't stop. I have not got time to try. I will try to when I can but his hands came empty out of the water emptying the water emptying away" (p. 448). But we also need, for our total comprehension, Tull's objective account as he tells his wife about it later. He puts it laconically: "How Darl jumped out of the wagon and left Cash sitting there trying to save it and the wagon turning over" (p. 448).

The same brilliance of description and narrative effect shows in the barn-burning episode. This account of Jewel's rushing into the burning barn and getting out first the animals and then the coffin is related principally by Darl. The descriptions are vivid: Jewel silhouetted against the burning barn appears "like a flat figure cut cleanly from tin against an abrupt and soundless explosion as the whole loft of the barn takes fire at once, as though it had been stuffed with powder" (p. 498). When Jewel and the Gillespies come to rescue the cow, "she is backed into the corner, head lowered, still chewing though rapidly." The men break an opening through the planks of the barn and in a moment the cow rescues herself: "with a single whistling breath she rushes between us and through the gap and into the outer glare, her tail erect and rigid as a broom nailed upright to the end of her spine" (p. 500).

Once the animals are saved, Jewel returns for the coffin. As he does so, it seems to Darl that the "hall-way looks like a searchlight turned into rain" (p. 500). Jewel rushes into the barn, crouches to the far end of the coffin and "for an instant he looks up and out at us through the rain of burning hay like a portiere of flaming beads" (p. 501). In a moment or two Jewel emerges with the coffin, "riding upon it, clinging to it, until it crashes down and flings him forward and clear and Mack leaps forward into a thin smell of scorching meat and slaps at the widening crimson-edged holes that bloom like flowers in his undershirt." This is sensitive reporting of a very high order indeed, and the more realistic elements in the account, including the grotesque detail of Gillespie's nightshirt borne ahead of him "on the draft, ballooning about his hairy

thighs" (p. 499) do not cancel out the poetry. They ballast and stabilize the poetry.

After the rescue, Vardaman watches Dewey Dell put butter and soot onto Jewel's blistered back and then finds Darl out under the apple tree lying on the coffin. "The moonlight dappled on him too. On her it was still, but on Darl it dappled up and down. 'You needn't to cry,' I said. 'Jewel got her out. You needn't to cry, Darl'" (p. 503). Darl's tears, of course, are shed because Jewel did get her out. Darl had hoped to end the horrible journey by cremating his mother's body.

The force exerted by the dead woman in holding her family together is underscored by our sense of the divisions within the family. One might argue that each of the Bundren children is making the journey alone, each shut up in his own consciousness and unable to communicate with the others. Jewel cannot understand Cash and is exasperated by what he takes to be Cash's insensitivity and callousness. He is outraged that Cash chooses to work on his mother's coffin near a window through which his mother can see him at his work.⁶ Between Jewel and Darl there is active hostility. Darl is bitter and even cruel in taunting Jewel for having a horse for a mother. The intensity of Jewel's love for his horse and the sacrifice that he has made to obtain it give special edge to the taunt. Yet there is no question that Jewel loves his mother and even Darl recognizes this, as, for example, when he observes what he calls "the furious tide of Jewel's despair" (p. 498).

The lack of communication extends through the family. Dewey Dell is unable to speak to anyone about her plight. There is a desperate need to talk to someone about her problem and yet there is literally no one to whom she can talk. The only person who is aware of her pregnancy is Darl, and him she fears and hates with a blind fury. Once their mother's body has been put into the grave, Dewey Dell joins Jewel in leaping upon Darl as they seize him in order to turn him over to the officers.

Jewel, too, is a passionate person who has no one with whom he can talk. Granted that there is a kind of nameless understanding

6. See below, Notes, p. 401.

between him and his mother, still it is nameless and unuttered, and his inarticulate poetry, the ardor and passion which he can express only through violent action, find no release in words—in part because there is no one with whom he can converse.

Cash, of course, has no poetry in him, articulate or inarticulate, and perhaps in him of all the family there is the least need for expression or for a sympathetic and understanding listener. Yet if Cash bears his relative isolation with patience and with no special sense of pain, he is nevertheless a baffled and lonely man. He reflects that he was born almost ten years before the three youngest children and therefore feels closest to Darl, but it is plain that he and Darl have very little in common. Cash shakes his head in puzzled reproach when he learns that it was Darl who set fire to Mr. Gillespie's barn. He is shocked when Dewey Dell and Jewel leap upon Darl in fury to turn him over to the officers, and when Darl breaks down into his crazy laughter, Cash is indeed at a loss. He says: "I be dum if I could see anything to laugh at" (p. 514).

The essential isolation of the characters is unobtrusively enforced by the fact that each part of the novel is presented through the consciousness of a particular character. We are always within one mind, never in some domain of objectivity and commonly held values. Often we are in the minds of sensitive observers like Darl and the child Vardaman. Darl has nineteen sections; Vardaman, ten. The sections assigned to all the rest of the family amount to only fourteen, and of these, Jewel, the heroically active son, has only one.

Faulkner's method of presentation allows us, on occasion, not only to penetrate into the depths of a character but to see him externally as others see him. Sometimes this external view is that of another member of the family; at other times, that of an outsider like Dr. Peabody or the druggist MacGowan. This technique of multiple presentation has everything to do with the solidity and power of *As I Lay Dying*. The author does not commit us to the experience and sensibility of one character whom we see only from the inside and whose world we apprehend only from his point of view. Instead, Faulkner has attempted the much more difficult role of putting us in some kind of sympathetic rapport with

an individual character and yet constantly forcing this character back into the total perspective of the world—the world of the family and the larger world of the community.

The presentation of Dewey Dell will illustrate. She looks at first glance like a rather stupid and selfish young woman, as in some sense she is. Yet in spite of her somewhat bovine simplicity, Dewey Dell has her secret terrors, her pathos, and even her shy dignity. When Dr. Peabody comes to see her mother, she yearns toward his knowledge: "he could do so much for me and he don't know it" (p. 380). But she is afraid to tell him what her problem is and feels to the full her alienation: "It's because I am alone" (p. 379). Later she reflects: "I don't know whether I am worrying or not. Whether I can or not. I don't know whether I can cry or not. I don't know whether I have tried to or not. I feel like a wet seed wild in the hot blind earth" (p. 384).

Incidentally, the reader must not be put off because Dewey Dell—and all the other characters for that matter—frequently in these interior monologues use words and expressions which we feel are beyond their education and background. This is one of the conventions which must be accepted in a reading of *As I Lay Dying*. The language with which the author provides the character to express his innermost thoughts is not necessarily the same language the author has him use when he speaks to another character. It would certainly not occur to Dewey Dell to tell anyone that she felt like a "wet seed wild in the hot blind earth."

On the wagon Dewey Dell, obsessed with her own problem, is conscious of being unable to indulge her grief for her mother. She says: "I wish I had time to let her die"—meaning, I wish that I were not too distracted to think of her dying. "I wish I had time to wish I had. It is because in the wild and outraged earth too soon too soon too soon. It's not that I wouldn't and will not it's that it is too soon too soon too soon" (p. 422). And in her despair she says to herself "I believe in God, God, God, I believe in God" (p. 424). But Faulkner allows us to see Dewey Dell through other eyes—those, for example, of the rather straight-laced Motson druggist, who notices that "she was pretty in a kind of sullen, awkward way," and who finally has to tell her that he wishes her "precious

Lafe had come for it himself; that's what I wish. . . . Me, a respectable druggist, that's kept store and raised a family and been a church-member for fifty-six years in this town. I'm a good mind to tell your folks myself, if I can just find who they are" (p. 487). He finally dismisses Dewey Dell with an admonition: "I haven't got anything in my store you want to buy, unless it's a nipple. And I'd advise you to buy that and go back home and tell your pa, if you have one, and let him make somebody buy you a wedding license." The author also lets us see Dewey Dell through the eyes of MacGowan, the less scrupulous druggist in Jefferson, who sees her as looking "pretty good" for a country girl, "one of them black-eyed ones that look like she'd as soon put a knife in you as not if you two-timed her" (p. 517). The account of MacGowan's prescription for what Dewey Dell has called the female trouble and of the "treatment" he gives her is comedy in the tradition of the medieval fabliau, but I find that it intensifies the pathos of the situation rather than canceling it.

Jewel, too, has an inner life—though little of it is revealed in interior monologue. He is high-strung and fractious, youthfully intolerant, lacking imaginative sympathy, shortsighted, and ignorant. Yet because of his real ardor and passion, his inner life has its beauty. The horse that Jewel finally sells so that his father can buy the team to complete the journey to Jefferson is his most precious possession. We cannot know how much this sacrifice costs him until we have from Darl the story of how Jewel paid for his horse, slipping out each night to work by lantern light in a neighbor's field and the next day working in his father's field. Darl says: "I have seen him go to sleep chopping; watched the hoe going slower and slower up and down, with less and less of an arc, until it stopped and he leaning on it motionless in the hot shimmer of the sun" (p. 429).

Darl first thinks that Jewel's nightly expedition has to do with a woman, but Cash, to whom Darl confides the secret, follows Jewel one night and learns the truth. But Cash does not let the rest of the family know what Jewel is doing; he just quietly takes over some of Jewel's work. The secret is not divulged until the morning that Jewel rides up on his pony. Anse is quick with his reproaches:

"You went behind my back and bought a horse" (p. 434). But Ad-die is overcome: "I'll give—I'll give—give—' Then she began to cry. She cried hard, not hiding her face, standing there in her faded wrapper, looking at him and him on the horse" (p. 434). And that night Darl finds his mother sitting beside the bed where Jewel was sleeping in the dark. "She cried hard, maybe because she had to cry so quiet" (p. 435). In saving the coffin from the river and from the burning barn, Jewel acts in character and makes use of his special talents. His sacrifice of his horse is less expected. In a sense it is the most heroic thing that he does.

It is Cash, however, who gains most from a multiple focus on his personality. Jewel possesses something of the poetry of action. Darl has the lucidity of the mad. But Cash's dignity and integrity scarcely shine forth—they are virtues too dull to shine—and we are hardly in a position to appreciate them until we have regarded Cash from a number of angles. More than one critic has been misled by Cash's inarticulate expression and his homely metaphors, drawn from the carpenter's trade, into taking him at the lowest discount. But Cash is no materialist; he is simply a very quiet and limited man, whose ideals are not showy but who has great power to endure and a great capacity to suffer without whining or complaining.

Cash also possesses more imaginative sympathy than may at first be evident. We have remarked upon the way in which he simply assumes a number of Jewel's duties when he realizes that his younger brother, in his passion to possess the horse, is attempting something beyond his powers. And Cash is sympathetic with Darl. He almost grasps the motives for Darl's actions on the journey. He says to himself: "I thought more than once . . . how it would be God's blessing if He did take her outen our hands and get shut of her in some clean way, and it seemed to me that when Jewel worked so to get her outen the river, he was going against God in a way, and then when Darl seen that it looked like one of us would have to do something, I can almost believe he done right in a way. But I don't reckon nothing excuses setting fire to a man's barn" (p. 510). But comprehension is not Cash's strong point. And Darl, after all, is insane.

The real difficulty with depicting a character like Cash, so patient, so uncomplaining, so passive in his acceptance of hardship, is that the reader may regard him as simply weak and stupid, and may laugh rather than sympathize with him. Faulkner's solution is to allow us to laugh at Cash. He does not play down the irreverent and mocking attitudes, but stresses them, makes them part of the total view, and thus wrests Cash's dignity out of the very jaws of comedy.

There are only five sections attributed to Cash, and the first three of these are brief and quite objective: Cash's justification for making the coffin "on the bevel," a short scrap of his conversation with Jewel, and an additional remark about the coffin's not balancing. The only meditative and ruminative passages allowed him are two that occur quite late in the novel.

Cash, then, begins as a kind of flat caricature, like a character in a humors play. We see him first working away at the coffin to the chuck, chuck, chuck of his adze, just outside the room in which his mother is dying. He is still a comic figure of a sort when he lies injured beside the flooded river, his tools carefully arranged beside him, with the wretched Anse muttering, "A fellow might call it lucky it was the same leg he broke when he fell offen that church" (p. 458). The horror of the grotesque contends with the comedy of the grotesque when the family, under Anse's direction, pour sand and cement around Cash's broken leg in order to set it in a crude cast. Later, when Cash is in agony, Darl recounts: "So we poured the water over it. His leg and foot below the cement look like they had been boiled. 'Does that feel better?' we said. 'I'm obliged,' Cash said. 'It feels fine'" (p. 495).

The problem of tone comes to a head in the exchange between Cash and Dr. Peabody. The doctor, having managed to get the homemade cast off the leg and having reset the broken bone, proceeds to say what he thinks of the way in which Cash has been treated. He remarks that a man might conceivably get into a position where he would let a veterinarian like Bill Varner patch him up as if he were a mule (this has happened earlier in the novel) but, he continues, "I be damned if the man that'd let Anse Bundren treat him with raw cement ain't got more spare legs than I

have" (p. 515). Cash gives the soft answer, defending even the unspeakable Anse: "They just aimed to ease hit some." But Peabody tells Cash not to lie there and try to tell him that he has ridden for six days on a wagon without springs, "with a broken leg and it never bothered you." When Cash replies that "It never bothered me much," Peabody remarks sardonically, "You mean, it never bothered Anse much." And he goes on to refer to what has happened to Darl: "No more than it bothered him to throw that poor devil down in the public street and handcuff him like a damned murderer. Don't tell me."

Continuing his questioning, Peabody learns that Anse is now returning the spade that he borrowed and he remarks: "Of course he'd have to borrow a spade to bury his wife with. Unless he could borrow a hole in the ground. Too bad you all didn't put him in it too. . . . Does that hurt?" (p. 516). Cash replies: "Not to speak of," though Peabody notices sweat drops "big as marbles running down his face and his face about the colour of blotting-paper." As the doctor works grumpily over the leg, he assures Cash that maybe next summer he 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." And Cash answers: "Hit's what paw says" (p. 516).

What does the doctor feel toward Cash? Pity? Admiration? Sheer amazement at his patience, irritation at his stolidity? Perhaps something of all of these. But not contempt, I should think. Cash has earned his right to be allowed to suffer in his own way. He is too sturdy and too solidly based to deserve any emotion elicited by weakness or moral pettiness.

The truth of the matter is that Dr. Peabody would probably not himself be able to describe precisely what his attitude toward Cash is. Our attitude toward Cash, of course, is not necessarily Dr. Peabody's, nor is our attitude toward any other member of the family that of our attitude toward Cash. And yet the problem that we have just been considering is a sort of paradigm of the larger problems raised by the novel. As Vernon Tull or Samson might put it, the Bundrens' exploit leaves us not knowing whether

to laugh or to cry. And more is involved than simple indecision or a stalemate between these opposed attitudes. Both the pathetic and the comic have scope in this situation: folly intermingles with heroism, and the total perspective in which we are invited to view the Bundrens' odyssey accommodates what would usually be regarded as hopelessly conflicting attitudes.

In the total perspective the contradictions prove to be only apparent. The surface of the Bundren 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. These people are not rhetoricians who talk 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 to what he sees with astonishment and fear. 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 much 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 self-conscious 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 and when it is not aware that it is remarkable. For a summarizing statement on *As I Lay Dying*, 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.

9

*Faulkner's Savage Arcadia:
Frenchman's Bend*

(THE HAMLET)

MORE THAN ANY other novel of Faulkner's, *The Hamlet* introduces us to a strange and special world. Frenchman's Bend, the little settlement built up around Will Varner's general store and cotton gin, together with the small farms that spread out from it through the hill country, constitutes a world of the poor white. The Negro has hardly any part in it. The Varners, it is true, have one or two Negro servants and there is a Negro fireman at the sawmill, but Negroes do not live in the community of Frenchman's Bend. There are none to be seen there after dark. Relations between white and black, which figure so powerfully in many of Faulkner's novels, have almost no place here.

In this regard *The Hamlet* resembles *Light In August* and *As I Lay Dying*. But *Light In August* is a novel about the town, and though countrymen constantly come into town, and though the townsfolk themselves are imbued with the folk culture, the atmosphere is quite different from that of *The Hamlet*. With respect to the social class of its characters *The Hamlet* more nearly resembles *As I Lay Dying*. A number of those who figure in *As I Lay Dying*, men like Tull and Bookwright and Quick and the Reverend Mr. Whitfield, also appear in *The Hamlet*. But the