

The Land of Consumption: Re-embodiment of *As I Lay Dying*

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1

While the descendants of the planters and the chattel slaves of the Old South play an essential part in William Faulkner's fiction, other white people, many of whom are poor and live by farming or small trading, also occupy much of his fictional world. The most productive years of his literary career is coincided with the period in which the proletarian novel in the United States is in its prosperity. Indeed Faulkner's novels and stories in the 1930s and early 1940s demonstrate the most extensive treatment of the southern poor white, new fictional heroes discovered by the literary left, and often reveal them either as the physically, mentally, morally deprived or as men of dignity, nobility, and integrity. The fact that Faulkner began working on *As I Lay Dying* (1930) on October 25, 1929, the day after the stock market crash had broken out on Wall Street, might be considered a significant coincidence.¹

This does not mean that Faulkner himself was politically or aesthetically attracted to the ideas of the literary left. Rather he disavows social or political commitment in art. His representation of the poor white, however, is neither unrelated to nor transcendent of the social and the political. We can infer his political stand as well as ethical conviction in light of his treatment of the characters such as the McCallums or V. K. Ratliff, with whom the author seems to have deeper sympathy than with the Snopes clan or the Bundrens. The most remarkable example of this tendency may be found in the story "Tall Men" (1941), which is, to borrow Sylvia Jenkins Cook's phrase, "a direct and highly polemical rejection of the New Deal." Cook, who follows the tradition of Marxist criticism and thinks highly of

“realism” as the most appropriate mode of social representation, continues to say: “elsewhere in the novels there is abundant evidence of a social conservatism that displays compassionate concern for the individual but staunchly rejects the possibility of furthering it through organizations or institutions.”²

In her analysis of *As I Lay Dying*, Cook evaluates Faulkner’s achievement in two antithetical ways; Faulkner, while using as a basis the stereotype of the poor white—shiftless, indolent, illiterate, and often vicious people—and the southern literary tradition of comical description of them, explores each individual’s consciousness and humanity and the values of the society; on the other hand, this very attempt deflects attention from fundamental social problems like poverty or exploitation of the lower classes.

The aim of this essay, however, is not to identify the political, ideological, or economical stand of the artist Faulkner in such binary oppositions as the upper and lower classes, agrarianism and capitalism, the South and the North, individualism and collectivism; rather I will try to redistribute the “modernist” work *As I Lay Dying* in the social and cultural conditions of modernity and to reconsider the novel in terms of consumption. In the following pages, special attention will be paid to the ambiguous fluidity of the novel and the process of modernization to which the novel is apparently opposed.

2

The following remarks in *As I Lay Dying* might be considered a commonplace but immediate response of a poor white peasant to the rapid social change in the American South.

It’s a hard country on man; it’s hard. . . . Nowhere in this sinful world can a honest, hardworking man profit. It takes them that runs the stores in the towns, doing no sweating, living off of them that sweats. It aint the hardworking man, the farmer. Sometimes I wonder why we keep at it. It’s because there is a reward for us above, where they cant take their autos and such.³

Of course we cannot take these Anse's words at face value, for he is presented as an indolent, hypocritical man. But these words may at least remind us of the alleged conflict between the ideals of the agrarian Old South and the myth of the New South Creed.

For Anse Bundren, the head of a poor white family (tenant or sharecropper), road construction signifies the modernization of the rural community and its devastating consequences. He curses at the road ("Durn that road" [31]), because it makes easier for the state authority to break into agrarian life so as to place taxes and even to replace the individual father's authority, and also because it brings into the village a variety of commodities and other cultural products of the urbanized world of abundance and comfort which would overshadow the worth of the traditional agrarian life and incidentally lead its personal and social integrity into change.

Putting it [the road] where every bad luck prowling can find it and come straight to my door, charging me taxes on top of it. Making me pay for Cash having to get them carpenter notions when if it hadn't been no road come there, he wouldn't a got them. . . . (32)

Anse's curse expresses not only one peasant's resentment against proceeding modernization that brought his family disorder and misfortune, but also the ethical, religious convictions general among southern farmers. Migrating from one place to another is a violation of the devine will which created "something to stay put" such as "a tree or a man" in "up-and-down ways," in contrast to "something to be always a-moving" such as "a road or a horse or a wagon" in "longways" (31-32).

This is not to say that the novel totally negates such a decomposing process of modernization as commodification of personal and social relations and reification of everyday life. Rather, as we will see, the Bundrens have already been composed in the dialectical history of capitalism.⁴ They even openly long for the emergence of mass consumer society along with the unfolding of industrial capitalism. We cannot overlook the Bundrens' desires for commodities: false teeth, abortifacient, electric toy, graphophone,

bananas. Dewey Dell Bundren is the one who holds the most immediate need for the development of technology and mass market. With abortifacient, she can at least entertain the possibility of controlling her body's reproduction and releasing herself from the patriarchal state law which prohibits abortion. Consumption is assumed here to be a system which urges the democratization of desire and assures the suppressed of material emancipation and comfortable life.

Money enters into the southern economy and culture in a way it has never done before; it constitutes and mediates the household in the rural South. When Jewel Bundren begins earning money secretly at night to buy a horse, he is too tired to do his daily jobs properly. His purchase of the horse evokes a crisis of economic authority in the family because Jewel has bought the horse not on Anse's "word" but on his own earnings. Later, during the burial journey to Jefferson, Jewel claims to pay for the extra hay for his horse to eat at Samson's or for the use of Tull's mule. His claim, which confronts the community's ethical code of charity, emphasizes intimate relations between personal dealings and business transaction. To put it another way, this reflects a degree to which money rules individual's mentality and forms interpersonal relationship.

Cash Bundren, at first, seems to resist the process of modernization. His devotion to crafting Addie's coffin might reveal his attachment to the paradigm of production which is supposedly replaced by the paradigm of consumption. This handmade coffin, the exact opposite of machine-made mass products, is designated only for its use value. But when it comes to his relation to his tools, things are a little different. His tools are valuable even when they are not used. It is not his family but tools that lessens the pain of his broken leg and gives him peace of mind:

He [Cash] tried to talk again; she [Dewey Dell] leaned down. "He wants to see them [tools]," she said. So Darl brought them in where he could see them. They shoved them under the side of the bed, where he could reach his hand and touch them when he felt better."(172)

Ultimately in his desire for graphophone (or more precisely, mechanically

reproduced music), we observe his hope for the expansion of mass market economy.

Anse, as we have seen, holds a grudge against the road, a symbol of disintegration, and criticizes his children for being strongly affected by the culture of consumer capitalism. But if we take a close look at his desire for false teeth, which he claims he needs in order to eat "God's own victuals as a man should" (33), we find the deep penetration of the logic of consumption into his mentality. He wants false teeth for other purposes than just a "comfort" (97) or use value. He obtains the teeth and they offer compensation for the loss of masculinity he might have felt. As implied in Cash's comment: "It [a set of false teeth] made him look a foot taller, kind of holding his head up, hangdog and proud too" (241), the teeth provide some appearance for Anse.⁵

Of course there are exceptions to all this. Addie and Darl Bundren are, as many critics noted, remote from other family members. Particularly Darl, because of his remarkable insight and his "objective", "reliable" narration, is considered a hero with an ironic vision or even an authorial character.⁶ Similarly, neighbors and friends of the Bundrens such as the Tulls, the Armstids, and Dr. Peabody offer critical views of the Bundrens. But this kind of narrative distance is not secured under the vast influence of capitalism.

So far we have made general observations on how *As I Lay Dying* represents the poor white peasants' ambivalence toward the disintegrative force of modernization, and how the Bundrens, with a few exceptions, are saturated with the logic of capitalism. With these points in mind, we will further discuss how the contradictions of consumer capitalist society are displaced into narrative conflicts and, eventually, resolved in the ending.

3

The fragmental form of *As I Lay Dying*, divided in fifty-nine monologues, provided by fifteen narrators, stands as a symptom of the disintegrating effect of modernization. This technical innovation works to explore each individual's private consciousness rather than interpersonal relations

among family or communal members. All the monologues, especially those of the Bundrens', are filled with private concerns and suspicious, critical, antagonistic views of others. Here emerges an image of the modern isolated self.

Poor white family members whose oral language is restricted to formulaic, ungrammatical, and practical utterances are allowed to have command over language, a range of philosophical speculation and poetic imagery that is utterly incommensurate with their alleged social status and cultural identity. For example, Dewey Dell, who is in many cases referred to as an ignorant, superficial, selfish country girl, in the private world of her language takes on a poetic quality.

The barn is dark. When I pass, he [the horse] kicks the wall a single blow. I go on. The broken plank is like a pale plank standing on end. Then I can see the slope, feel the air moving on my face again, slow, pale with lesser dark and with empty seeing, the pine clumps blotched up the tilted slope, secret and waiting.(56)

Even Vardaman, who is too young to distinguish the fish he took and his mother and repeats, "My mother is a fish [74, 89]," is permitted a range of philosophical speculation when he recounts his encounter with Jewel's horse in the barn.

Seen from the standpoint of the narrative convention of appropriate speech, the collaboration between utterance and character in *As I Lay Dying*, thus, takes a perverse form. Critics of the novel tend to see this kind of deviation from mimesis either as failed realism or as anti-representational aestheticism. But we can suppose this difference as textual indication of a gap between the private and public selves or of the split of the world into the personal and social spheres.

In some cases, a character's voice is occasionally detached from his/her body that logically utters it to such an extent that it might raise doubt about the propriety for us to name the characters' act as monologue. Darl, for instance, narrates the scene of Addie's deathbed and the way Cash completes her coffin and brings it with other men into the house though Darl

has never seen the scene or has never been with them. It is as if Darl were clairvoyant or omniscient, transcending the limits of space and time in the novel's realistic basis.

Similarly, Addie's sole monologue is placed in the middle of the Bundrens' burial journey, as if it were a posthumous voice. What this chronological displacement suggests is that her voice is an extreme example of disembodiment. It is a voice transcendent of corporeality and earthly experience. Just as Darl's voice assumes a kind of self whose integrity risks being lost in exchange for its ability to be linked with other's mind, Addie's voice defines a self as a series of connections of consciousness. Indeed, Addie is dead and absent from the ritual journey, but it is her voice that seems to relate the fragmented monologues with each other. Then it could be said that these disembodied voices are the moments of reintegration; they are textual gestures to mediate and reunify the reified relation between the individual and the world or the private and public selves. The novel's entire body is, to quote Eric Sundquist, "disintegrated yet carefully producing the 'illusion of a coordinate whole'" around the dying "I" of Addie.⁷ In her actual life, however, she remains "a private woman"(17) as her family and neighbors consider. Her private self is entirely different from her persona and others have no idea about what this self contains.

Addie's monologue explicitly articulates her criticism about both a secret, private thought and the socially constituted language. For her a secret thought or a state of "aloneness", which takes her back to her father's fatal words: "the reason for living was to get ready to stay dead"(155), has to be violated so as to experience authentic "living" and "touching" and to achieve wholeness. And language stands as a mere substitute for experience rather than represents authentic experience: "words dont ever fit even what they are trying to say at"(157). Here Addie seems to support the romantic ideal of intuitive comprehension, but she is unsatisfied with it; instead, she distinguishes between "the words that are not deeds"(160), socially defined language, and the words that are deeds, living words. Social language for her is "dead words"(161) and "just a shape to fill a lack"(158) but living words can attain authentic human communication and overcome the division of the self.⁸

Yet reunification of the gap between the private and the public that Addie intends is never realized because living words in her sense can only be obtained by personal definition. Since they are personally defined, her experience is necessarily incommunicable. The death of Addie and the putrid smell of her dead body might emphasize the defeat of this radical self. As Dorothy Hale notes: "the 'I' of the novel's title, the 'I' that lies dying, is not just Addie but the radical individualism that she embodies."⁹ The opposite of Addie is her husband. Anse is generally presented as lacking distinctive self. With no conflict inscribed, his self is identified as totally conditioned in the social process. Thus he survives quite contentedly in the world of consumer capitalism.

Monologues of their children demonstrate the conflict between the private and the public. And *As I Lay Dying* ultimately represents the triumph of the social over the individual self by showing that the children who do survive the conflict are those who can conform their private selves to the social process. If we examine the variety of language employed in Cash's monologue, we can see that his personal and productionist concern gives way to the norms of the social world which he mobilizes in order to justify family's turning Darl into the state authority in charge of arson: "there just aint nothing justifies the deliberate destruction of what a man has built with his own sweat and stored the fruit of his sweat into"(221).

Darl, unlike anyone of his family, keeps the private and the public perfectly separate. His private self is remained totally hidden, and thus he looks egoless in appearance. Yet finally he is no more able to straddle the split within his self than Addie is able to transcend the split within her. When the internal split within Darl's self widens to such an extent that he can no longer keep suppressing his private self, he sets fire to Gillespie's barn in order to burn Addie's coffin and corpse. Darl's self is never opened to others or linked with social motives. The society neither comprehends him nor is satisfactory to him, as Cash comments: "this world is not his [Darl's] world"(242).

As I Lay Dying, with its formal obscurity and stylistic eccentricity, has been disturbing critics of Faulkner, but the thread of the Bundrens' burial journey from Frenchman's Bend to Jefferson seems to make a dominant structure. The journey's immediate cause is the fulfillment of a promise to bury Addie with her parents in Jefferson. And all the characters seem subordinate to this public cause. The journey is beset by flood, heat, fire, difficulties of transportation and supplies. The family completes the journey by paying a high price: Cash's injury, the loss of Gillespie's barn, the loss of Jewel's horse in order to get a pair of mules, and Darl's commitment to the state asylum.

The subordination of the individual to the public cause is indeed only half of the story, for the characters have their own private motives of the journey that have little to do with its public cause. Private motive includes desire to have commodity: a set of new teeth for Anse, graphophone for Cash, abortifacient for Dewey Dell, toy train for Vardaman. It might be said that the Bundrens' ritual journey is activated by the economies of those private desires. *As I Lay Dying*, demonstrating a variety of confictions or interactions between the private and the public, ultimately reveals the unifying force of a system whose function is to control both the private and the public and to anticipate voices or subjectivities that reinforce its logic. Consumption produces individuals' desires and manages the exchange and distribution of commodities; and it is the logic of consumption that leads the narrative to its ending.

The novel, depicting the scene of Anse's introduction of his new wife to his children just a day after Addie's burial, concludes with Anse's words, "Meet Mrs Bundren" (242). The plot of *As I Lay Dying* traces a movement from the threatened disintegration of family unity to the reunification of the family through Anse's sudden remarriage. Although we are given some hints of his remarriage beforehand: Kate Tull says that Anse will "get another one [wife] before cotton-picking" (32) and Cash refers to a "Mrs Bundren" (225), Anse's new wife is a narrative surprise. This surprise, a moment of reintegration, is considered a device more typical of comedy.¹⁰

Seated in the wagon and eating bananas, the children are amazed to see their father putting on a set of new teeth and escorting the new Mrs. Bundren. The family loses its mother and Anse provides a new one. This is the crucial substitution that the novel offers so as to close the story of the Bundrens. More noteworthy about the new mother is the fact that the children's attention is not so much paid to her as to one of her belongings, graphophone. The ending underscores how commodities substitute for the unsatisfied desire of the members of the family and replace the family's lost members.¹¹ Bananas with their novelty, referred first by Dewey Dell in an effort to distract Vardaman's desire to know the reason of his mother's death and his longing for the toy train which he has seen in town, now ease and even compensate the family's emotional loss. False teeth, obtained with the money which Cash saved for a graphophone, not only enables Anse to eat food, but also makes him look nice and serves him to find his new spouse. Graphophone promises comfort and entertainment to the household of the working class.

The graphophone's music, as Cash thinks, sounds as "natural as a music-band" (218). This is of course an illusion, but it is a notable example of abstraction of live music to an object that can be stored and later taken out. Commodification separates the product from the circumstances of its production, but its reifying effect is, under twentieth-century capitalism, compensated by consumption, the process of substituting one commodity for another. In other words, consumption becomes a means for replacing relations between people and deflecting emotional loss. In this novel, it is the power of consumption that diverts the sorrow the Bundrens feel for Addie's death, assuages the uneasiness the family might feel for Darl's removal, and finally reconstitutes the family into a whole.

Faulkner referred *As I Lay Dying* as "tour de force" on several occasions and the work seems to be more deliberate and predetermined than other Faulknerian novels.¹² The novel, putting on the appearance of a machine-made object, is produced by the very process which, as often been claimed, it criticizes. As the crisis of disintegration turns out to be apparently resolved, we might interpret the novel as having the same functions as the graphophone and deflecting attention from the story of misery.

But, for the time being, it suffices to say that the novel anticipates a historical process that those poor peasants who cannot be assimilated into industrial capitalism as producers are incorporated into the society at the level of consumption.

Notes

1. Joseph Blotner, *Faulkner: A Biography* (1974; New York: Vintage, 1991) 248.
2. Sylvia Jenkins Cook, *From Tobacco Road to Route 66: The Southern Poor White in Fiction* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1976) 40.
3. William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, The Corrected Text (1930; New York: Vintage, 1987) 97. Subsequent quotations from *As I Lay Dying* are cited parenthetically in text.
4. John T. Matthews, "As I Lay Dying in the Machine Age," *Boundary 2* 19, 1 (1992): 74. Matthews analyzes in this important essay the way the novel mediates empirical reality of the modernized South by transforming it into aesthetic form.
5. Susan Willis, "Learning from the Banana," *American Quarterly* 39,4 (1987): 591. I am drawing on her essay especially for a formulation of the concept of consumption. As for a general observation on the function of commodities in consumer society, see also Jean Baudrillard, "Consumer society," in *Selected Writings*, ed. Mark Poster, trans. Jacques Murrain (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1988) 29-56.
6. See, for example, Donald M. Kartiganer, *The Fragile Thread: The Meaning of Form in Faulkner's Novels* (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P) 23-33.
7. Eric J. Sundquist, *Faulkner: The House Divided* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1983) 30.
8. For a related discussion on this point, see Carolyn Norman Slaughter, "As I Lay Dying: Demise of Vision," *American Literature* 61,1 (1989): 17-26.
9. Dorothy J. Hale, "As I Lay Dying's Heterogeneous Discourse," *Novel* 23,1 (1989): 13. Hale's analysis of the language of the novel focuses on the relation of the private to the public self.
10. Patricia R. Schroeder, in her comprehensive analysis of the novel's comic elements, shows how *As I Lay Dying* follows the classical plot of comedy: "Moving from one social center to another, the hero... overcomes obstacles to win his heroine and so join the community. Along the way the *pharmakos*... is expelled

- and the comedy ends with an unforeseen marriage and a wedding feast." Important to note is that comedy is basically a mode that celebrates the continuation rather than the transformation of the society. See her "The Comic World of *As I Lay Dying*," *Faulkner and Humor: Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha, 1984*, eds. Doreen Fowler and Ann J. Abadie (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1986) 34-35.
11. Willis 591-92.
 12. See, for example, James B. Meriwether and Michael Millgate, eds, *Lion in the Garden: Interviews with William Faulkner 1926-1962* (New York: Random House, 1968) 244.