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Author(s): Joseph R. Urgo

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*William Faulkner and the Drama of
Meaning: The Discovery of the Figurative
in As I Lay Dying*

JOSEPH R. URGO

WHEN CYNTHIA GRENIER ASKED William Faulkner in 1955 to explain why so many of his characters “are trapped by fate,” Faulkner responded that although the observation was accurate, the question was misdirected. A more relevant question, he said, would be to ask “*how* they go under,” to which he replied: “It’s to go under when trying to do more than you know how to do. It’s trying to defy defeat even if it’s inevitable” (Meriwether 221). Although such formulations are vintage post-Laureate Faulkner, the sentiment that human beings create their own circumstances despite the force of what appears to be fate is as old as any published Faulkner. “But mankind lives in a world of illusion,” Faulkner wrote in 1925, “he uses his puny powers to create about him a strange and bizarre place” (Blotner 350). In Faulkner, meaning must continually be either accepted or made by the human mind. Human confrontation with reality, then, is primarily an epistemological one in which the mind seeks control by signifying. “Our lives are summed up in sounds made significant,” according to Faulkner’s “Mountain Victory,” written in 1932. “Victory. Defeat. Peace. Honor. That’s why we must do so much to invent meanings for sounds, so damned much” (*Stories* 766).

Production of meaning by Faulkner’s characters resembles an interior drama, where the act of signification is central to the development of the fiction. In fact, Faulkner’s formal plots and storylines often emerge as secondary to this epistemological drama, and the conflicts that provide tension and suspense in the typical Faulkner novel are as likely to be conflicts of meaning and epistemological projection as they are likely to be conflicts of will, or intention. At least, conflicts of will or intention are almost always demonstrated by

Faulkner's narrative to flow directly from primary acts of conflicting signification. This dramatic production of meaning forms a motif throughout the major portion of Faulkner's work. However, whereas most readers of Faulkner would say that *The Sound and the Fury* marks the turning point in his career from apprentice to master, I would suggest that the turn was not completed until the Bundren family made its trip to Jefferson and laid the corpse of Addie to rest. When Addie is buried, simplistic notions of figuration and of the power of words are also put to rest, and Addie's mistaken "words are no good" is overcome, as will be explained here, by the triumph of Vardaman's emblematic "My mother is a fish." Vardaman, the youngest Bundren, emerges as the author-figure in the novel who will insist, as Faulkner would insist from *As I Lay Dying* onward, that his figuration is real—as real an alternative as any to the literal, or to what often passes in fiction as realistic.

At the University of Virginia in 1957, Faulkner talked often about conflict, giving variations on this statement: "I'm interested primarily in people, in man in conflict with himself, with his fellow man, and with his time and place, his environment" (Gwynn 19). This trio of human oppositions—self and self, self and other, self and circumstance—faced by "people" suggests an intellectual as much as a physical series of polarities. First, man is "in conflict with himself," with the preconceptions and values that he has inherited and that he carries with him, preconceptions and values which can blind him to reality and prevent independent, or genuine reaction. Faulkner states this conflict best in "Smoke," from *Knight's Gambit*:

But men are moved so much by preconception. It is not realities, circumstances, that astonish us; it is the concussion of what we should have known, if we had only not been so busy believing what we discover later we had taken for truth for no other reason than that we happened to be believing it at the moment. (24-25)

The drama of confronting historical events with one's peculiar vision and preconceptions is played out repeatedly in *Absalom, Absalom!*, for example, where the beliefs and anxieties of the present inform the "realities" of the past, and block the path to comprehension and communication.

Second, man is in conflict "with his fellow man." He is in eternal conflict with his fellows to communicate amid the cacophony of voices that in turn attempt to reach him. "We are like men trying to

move in water, with held breath watching our terrific and infinitesimal limbs," Faulkner wrote in "Ad Astra," "watching one another's terrific stasis without touch, and without contact, robbed of all save the impotence and the need" (*Stories* 407). It is a conflict of outward articulations, voiced and unvoiced, reflective of a jangle of human realities. In *As I Lay Dying*, for example, voices compete in an effort to define just what reality amounts to, and to define just what it is that is shared as "the real." Reality is repeatedly defied, in Faulkner, by the mind's capacity to define it and its power to configure it.

Finally, man is in conflict "with his time and place, his environment." He is the product of a particular set of historic circumstances with which he must struggle to form a world view independent of what is told or given to him, one that expresses his own vitality in reaction to the world, one which marks his place *in* that world. It is the failure to do this, or the perception that it is impossible to do this, that leads, or at least contributes, to Quentin Compson's suicide, Isaac McCaslin's repudiation of his "inheritance," Flem Snopes's ultimate stagnation. Conflict with "environment"—time, place, and circumstance—is the grounding for the humanist ecology throughout Faulkner's work; it is what forces people "to go under," as he told Grenier, doing more than they know how to do.

The drama of meaning is a motif in Faulkner's fiction that flows directly from a particular view of the nature of reality and of human understanding of reality. As conflict informs drama, so does conflict inform Faulkner's ontology. Throughout the Faulkner canon, meaning is not an external, fixed commodity *out there*, to be consumed, but the product (and often the by-product) of an eternal drama within and without the mind. It is a drama where human understanding is created and projected by the mind, reflected in the structures and the products of social realities, overturned by human conflict with inherited meaning and value, and created again. Meaning, understood as a drama that engages the mind, is not fixed and established but elusive and subject to change. What is *real* in Faulkner is not external "reality," and neither is it any particular view of reality. What is real in Faulkner is the drama itself, the drama of meaning continually reasserted, continually denied, continually remade, in eternal conflict with its source and signification. Meaning understood as a drama can no more exist independent of the mind than can the act on stage exist independent of the actor, the human subject and object of the drama.

This ontology leads clearly into polarity. On the one hand, it may serve to partially explain Faulkner's infamous asocial qualities, as

well, perhaps, as his capability for self-destruction. To hold to this view of reality is to hold to a kind of formal nihilism, where one would have to “know better” than to believe in anything fixed, or eternal, as true. Indeed, the best that one might do in the midst of the drama is, as Faulkner liked to chant, “endure.” As he told Grenier in 1955, what interested him was “trying to defy defeat even if it’s inevitable.” On the other hand, with “pity and honor and courage,” to quote another Faulknerian signature, one might master the arts required by the drama, and manage to leave one’s “Kilroy was here” on the wall (Meriwether 253). This is what occupied Faulkner throughout his career as a writer, what he said, in his Nobel Prize Address, was “worth writing about.”

Early in his career, during his own most intense period of production, Faulkner worked out the idea of the drama of meaning by demonstrating the way in which the drama is mastered. In *As I Lay Dying*, the meaning of death informs the epistemological drama and provides the basis for the trio of conflicts—between the self and the self, between selves, and between the self and its “time and place, environment.” Harold Bloom has called *As I Lay Dying* “Faulkner’s strongest protest against the facticity of literary convention” (3), and it certainly is that. In this novel, more so, I think, than in its more famous predecessor, *The Sound and the Fury*, Faulkner charted an aesthetic “discovery” of sorts, a discovery that would call into question a number of assumptions about “realism” and “facticity.”

Within the context of the drama of meaning, in other words, *As I Lay Dying* is *intensely* realistic. But the realism is of an epistemological nature, and the reality projected in the novel comes into perpetual conflict with the reader’s own “better” judgments. Nonetheless, the ammunition in this conflict is identified by Faulkner as consisting of a magazine of images, metaphors, and projections—of *figurations*—that characters volley at one another (and at the reader) in an effort to “know” what is happening to themselves, to each other, and to the environment. In *As I Lay Dying*, and, I suspect, in Faulkner’s own sense of his success as a writer of fiction, one’s role in the drama of meaning is largely determined by one’s mastery of the use of the figurative. There is no other way to enter into the conflict, to produce meaning.

The ontological concerns of *As I Lay Dying* form the core of Faulkner’s lifelong meditation on the creation and nature of existence and knowledge. For even though there seems to be no limit to the ways in which critics effectively confront the novel,¹ *As I Lay Dying* poses, and through its various monologues attempts to answer, a single, ontolog-

ically crucial question: Is life meaningless? The question of meaning and explanation permeates the novel, beginning with the basic motivation of the plot itself. Why are the Bundrens going to Jefferson? At first glance, the answer is obviously to bury Addie according to Anse's promise to her. But Anse is also going to Jefferson to buy new teeth. Dewey Dell is going in search of an abortion. Vardaman wants to see the toy train and get some bananas. Cash wants a "graphophone," and wants to work on Tull's barn on the way back and so brings along his tool box. The only two Bundrens who do not have a personal motivation for the family trek are Darl and Jewel; but Darl goes crazy and Jewel never really participates fully, except to put Darl away. Even Addie has a personal stake in making the journey: to get even with Anse. It is the living, however, who triumph in *As I Lay Dying*, as Anse turns Addie's vengeance to his own purposes. Life, in Faulkner's early novel, is meaningless for those who cannot or will not give meaning to it, just as it is controlled by the dead and the meanings bequeathed by the dead for those who will not wrest control. Viewed from the outside, the Bundrens' trip looks like some absurdist joke, but viewed from the inside—and here Faulkner's technique ceases to be "experimental" and should be understood ideologically—the trip is a demonstration of each character's relative struggle to wrest control by applying personal interpretation and value to their circumstances and predicaments.

If there is a "center" to *As I Lay Dying*, it is Addie Bundren, the woman who is dying, dies, and is buried in the course of the novel. Addie is the center of the novel's plot, the hub around which the monologue-spokes revolve, the "reason" carrying the Bundren wagon to Jefferson. Robert Dale Parker, in his analysis of "secrecy" in the novel, offers a perceptive "study of the individual secrets that Addie's secret inspires," and characterizes these secrets as symptoms of "the primal indefinability in every one of us" (49). But Mrs. Bundren, even if essentially unrevealable, is a bundle of contradictions, and her contradictions point to the novel's dominant epistemological concerns.

Addie says "words are no good" (163), but it is her "word" that compels the journey; it is her word, or request, that Anse bury her in Jefferson which moves the family. Addie says that the reason for living (in addition to "staying dead for a long time") is "the duty to the alive" (161, 167). But it is the duty to the dead that actuates the journey. Addie's attack on words, then, is essentially specious. She claims that words exist to take the place of real emotion or real things, but we see how Anse uses, or takes advantage of his word to Addie to

replace *her* with a new, improved (in the sense of being alive) “real” Mrs. Bundren. What Addie misses in her conception of words, then, is that unless the user of them charges them with significance they will remain what they are in the dictionary, simple potentiality.

The dichotomy between words and acts forms the basis of Olga Vickery’s essay on *As I Lay Dying*, but the dichotomy is, within the drama of meaning, a false one. According to Vickery, “Awareness of the difference between empty and significant ritual, framed in terms of the word and the act, dominates Addie Bundren’s dying thoughts” (53). This is entirely true, but it is the source of Addie’s *failure*, not her success; it is a misconception, not an “awareness.” Vickery points out that Addie realizes that words have “repercussions in the world of experience” and so distinguishes between the “empty words of Anse” and “words that are deeds” (54). However, Vickery does not point out that Addie’s insistence on this fixed dichotomy blinds her to the interchangeable nature of words and acts. Words may or may not become deeds, may or may not communicate, but the transformation has nothing to do with the words or deeds. The actors in the drama, who speak and act, determine, through conflict, which words will remain empty and which words will be filled with significance. Addie, assuming the existence of a fixed dichotomy between empty word and significant act, dismisses Anse as ineffectual. Vickery concurs, describing Anse Bundren as “completely blind to Addie’s intense desire for life and to her conviction that language is a grotesque tautology which prevents any real communication” (53). This merely privileges Addie’s eloquence over Anse’s more muted speaking part in the drama. Nonetheless, Anse’s “intense desire for life” is equal to Addie’s and is fully communicated by his mouth full of new teeth, and by his armful of new wife, both of which result from deeds informed by the filling up of Addie’s words.

What Addie misses is the symbolic vitality of words. What she bequeaths to Cash, her first born, is her literal-minded approach to life, her ledger-book morality and her sense of measured justice — all of which Cash converts into the principles of craftsmanship and physical productivity. Addie confuses symbols with “hard currency” (it took her three births to get from “Cash” to “Jewel”) and expects words not to “mean” but to “be.” As a result, she is disappointed by the apparent impotence, or falsity, of words. She lives by the deed and understands actions only, such as Cash’s demonstration of love in building her the best coffin possible (164). It follows, then, that in order to understand sin, Addie must physically experience it by committing adultery. And if life is a struggle to create in the face of

death, Addie will naturally pervert life into a simple preparation for death, and will need to understand life and death only by living and dying. This is why her postmortem monologue is so fitting to her. Only after dying does Addie have anything to say. Addie, who actually loves death—when she tells Anse “I have people. In Jefferson” (167), she means dead people—is a woman born to die. She abhors life (after creating life by giving birth to Cash she realized that “living was terrible” [163]) and welcomes her death, all because she is unable to communicate and considers herself, as a consequence, completely isolated. “My children,” she says of the products of her only “real” physical contact with others, “are mine alone” (167). If Addie stands for anything, or dies for anything, it is to demonstrate the absurdity of life without communication and the painfulness of repressed expression, in word *or* deed.

The ways in which the individual Bundrens cope with Addie’s death reveal their relative abilities and methods of rendering life meaningful, and of learning. Anse has a passive, consumer-oriented mastery of life: he simply replaces a used up wife with a new one. Cash constructs a new physical place for Addie’s body, maintaining a practical, literalist approach to life’s complications. Darl finds it impossible to assimilate his mother’s death because her death does not fit into his logical, ratiocinative—even if creative—understanding of phenomena. Jewel prefers either not to think about it, or, as Addie’s favorite, has repressed its meaning beneath anger. Dewey Dell’s response is to avoid repeating her mother’s fate by attempting to get off the cycle of feminine doom; that is, to have an abortion and not become a mother. Vardaman, finally, assimilates his mother’s death by asserting her spiritual immortality, or rather, her physical transubstantiation. He does this in his expression of the figurative, “My mother is a fish,” the culmination of the novel’s celebration of metaphor as a method of controlling, appropriating, and communicating meaning.

There is a dialogue that informs *As I Lay Dying*, a dialogue between Darl, who represents logic and rationality, and Vardaman, who represents the symbolic and the figurative. Between the two of them stands Cash, representing precision and production. Their three successive chapters (71-79) early in the novel set up the dialogue between Darl and Vardaman with Cash as a balancing influence. Darl’s chapter ends with his meditation on being “emptied for sleep”; Cash’s lists the thirteen reasons for making the coffin the way he did; and Vardaman’s consists of the line about his mother being a fish.

Darl opens the novel with a monologue that is a precise, imagina-

tive, and coherent narrative. His early observations are interesting—such as how to drink well water from a cedar bucket (10)—and penetrating, such as Jewel’s “mis-matched eyes” and Anse’s cramped, bent, and warped toes on his splayed feet (11). He has creative powers, as when he “sees” Jewel cross inside the cottonhouse (4), knows about Dewey Dell’s pregnancy by divination, and finds out about Jewel’s paternity by watching his mother’s attitude toward him (129). But Addie’s death throws Darl off that “path . . . straight as a plumb line” (3) on which he began the novel and into a realm where his ratiocinative powers can no longer satisfy him. His meditation on time and death comes on the first night he knows his mother is dead. In his thoughts, Darl tries to understand the passing away of his mother by comparing it to the lumber that is passing from one proprietor to another. The load of lumber, he thinks, “that is no longer theirs that felled and sawed it nor yet theirs that bought it and which is not ours either, lie on the wagon though it does,” exists in a kind of limbo (76).

Darl’s meditation here, and his similar concerns with time and space throughout the novel (101, 139, 198), reveal an effort to understand what has happened to Addie, to understand loss, by purely ratiocinative means. The connection between what has happened to Addie and the selling of the lumber is in the transformation of each from one state to another, from one definition to another, over time. But even as ratiocination it fails, because it considers time an absolute rather than a fluid quality. “Because if I had one,” Darl says of his mother, “it is *was*. And if it was, it cant be *is*. Can it?” (95). Darl cannot accept his mother as both “alive” in the past, in his memory and emotion, and “dead” as a physical being. He does not see the past and future as “created species of time,” in the Platonic sense, but as fixed entities, does not see time as “a moving image of eternity,” but as an absolute value or quality. Hence, his view of life and of the meanings that inform life is essentially static and constant, knowing nothing of the Faulknerian principle of epistemological drama, motion, and change.

Because Darl’s is an either/or world and not a world of becoming, his efforts to understand and communicate ultimately fall flat. He can articulate for others, and he can narrate effectively scenes that originate wholly in his imagination, such as the event of Addie’s death. But he cannot, finally, make any sense of his observations because he never makes his observations his own, and never pushes his impressions toward explanation. Darl demands, perversely, that his *idea* of things be proven externally, or logically. At the very basis of

the novel, however, is the philosophic position that personal worlds exist and conflict with one another, and that if there is a “center” of the universe it shifts with the observer as the observers shift in *As I Lay Dying*. Darl’s ratiocinative stance fails him because its reliance on logic leaves him unable to accept life’s ultimate contradictions. In his final chapter, he abandons his personal perspective entirely and speaks in the third person. Through his laughter, he says “no” to all of life—to the absurdities made emblematic by riding backward on the forward-moving train, to the family that has committed him to Jackson, and to himself—and does so by the paradoxical repetition, “yes yes yes yes yes.” His is a kind of liberating laughter, a grotesque laughter that purifies him and absolves him, but which also disqualifies him from comprehension and removes him, as Cash says, from “this world” (250).³

Cash assures the reader that Darl is “outside it too” just like “you,” the reader of the novel, in his penultimate narrative (226-27). Cash believes it will be “better for” Darl to be in Jackson than in the family (228), just as he knew it was better for Addie to be in a good coffin than a shoddy one: everything in its place. Although Cash, the craftsman, is not about to pass judgment on the relative sanity of Darl or anyone else (228), he will insist on a good job where everyone is in his and her proper place, acting sane. Whether life is meaningful or not is really of little consequence to Cash, and his craftsman’s attitude—his classic sense of the workings of things—tells him that a good job takes preference over the job’s purpose. Cash will never challenge the way the world is defined for him, but he will master the definitions and skills handed down to him. “It’s like it aint so much what a fellow does,” he says, voicing the structural principle of the novel, “but the way the majority of the folks is looking at him when he does it” (223).

It is in the character of Vardaman Bundren that the novel’s epistemological motif culminates, and through Vardaman that Addie’s self-destructive nihilism is effectively counterbalanced and perhaps overturned. Vardaman’s first monologue comes immediately following Addie’s death. He chases after her ghost and makes his first metaphoric observation: “The trees look like chickens” (52). His initial attempt to understand his mother’s death is based on a Darl-like kind of logic of causation and he blames Doc Peabody for killing her. When this fails to satisfy, he simply denies she really died (63). Then he makes a crucial connection between the fish he has caught and his mother. The fish, he says, “was laying right yonder in the dirt [and] now it’s all chopped up. It’s laying in the kitchen” now, he continues,

“waiting to be cooked and et.” Here he makes the imaginative, or associative, leap: “Then it wasn’t and she was, and now it is and she isn’t. And tomorrow it will be cooked and et and *she will be him and pa and Cash and Dewey Dell and there wont be anything in the box and so she can breathe*” (64).

When Vardaman announces, “My mother is a fish,” he has discovered the figurative. Vardaman applies to his mother’s death the principle of the fish’s transformation from an external part of nature to part of himself and his family: she is not dead but is a part of him now, and a part of everyone else she knew. Unlike Darl, who sees only things, or Cash, who sees only how things work, Vardaman sees how things change. He clings to his fish-image throughout the novel, claiming it to be his own (95), and relying on it to maintain his important faith that the putrid corpse in the coffin has nothing to do with his mother (187). In the same way that Anse appropriates Addie’s “word” for his own purposes, Vardaman has captured (or perhaps “caught”) the principle of the appropriation and projection of knowledge.

Through Vardaman Faulkner defines his fiction-making in a way that defends itself against the charge of being unrealistic or fantastic. The discovery of the figurative is the basis and supreme expression of the drama of meaning in human communication. It is not that “my mother is *like* this fish,” or that the meaning I make is *like* the external world, or reflective of it, but that my mother *is* a fish, my meaning *is* the world, my fiction *is* reality. All through *As I Lay Dying* characters try to explain and connect phenomena by saying things are “like” other things.⁴ Tull says the house holds his wife “like a jar of milk in the spring” (132). Darl says that Cash’s head turns “like an owl’s head” (102), that the raindrops “are as big as buckshot” (72), and compares Addie to “a handful of rotten bones” (48). Even the novel’s title is a cryptic reference to something *else*. What is happening “as I lay dying” or what am I like “as I lay dying”? What is signalled by the “as” in this title?⁵ The “as” immediately suggests that something is occurring “while” someone is dying. However, the temporal simultaneity is complemented by the suggestion of a phenomenological simultaneity, based on the frequency of metaphor and simile in the novel. What is death *like*? Is it like the loss of word and deed, the drama’s closed curtain, the end of conflict? Addie’s postmortem narration denies this. And for the other Bundrens, “as” Addie lay dead her words are transformed and the drama continues with someone else playing the role of “Mrs. Bundren.” Death seems to be what the living make of (and with) it.

It is never enough to describe a thing as being like another thing—Cash's head like an owl, Addie's body like rotten bones. True understanding, the kind of understanding that teaches and communicates, is achieved through figuration: applying the principle of what is understood of the owl, or the fish, or Addie, the mother, to phenomena which are problematic. In this way Faulkner demonstrates the way in which the human mind continually makes sense of the world—through association, through metaphor—in a continuing dance with external reality, a dance that amounts to the human drama of meaning. What the discovery of the figurative adds to the drama, though, is *appropriation*: to transform the universe from something mysterious and “out there” to something in which the human mind is “at home.” To say a thing is “like” something else—as many of the characters in *As I Lay Dying* actually do—is to create a distance between the things to be comprehended, and to maintain a distance between the knower and the thing known. However, to depict one thing as if it were another thing, to say “My mother is a fish,” is to digest it, as it were, and to make the problematic object a part of one's self. This is precisely what Vardaman does. As obtuse as the boy is, he is the only Bundren who has made the link between comprehension and the production of meaning. What Vardaman does is to create a text of his own: “My mother,” claims the author-Vardaman, “is a fish.” *As I Lay Dying* marks Faulkner's understanding of knowledge and of reality, an understanding of conflict and transformation, a summation of “sounds made significant” by usage and comprehension. In *As I Lay Dying*, words and acts are not polarities, nor do they exist in formal dialectic, as Addie might have it. Rather, they exist like mass and energy, in eternal transubstantiation, producing not synthesis, but each other.

Vanderbilt University

NOTES

¹A few examples: Millgate has an Auerbachian sense of the novel's realism: “Faulkner's principal purpose seems . . . to have been to enforce a reading of the novel, an interpretation of the Bundren family and its adventures at a much higher and more universal level than either the characters or the action would seem at first sight to require or even deserve.” Millgate sees the novel as “a primitive fable of human endurance, an image of the tragi-comedy of all human experience” (110). Elizabeth Kerr in “*As I Lay Dying* as Ironic Quest” notes that Faulkner's “tendency . . . to use mythical themes in a realistic framework” is particularly evident in this

novel (Wagner 241). Vickery stresses human isolation: "The need to cooperate during the journey merely disguises the essential isolation of each of the Bundrens and postpones the inevitable conflict between them" (50). Goldman sees the *story* assuming a vitality of its own, over any constraints of realism: "He [Faulkner] implies that what was there to be seen in individual portions of an action had to be said, regardless of whether, from a realistic point of view, there was anyone *there* likely to say them. The fabric of the novel is thereby striated, with no simple unity of narrative structure along a horizontal plane" (174). Brylowski sees "the unifying principle of *As I Lay Dying* . . . in the rhythm of the cyclic process of life and death, an affirmation of life in the face of death and the forces of nature which deal out both life and death" (86). Reed emphasizes the parallel divisions of comedy and tragedy, and outsider and insider perspectives in the novel. Although much of the novel is comic, the comedy ceases once the reader becomes an involved participant. According to Reed: "Once we are involved participants in the family, even though our participation is tenuous . . . we must share individual compulsion, isolation, and ultimately, tragedy" (88).

²The quotation is from Plato's *Timaeus* (1167). Faulkner's comments in Virginia about "the mystical belief that there is no such thing as *was*," echo the language of the *Timaeus* (Gwynn 139).

³Compare Bakhtin, "Laughter purifies from dogmatism, from the intolerant and the petrified; it liberates from fanaticism and pedantry; from fear and intimidation, from didacticism, naivete and illusion, from the single meaning, the single level, from sentimentality" (123).

⁴Reed suggests a thematic function: "The catalog of metaphors and similes adds up to less than one might want it to, perhaps, until one realizes the rather unpredictable function of all these metaphors, the emphasis of grotesque distance, corresponding to the tension between our subjective empathy with the Bundrens which leads to a perception of tragedy and our objective ridicule which leads to a sense of them as comic" (97). Calvin Bedient also stresses the primacy of the simile in the novel in "Pride and Nakedness: *As I Lay Dying*" (Cox 219-20).

⁵The significance of the "I" in the title is not entirely clear. For example, Melvin Bachman, in "Addie Bundren and William Faulkner," claims that it may refer to Faulkner himself, "the threatened artist" (Carey 22); Levin cites the source of the title, taken from book eleven of the *Odyssey*, as a speech made "to denounce the cruelty of Clytemnestra and of all women in general" (111).

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