William Faulkner's As I Lay Dying: What the Grotesque is Trying to Say At

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> "That was when I learned that words are no good; that words dont ever fit even what they are trying to say at."
>
> "Addie," 99.

> "Of all Faulkner's novels, it is the most opaque, the most enigmatic, the one most uncannily attuned to the sheer wonder and terror of reality."
>
> André Bleikasten, "For/Against an Ideological Reading," 48.

A dying woman. A coffin in the making. Buzzards keeping guard. Then, later on: a rotting corpse, broken and mad bodies.

Faulkner's novel *As I Lay Dying* stages some of the most compelling protagonists of the gothic genre. However they stumble against other elements that— like the water of the river—cannot be crossed without creating a rupture: a narrative and cognitive rupture. Soon after the reader has started reading, he/she cannot get around the fact that the text resists hermeneutic closure through its uncanny layout, imagery, temporality, characterization, and structure. As Michael Gorra puts it in his introduction to the Norton Edition, it is—among other peculiarities or "ludicrosities" (a Faulknerian term used in one of the Darl sections)—"a novel in which one character provides an eyewitness account of events at which he was not present and another speaks from beyond the grave" (ix); it triggers in the reader a sense of dislocation where the issue of reliability is irrelevant, or even incongruous. Moreover, the frequent collapsing of the comic into the terrifying calls forth another genre: the grotesque.

As a genre, the grotesque plays on the tension between *mimesis* and *poesis*—the referent and the writing of this referent. It constitutes one of the clearest signs of Faulkner's departing from the clear-cut medium of realistic writing. It provides one way to consider and engage with the unusual dimension of the Faulknerian text not to explain it away, but to enhance and contextualize it within the larger social and cultural resonance of the work; it offers an entry into its Southernness, in

particular a legacy of violence and haunting, with the occasional intrusion of the supernatural or the visionary.

This article proposes to consider Faulkner's handling of the grotesque genre within a larger consideration of its significance in *As I Lay Dying*. I will start with a brief theoretical exploration of its tenets before analyzing the way Faulkner weaves them into his gothic script of a corpse "speaking from the grave" to use Gorra's image. The novel twists its central event—Addie's burial—and prop—Addie's corpse—and sets in motion a reflection on the importance of the body (in particular the female body) in Southern culture. Addie's corpse constitutes a historical disturbance that cannot be erased, as the plot elements reveal. Living, Addie's life revolved around a form of self-effacement. Dead, she hovers over the living through a physical materiality (weight, smell, size) that *will* just *not* go away. The title echoes the paradox of a voice finding agency on the *verge of* and *in* death. A corpse comes back to haunt the Southern psyche in a culture that has turned the living human body into "property."

Theoretical Background

If the grotesque as a genre has raised a lot of questions and issues, its origins are well known. The term itself is derived from the Italian term *Grottesco*, meaning cave, and it first referred to the strange motifs found in the collapsed and partly underground ruins of Nero's *Domus Aurea* in the 15th century that combined human, animal and vegetal motifs. Because of the uneven surface of the ceiling, they seemed distorted. They became very popular, and inspired many artists; they invited imitation and unleashed exuberant creative energies. The word "grotesque" came to be associated with both what it represented and the effect it triggered—comic but also terrifying in its uncanniness. Its main features—enriched over the centuries and extended to other artistic forms beyond visual arts—include the following: exaggeration, deformity (the physical distortion often symbolizes the mental or emotional one, and/or the dysfunctional societal elements), incongruity, name humor and puppet-like characters, dark humor, irony, hyperbole and excess, the fusion of categories (in particular the animate/inanimate), and tonal shifts. The term grotesque is used as an adjective (as in a grotesque *effect* or *situation*) and as a noun (as in *a* grotesque or a *gallery of grotesques*, meaning a grotesque creature or character). The economy of the grotesque relies on the bizarre, the unpredictable, suddenness, surprise, and shock. The aesthetic dimensions of the grotesque take on political

resonances that perform cultural work. Thus, through its alternative mode of representation, the grotesque often functions as a form of countercultural discourse. It includes a didactic element as it focuses on dysfunctional social codes and habits, moral contradictions, psychological distortions, and emotional conflicts. Most importantly, the dialogue between the comic *and* the terrifying forms its core feature, and distinguishes it (as such) from the gothic (which is characterized by the presence of tragedy *and* terror). When encountering the grotesque, we feel what William Van O'Connor describes as "an assault on our senses, reason, emotions, and cognitive expectations" (3).

Enter The Grotesque, Made in Yoknapatawpha

The first section of *As I Lay Dying* (narrated by Darl) provides a form of tutoring into the way the grotesque shapes the world of the novel into meaning. It features most of its tenets, in particular the following: distortion, incongruity, the blending of realities and blurring of boundaries, hyperbole, and excess. The novel opens on an incongruous noise that signifies the uncanny labor of a saw destined to rot in the ground. The sentence inversion points to the estranging purpose of the task: "A good carpenter, Cash is" ("Darl," 3).

First, the adjustment of the boards into a coffin provides a literal image for the way the grotesque functions: it fits two realities (the implicit model and its distorted representation) to construct a third reality (the revising effect of "the same with a difference"). [1] The planks themselves are compared to "soft gold"—an incongruous comparison triggered by the color of the planks: "They are as yellow as gold" ("Darl," 3). Yet, the conjured up image of gold sets in motion a referential line prolonged by Darl's further remark: "bearing on their flanks in smooth undulations the marks of the adze blade" ("Darl," 3). This blurring of boundaries extends into another border crossing: the vision presiding over the making of the coffin renders the line between life and death porous.

The coffin is indeed designed to be comfortable even though its "tenant"—to use Poe's image in "The Fall of the House of Usher"—is dead. The excess encoded in the notion of providing a "comfortable" coffin—absurd as it appears at first—becomes grotesque when considered as a sign of the terrifying dimension of death in its radical

[1] For more on the economy of *mimicry* as applied to the grotesque genre, see Liénard-Yeterian, "Écriture du marginal."

Otherness. The hyperbolic activity speaks for the resistance of the living *to think* death as *death*; instead, some projection of the economy of life is superimposed on to the relentless logic of death. The "confidence and comfort" that the coffin is supposed to give a living/dead Addie sounds all the more ironic in view of the later fate of the coffin in water and fire.

In addition, Darl's description of Jewel initiates the characterization pattern of endowing human with non human features, a key narrative strategy of the grotesque mode: "His pales eyes like wood set into his wooden face…" ("Darl," 3). Other images are frequently added to qualify and broaden the character, turning him/her into an emblem: "he crosses the floor in four strides with the rigid gravity of a cigar store Indian dressed in patched overalls and endued with life from the hips down…" ("Darl," 3). The overall instability of the referential economy makes for more grotesque insertions and suggestions, as in the following where "carpenter" and "box" are fused together to create a "third dimension," so to speak: "A good carpenter. Addie Bundren could not want a better one, a better box to lie in" ("Darl," 4).

Last but not least: the visual play—in keeping with the generic roots of the grotesque—creates an arresting drama on the page—a performance of blanks or shapes rehearsing (or even acting out) on the formal stage the eccentricities of characters and narrative. Darl's final statement reads (or shows…): "I go on to the house, followed by the

> Chuck. Chuck. Chuck.
> of the adze. ("Darl," 4)

The triplet "chuck"—a "*bibelot d'inanité sonore*," as Mallarmé might suggest—operates a rupture, poised as it is between onomatopoeia (the sound of the saw—unless it is the very sound of Darl's mind…) and nickname, opening an intricate dance of blanks, gaps, and interstices to be *fitted*, like the planks of the coffin, and waiting to be filled by meaning—body or corpse?—before being shifted around on the wagon of the sentence, engaged in a journey composed by the remaining 58 sections. A relentless Odyssey indeed, with twists and turns.

The Grotesque Body

The central element of the grotesque mode is the handling of the body, as the physical constitutes the primary vector of the grotesque. Bakhtin is one of the most important theoreticians of the "grotesque body" with its emphasis on the materiality of the "lower functions"—in

Dewey Dell's own image, the body is "a tub of guts" ("Dewey Dell," 35). In the Southern context, the materiality of the body—in particular the female body—is concealed (even repressed) and contained within cultural diktats and imperatives (such as "Ladyhood" or "code of honor"). Yet, in the work of Southern female authors like Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers and Flannery O'Connor, the female body exceeds the boundaries of propriety and decorum, or even its size through the figure of the female Gargantua (see Yaeger, and Liénard-Yeterian, "The Female Grotesque" and "Le Gargantua sudiste (féminin)"). In Faulkner's novel, as in Sofia Coppola's recent adaptation of *Beguiled*, it comes back with a vengeance.

In *As I Lay Dying*, the female body is rendered grotesque by anguish and disease. Dewey Dell's upcoming physical distortion as a result of pregnancy becomes an incongruity because of the out-of-wedlock context. Her swelling body speaks for an excess that displaces codes, yet results in its terrifying "predicament." The carrying of the cakes on the mortuary march emblematizes the young woman's "ludicrosity" in the context of Southern propriety. Addie's body is tampered with and damaged beyond repair, breaching canons of female beauty—a freak that transgresses the boundaries of decorum through its disturbing and haunting materiality. First through its weight:

> For an instant it resists, as though volitional, as though within it her pole-thin body clings furiously, even though dead, to a sort of modesty, as she would have tried to conceal a soiled garment that she could not prevent her body soiling. Then it breaks free, rising suddenly as though the emaciation of her body had added buoyancy to the planks or as though, seeing that the garment was about to be torn from her, she rushes suddenly after it in a passionate reversal that flouts its own desire and need. ("Darl," 57)

Then, through its stench, it brings attention to its decaying state, an uncomely reminder of the encroachment of death upon the living: "We lower it carefully down the steps. We move, balancing it as though it were something infinitely precious, our faces averted, breathing through our teeth to keep our nostrils closed" ("Darl," 57). The materiality of the grotesque body collides with cultural norms of social body language (literally), and transgresses mourning rituals and customary funeral practices.

More largely, the grotesque effect relies on the frequent strategy of blending or conflating different elements—a grotesque tool also used very successfully by Flannery O'Connor, for example. Human life is often endowed with animal or mineral. For example, Tull describes Anse as a "felled steer" ("Tull," 42). When Anse decides to continue the journey even though Cash is suffering, Darl notes that "his face [is] still as a rock" ("Armstid," 111). Dewey Dell's description of Peabody provides another striking example: "I can see Peaboby's back like two round peas in two thimbles: perhaps in Peabody's back two of those worms which work surreptitiously and steady through you and out the other side and you waking suddenly from sleep or from waking, with on your face an expression sudden, intent, and concerned" ("Darl," 60). Sometimes, the description collates human and natural elements to expose the pervasive harshness of the protagonists' world. For example, Peabody compares Addie to "a bundle of rotten sticks" ("Peabody," 26); Vardaman's reaction to Addie's death owes to the grotesque economy of colliding two sets of references, exposing how death fractures the ordinariness of life: "He begins to move slowly backward from the bed, his eyes round, his pale face fading into the dusk like a piece of paper pasted on a failing wall, and so out of the door" ("Darl," 29).

A Gallery of Grotesques

As I Lay Dying is often seen as the "white trash" or "redneck" version of *The Sound and the Fury*. It stages a gallery of grotesques—a "human zoo" in Richard Marius's image (3)—where physical distortions are signs of other types of distortion (moral, emotional, and psychological). The reader is faced with a line of highly distorted and enigmatic characters acting out (or working through) paradoxical situations, and uttering linguistic conundrums.[2] At times, they resemble pawns performing a mock epic journey, faced with the anti-heroic predicament of bringing a beloved to her final resting place in her overwhelming "materiality." The coffin—and what happens to it—becomes the prop of the comedy of errors performed in front of our "de-scaled" eyes (in Racine's image of *les yeux decillés*). The use of the grotesque in characterization and situation indeed forms the core of Faulkner's translating concrete situations into larger—universal—terms and postures.

[2] The viewer of the recent movie *The Square* feels quite at home!

After focusing on two human grotesques (Addie and Anse), I will discuss the river as another grotesque protagonist, and explore briefly what can be called a grotesque bestiary. The central figure in this gallery of grotesques is Addie. We first encounter her through Cora's portrait that combines human and non-human features: "Her face is wasted away so that the bones draw just under the skin in white lines. Her eyes are like two candles when you watch them gutter down into the sockets of iron candle-sticks" ("Cora," 6). The overall effect bespeaks the dehumanizing effect of agony and coming death. A few pages later, Jewel notes: "…her hands laying on the quilt like two of them roots dug up and tried to wash and you couldn't get them clean" ("Jewel," 10). Such an image translates the repulsive dimension of sick flesh, deconstructing the canonical and "clean" narratives of death. Addie in her bed appears like a grotesque repetition of other women—docile and subdued—on their own deathbed. As Tull explains:

> It's a hard life on women, for a fact. Some women. I mind my mammy lived to be seventy and more. Worked everyday, rain or shine; never a sick day since her and then she went and taken that lace-trimmed night gown she had had forty-five years and never wore out of the chest and put it on and laid down on the bed and pulled the covers up and shut her eyes. "You will have to look out for pa the best you can" she said. "I'm tired." ("Tull," 18)

But Addie refuses to go away quietly. Instead of "kind" words, she delivers a scalding indictment of the conjugal bond (and bondage). Moreover, the different incongruous images to refer to Addie as a mother (fish, horse, rabbit) signify the multi-faceted filiation in the wake of adultery.[3] The superimposition of the image of light or lamps with Addie's gaze becomes the central motif of her passing away. Peabody indicates: "Her eyes look like lamps blaring up just before the oil is gone" ("Peabody," 27); as for Darl: "She looks at Vardaman; her eyes, the life in them, rushing suddenly upon them; the two flames glare up for a steady instant. Then they go out as though someone had leaned down and blown upon them" ("Darl," 28). The comparison suggests the reifying effect of poverty and agony endured by Addie.

[3] See "Vardaman," 58-59, for example.

Her last portrait calls forth a portrait of death itself in its immobility and unbending quality: "It is like a casting of fading bronze upon the pillow, the hands alone still with any semblance of life: a curled, gnarled inertness…" ("Darl," 30). Dead, Addie remains a freak. She was made to wear her wedding dress and had to be put in the coffin in a way so as not to crush her dress, in a grotesque reversal of the order imposed by custom and practicality: even in death, the conjugal bond operates as some kind of constraint.

In general, Addie's characterization features the frequent in-betweenness of the grotesques. She is poised between sleep and final sleep, as the ambiguity of the verbal form in the title reveals. Her section—situated in the middle of the novel, a balancing narrative act between analepsis and prolepsis—revolves around a textual blank: "The shape of my body where I used to be a virgin is in the shape of a and I couldn't think *Anse*, couldn't remember *Anse*" ("Addie," 100). Retrospectively, *and* in *some* foreboding, such a rupture opens a space for the reader to play out her/his imagination, to make sense of what she/he has read and will be reading—a site where words "are trying to say at," to paraphrase Addie's most puzzling statement. The hole on the page opens a gap between the said and the unsaid; it *mimics* the contours of and *figures* absence. The reader is left with an incongruous riddle: what comes first? The white lack or the words around it? The shape of the coffin or the body in it? What is concealed and what is revealed?

The first portrait of Anse (by Darl) revolves around the uncanny element of his lack of sweat and the narrative he feeds his family to justify his laziness, which conveys his overall aloofness and hypocrisy: "There is no sweat stain on his shirt. I have never seen a sweat stain on his shirt. He was sick once from working in the sun when he was twenty-two years old, and he tells people that if he ever sweats, he will die. I suppose he believes it" ("Darl," 11). This incongruous situation for a farmer who has to work in the field betrays his later hyperbolic lie. He *will* abide by Addie's word but, as we discover at the end of the novel, the avowed reason for sacrificing his family's health, well-being and resources is (another) lie: he is indeed "fixing" to get new teeth, and a new wife!

Moreover, Anse is often compared to a bird, which conjures up the equally recurring comparison of the buzzards with an old man. Darl presents Anse as a bird-like figure: "Pa leans above the bed in the twilight, 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" ("Darl," 29). After the river crossing disaster, Darl remarks: "Pa comes back long the bank. He stops for a while and looks at us, hunched, mournful, like a failing steer or an old tall bird" ("Darl," 93). Such an image conjures up his predatory nature. More largely, Anse's physical distortion is a sign of his moral distortion, in particular his self-centeredness and dishonesty. His inhuman dimension is also expressed in terms of wood material: "He looms tall above us as we squat; he looks like a figure carved clumsily from tough wood by a drunken caricaturist" ("Darl," 94).

In addition to human protagonists, let us consider the non-human grotesques: the river and a bestiary also occupy center stage in Faulkner's repertoire of incongruous figures. The river is presented as a monster: "Before us the thick dark current runs. It talks up to us in a murmur become ceaseless and myriad, the yellow surface dimpled monstrously into fading swirls travelling along the surface for an instant, silent, impermanent and profoundly significant, as though just beneath the surface something huge and alive waked for a moment of lazy alertness out of and into light slumber again" ("Darl," 82). It swallows everything on its path and has a two-fold nature—elemental and human: "Above the ceaseless surface they stand—trees, cane, vines—rootless, *severed* from the earth, spectral above a scene of immense yet circumscribed desolation filled with *the voice* of the waste and *mournful water*" ("Darl," 82; my emphasis): the drifting signifiers of the earth signify its primeval chaos in a scene that paves the way for the convict sections of *If I Forget Thee Jerusalem*. The predatory violence of the elements is a token of the adversity encountered in life as epitomized in the fragmented, dismembered, or truncated grotesque body:

> Jewel and Vernon are in the river again. From here they do not appear to violate the surface at all; it is as though it had *severed* them both at a single blow, the *two torsos* moving with infinitesimal and *ludicrous* care upon the surface. It looks peaceful, like *machinery* does after you have watched it and listened to it for a long time. As though the clotting which is you had dissolved into the myriad original motion, and seeing and hearing in themselves blind and deaf; fury in itself quiet with stagnation. Squatting, Dewey Dell's wet dress shapes for the dead eyes of three blind men those mammalian *ludicrosities* which are the horizons and the valleys of the earth. ("Darl," 94; my emphasis)

No wonder, perhaps, that the grotesque is named explicitly in a passage that proposes a climactic exploration of the comic and terrifying dimensions of the human condition: the pantomime-like battle of the elements stages its "ups" and "downs," trials and errors—the tribulations of the actor strutting on stage, to use the Shakespearian image. The chaos in the water destroys categories, wreaking referentiality so to speak: "The head of one of the mules appears, its eyes wide; it looks back at us for an instant, making a sound almost human. The head vanishes again" ("Darl," 86). The head of the mule can be read as a synecdoche for all the destruction: animal, material, vegetal and human. The horse, too, is "moaning and moaning like a natural man" ("Tull," 89). Cash, after being kicked by the horse and fighting the monstrous waters, "looked just like a old bundle of clothes kind of washing up and down against the bank" ("Tull," 89) and "his face is gray, his hair plastered in a smooth smear across his forehead as though done with a paint brush" ("Darl," 90). More dead than alive, he is laid "on top of Addie" ("Darl," 105), vomiting and bleeding—his bodily fluids becoming symptoms of the materiality of the grotesque body/excess.

A Grotesque Bestiary

The most striking cast of the grotesque bestiary stages the buzzards; like ghosts or specters haunting the living, they mark the frequent intersection of the grotesque with the gothic. Such is Darl's depiction: "High above the house, against the quick thick sky, they hand in narrowing circles. From here they are not more than specks, implacable, patient, portentous" ("Darl," 55). The buzzards—ever present—would prey on the living, too. They are endowed with human qualities in a fluidity that is reversible; sometimes humans become buzzards, as in the following comment narrated by Jewel: "And now them others sitting there, like buzzards. Waiting, fanning themselves" ("Jewel," 10). The blurred boundaries human/animal reveal the predatory quality of human needs or expectations, with the effects of poverty in particular, and a taste for morbidity along with a voyeuristic streak.

Another example is found in a chapter narrated by Samson when he overhears something and thinks one of the Bundrens is still in the barn:

> … then I saw what it was. It was a buzzard. It looked around and saw me and went on down the hall, spraddle-legged, with its wings kind of hunkered out, watching me first over one shoulder and then over the other, like a old baldheaded man. When it got

> outdoors it begun to fly. It had to fly a long time before it ever got up into the air, with it thick and heavy and full of rain like it was. ("Samson," 67)

The eerie comparison/superimposition of the buzzard with the image of an old man calls forth the uncanny recognition of some porous boundary that can easily be crossed. After the river crossing tragedy, Vardaman is obsessed with the buzzards and "where they stay," notices that their number has increased—a token of the increasing decay of Addie's corpse: "Now there are five of them, tall in little tall black circles" ("Vardaman," 122).

Cats and dogs also feature in the grotesque bestiary—directly or indirectly. For example, another predator is attracted by the stench: "When we came up *the cat* leaped down from it and flicked away with silver claw and silver eye into the shadow" ("Darl," 123; my emphasis). In the reversible logic of the grotesque, Dewey Dell becomes like a cat and jumps on Darl as he is about to be taken away: "She hadn't said a word, hadn't even looked at him, but when them fellows told him what they wanted and that they had come to get him and he throwed back, she jumped on him like a wild cat so that one of the fellows had to quit and hold her and her scratching and clawing at him like a wild cat…" ("Cash," 137). In addition, a dog finds its uncanny way into the narrative as a sound, to convey the faithful devotion of Cash's activity *and* the eerie patience of death biding its time as heard in the very title of the novel "as I lay dying": "Then the sound of Cash's sawing comes in from that way. It is like a dog outside the house, going back and forth around the house to whatever door you come to, waiting to come in" ("Dewey Dell," 35).

Textual Grotesqueries

The novel is characterized by an uncanny relationship to the realist tradition of *mimesis*, and by the dismantling of narrative conventions. The frequent incongruity of the hole on the page opens hermeneutic gaps; the void ushered by the unexpected stumbling block of an absence in the middle of the Addie section is eventually filled by that very absence: the stuttering of the text beyond its own conventions, delivering a range of

linguistic, stylistic, and grammatical "ludicrosities" or "grotesqueries."[4] These departures from narrative norms hinge on the Janus-faced modality of the grotesque: they add a carnivalesque yet terrifying note as they convey a sense of loss and the collapse of bearings.

Some of the textual grotesqueries include unfinished and unpunctuated sentences, indented or italicized statement. The lack of punctuation gestures towards the lack of closure that loss brings to human existence. The indented statements puncture the narrative continuity, mimicking the intrusion of death in the fabric of habits. Italics often convey the unsaid or unsayable—something outrageous or indomitable, to use Faulknerian images—as the departure from normative typography suggests. There are numerous examples, for instance in the section when Darl narrates something he has actually not witnessed: the italics figure the voicing of the absent teller's presence in a sort of *mise en abyme* that stages the incongruity of that absence during the crucial moment of the beloved mother's passing away. The italicized narrative collides with the narrative of another struggle—Darl and Jewel trying to get "one more load" of wood—and bespeaks the terror of a life when no break can be taken, and a constant sense of the urgency of material tasks and chores to be performed to outdo the elements (rain storms, flood) takes over the bonds of filial affection.

The overall play on pronouns, in particular in the Vardaman sections where "it" often refers to both animals (fish, rabbit) or humans indiscriminately, plays another variation of the sense of chaos. In one of the Darl sections, the linguistic conundrum oscillates between what *is* and what *is not*—calling forth the moving frontier (or line) between life and death: "And since sleep is is-not and rain and wind are *was*, it is not. Yet the wagon *is*, because when the wagon is *was*, Addie Bundren will not be. And Jewel is, so Addie Bundren must be. And then I must be, or I could not empty myself for sleep in a strange room. And so if I am not emptied yet, I am *is*." ("Darl," 47). The dialectical tension in the grammatical tenses bespeaks the irreducible otherness of life to death, and death to life. Yet the dynamics of life prevails in the hermeneutical process involved in reading and deciphering the riddle, embracing semiotic and semantic stumbling blocks, and engaging with their *un-smooth* surface…

[4] Linguistic grotesqueries include the striking feature of Faulkner's writing: portmanteau words. For example: "Beyond the *unlamped* wall I can here the rain shaping the wagon that is ours…" ("Darl," 46; my emphasis).

Dewey Dell's grammatical aporia bespeaks her terror when she realizes she is pregnant: "But I know it is there because God gave women a sign when something had happened bad" ("Dewey Dell," 35). In the Addie section, it voices the outrage of life for women trapped by their bodies: "So I took Anse. And when I knew that I had Cash, I knew that living was terrible and that this was the answer to it. That was when I learned that words are no good; that words dont ever fit what they are trying to say at" ("Addie," 99). Likewise through the eerie structure of Darl's lapidary statement: "He is bleeding to death Cash is" ("Darl," 120). Strange collages and combinations sometimes convey a similar sense of loss, such as Vardaman's pairs "not-fish" and "not-blood", or Darl's uncanny blend of erasure and affirmation: "And since sleep is is-not and rain and wind are *was*, it is not" ("Darl," 47).

Lenticular Logics

The grotesque conflates categories and distorts reality. The resulting effect (and strategy) is to juxtapose an image onto another in the kind of logic called "lenticular" by Tara McPherson in her book *Reconstructing Dixie*: "A lenticular image is composed when two separate images are interlaced or combined in a certain way. This combined image is then viewed via a unique type of lens, called a lenticular lens, which allows the viewer to see only one of the two views at a time. Rotating the picture slightly brings the second image into focus, displacing the first" (26). When you slightly change the perspective, you discover another image. In *As I Lay Dying*, the effect of this logic is carried out in particular through the use of the recurring phrase "as though" or "as if": one image morphs into another one, and (as a result) ushers another level of reality. "As though"/"as if "set up parallel narratives. Yet the first segment functions as a palimpsest referential world in a form of revising that partakes of denial—*as if* the current situation of mourning and loss could be erased, avoided, *not-lived*.

One of the most striking examples is to be found in one of the Darl sections: "Cash labors about the trestles, moving back and forth, lifting and placing the planks with long clattering reverberations in the dead air *as though* he were lifting and dropping them at the bottom of an invisible well, the sounds ceasing without departing, *as if* any movement might dislodge them from the immediate air in reverberant repetition" ("Darl," 44; my emphasis). The next paragraph focuses on the elements as

synecdoches for the current tension that presides over the completion of the coffin—the sense of urgency and gloom:

> Below the sky sheet-lightning slumbers lightly; against the trees, motionless, are ruffled out to the last twig, swollen, increased as though quick with young.
> It begins to rain. The first harsh, sparse, swift drops rush through the leaves and across the ground in a long sigh, *as though* of relief from intolerable suspense. They are big as buckshot, warm *as though* fired from a gun; they sweep across the lantern in a vicious hissing. Pa lifts his face, slack-mouthed, the wet black rim of snuff plastered close along the base of his gums; from behind his slack-faced astonishment he muses *as though* from beyond time, upon the ultimate outrage. ("Darl," 44; my emphasis)

The next paragraph returns to the saw—the tool and agent of change—defying the storm, thunder, rain and all, with Cash "wet to the skin" in "an instant" ("Darl," 44): "Yet the motion of the saw has not faltered, *as though* it and the arm functioned in a tranquil conviction that rain was an illusion of the mind" ("Darl," 44-45; my emphasis). The statements ushered with "as though" bespeak the outrage and "burlesque" of the Bundrens' lives where the destructive effect of torrential rains adds to the outrage of death—a feeling encoded in the description of Anse's face that crystallizes the family's misery and despair: "It is *as though* upon a face carved by a savage caricaturist a monstrous *burlesque* of all bereavement flowed" ("Darl," 45; my emphasis). They draw the contours of the tautological circle of grotesque excess and hysteria.

A lenticular logic effect is also achieved through the insertion of intertextal references that perform a grotesque intrusion of the lyric into the trite prose of the Bundrens' life. Such is, for example, the image of the womb of time borrowed from Othello ("Dewey Dell," 69); it is all the more ironic in its effect as it appears in one chapter narrated by Dewey Dell for whom the image takes on a very realistic and pressing urgency later in the novel.[5]

[5] The image of time crosses another boundary when Darl compares it to a string: "It is as though time, no longer running straight before us in a diminishing line, now runs parallel between us like a looping string, the distance being the doubling accretion of the thread and not the interval between" ("Darl," 85).

The Political Dimension of the Grotesque

The grotesque structural and referential distortions of the novel perform a critique of society. They expose the dysfunctional societal and cultural elements; they re-present (and stage, through their visual and physical economy) the distortion of the political body. In the Southern imagination, the grotesque body calls forth the abused body—whether it is the slave's lynched body or the woman's policed body. As Richard Moreland notes: "The world of [his] work does not feel natural, comfortable, or recognizable in the way that realist work feels to many readers"; he adds: "There are profound social and psychological problems… that disturb the flow of almost every sentence, and there is no comfortable position form which to view these problems, or not for long" (24-25).

The grotesque genre sets images and references into motion as it associates different elements or dimensions of reality. Thus it conjures up the inevitability of change that the South resists, challenging its obsession with place. Anse's reluctance to get moving (see, for example, "Anse," 22) emblematizes his rejection of change. Yet the road is the sign of movement and mobility. Things cannot *stay* in place, cannot be *left* in place: movement *is* the very logic of life. The grotesque effect translates this dynamic in particular by stirring up representational worlds.

In addition, the grotesque characterization contributes to demystifying the past and its attending cult of heroism. In *As I Lay Dying*, the protagonists are totally embedded in the present and have no heroic deeds to account for—caught as they are in the sensory and material weight of the present. Furthermore, the novel deconstructs the process of the master narrative in favor of a blatantly fragmented narrative as the whole notion of a centered consciousness and authority is undermined.

Lastly, by bringing together elements from different semantic fields, for example, the grotesque genre performs a form of miscegenation, dismantling Southern social and racial classifications.

Conclusion

André Bleikasten, commenting on the fragments of the Bundren story, notes: "In the end, a story will have been told but it is a blank story, both tragic and comic and neither, both thick with meaning and void of it" (48). *As I Lay Dying* is indeed a protean and puzzling work; words and text stumble out of preposterous images and narratives, and stammer out of conventional meaning. Its narrative structure exceeds

conventional novelistic borders, transgressing into the poetic field. The apparent incompletion of the title, with its clause left dangling, forms a grotesque riddle suspended between different interpretive possibilities—grotesque as it calls forth the lack of closure of life in front of death or, as Darl puts it: "It is as though the space between us were time: an irrevocable quality" ("Darl," 85). Surely, for the reader, an irrevocable book indeed, as she/he might add: "As I lay reading." Unless, perhaps, it is: "As I lay reading-at"…

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