

REFLEXIVITY IN THE NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE
OF *AS I LAY DYING*

William Faulkner wrote *As I Lay Dying* while he was a university janitor, during the night shifts of a few weeks. The novel was published in 1930, and it has since been considered one of his most deliberate formal experiments. In this paper I will analyze the narrative form of *As I Lay Dying*, pointing out some of the less evident metafictional structures and their relation to the world-view of the novel—one which is quite obviously under the sign of perspectivism.

As I Lay Dying is divided into fifty-nine sections¹ which are described by most critics as the "interior monologue" or the "stream of consciousness" of the characters. A typical instance is Carvel Collins's claim that "*The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying*, alone of William Faulkner's novels, use the Joycean interior monologue extensively."² However, the theoretical works on the stream of consciousness technique are not satisfied with these general terms, which stand for a whole range of phenomena and become nearly meaningless if applied indiscriminately to such different narrative modes as Faulkner's in the first three sections of *The Sound and the Fury* and in *As I Lay Dying*, Joyce's in the Molly Bloom monologue, Woolf's in *Mrs. Dalloway* or Beckett's in *The Unnamable*. We can even go on to discern different modes at play in a single work. This is the case in *As I Lay Dying*. There are differences in the level of consciousness depicted by the monologue.³ Indeed, some sections (most notably Addie's) seem to be the author's reading of a character's essential self, rather than a credible narration in the character's own terms. This amounts to an interference between the novel's textuality and its mimetic function. Such interference also manifests itself through other differences in narrative technique between the sections, the most significant of which concerns the moment of narrating.⁴ In most of the Bundrens' sections the present tense seems to indicate a simultaneity between the story time and the moment of narrating. In the "chorus" sections by other characters, usually written in the past tense, the narrating vantage point remains undefined, but in an unobtrusive way which does not disturb the smooth progress of the novel. There is one obvious distortion, however: Addie's section brings us back in time not only as regards its narrative content, but also as regards the moment of narrating. Addie's monologue is often assumed to be the impossible utterance of a dead woman, and as such a radi-

cal departure from monologic verisimilitude, a "post mortem autobiography."⁵ Although nothing in the text warrants such an assumption (that is, we may choose to see it as a simple chronological disruption rather than as the narration of a dead person), the mere chronological shift shocks the reader.

Genette defines an analepsis as a retrospective anachrony, "any evocation after the fact of an event that took place earlier than the point in the story where we are at any given moment" (Genette 40). A crucial distinction between two kinds of analepses, one somewhat disregarded by Genette, is relevant at this point. He mentions a distinction

between, on the one hand, the anachronies that the narrative takes direct responsibility for, and that thus stay at the same narrative level as their surroundings . . . and, on the other hand, the anachronies that one of the characters of the first narrative takes on, and that thus appear at a second narrative level. (Genette 47-48)

I shall call the first type "extradiegetic analepses" and the second "intradiegetic analepses" (not to be confused with Genette's "internal" and "external" analepses!), but the definition in *Narrative Discourse* needs to be slightly modified. If we take Genette's definition literally, we find that it cannot apply to *As I Lay Dying*, where there is no narrative level different from the narration of each character. The sum of all the narrations constitutes the first narrative level, and there is no independent narrative voice (other than the implied author's) to take responsibility for the temporal disruptions involved in their order. What makes this analepsis qualify as an extradiegetic analepsis is not a question of narrative level, but quite simply the fact that it is not motivated by any cognitive process of a character inside the story.

Addie's narration is the only extradiegetic analepsis of the book, and this is no doubt the reason why it is so puzzling. Bruce Kawin takes this disruption to be one key to the novel's deep structure. Another is the title itself. In Kawin's opinion, "The simplest way to interpret the novel's title is to accept it at face value: all the action takes place as Addie lies dying. . . . The whole novel may be her fantasy."⁶

According to Dorrit Cohn's classification of narrative techniques, Addie's monologue is an *autobiographical monologue*, a psychologically implausible technique in which "a lone speaker recalls his own past, and tells it to himself in chronological order" (Cohn 181). Cohn observes that the use of re-

portive language is at odds with interior monologue, which tends to be emotive (Cohn 208). This is true to some extent of every monologue in the novel. These narrations are narrated to no one, if not to the actual reader, leaping over the boundaries of fiction (a metalepsis; cf. Genette 236). Their psychological motivation is always partial, they always set rhyme over reason. Darl's are the clearest examples.

Darl acts as a witness of the actions being carried over by his family. According to Cohn,

Darl tells what he sees, hears, does and says in the episodes of the funeral journey, but never what he thinks or feels. This is one reason that, contrary to the other members of the family, he remains such an enigmatic figure; it is also why his ultimate lapse into insanity carries such great shock-value. (Cohn 205)

The use of narrative phrases, the lack of emotion, and the sudden intrusion of past tense verbs, as in the italicized passage in 34 make Cohn wonder whether Darl's interior monologue is "not rather a retrospective narration in evocative present tense" (Cohn 206). That is, the present tense in Darl's narrative is not to be understood as a sign that the narrating coincides in time with the action being narrated.⁷ In contrast, "the discourse of his father and siblings, by merely adding the subjective ingredients missing from Darl's discourse, clearly create [sic] the illusion of mental self-address" (Cohn 207). Cohn does not mention the witnesses' monologues, the sections narrated by Cora, Peabody, Samson, etc. Most of them would seem to belong with Darl's narratives: they are focused on the Bundrens' actions rather than on the reflector, and are narrative rather than disconnectedly perceptual or emotive. Many of them are written in the past tense, which contributes to their narrative solidity. None of the monologues, neither the witnesses' nor the Bundrens', is a Joycean interior monologue. Although Vardaman's, Dewey Dell's or Jewel's tend to focus on the emotive-expressive pole of language, they are still similar to Darl's in that they contain many straightforwardly narrative, "referential" sentences, a trait of Edouard Dujardin's writing in *Les lauriers sont coupés* which would be carefully avoided by Joyce. There is a whole range of monologues in *As I Lay Dying*, but none of them is quite a straightforward autobiographical narration (the moments of narrating are superceded by the time the story ends, leaving us with a narrating from limbo) nor a mimetic monologue.

There are further oddities. Darl is a "privileged" character. His centrality in the novel is accompanied and brought into ironic relief by transferring to him some characteristics of the classical omniscient, omnipresent third-person narrator. For instance, Darl is presented as the focalizer of scenes which ought to be beyond his perceptual range. The earliest instance prepares the reader from the very first page for what is about to follow:

The cottonhouse is of rough logs. . . . When we reach it I turn and follow the path which circles the house. Jewel, fifteen feet behind me, looking straight ahead, steps in a single stride through the window. Still staring straight ahead, his pale eyes like wood set into his wooden face, he crosses the floor in four strides. (1)

In section 3, a hypothetical future sequence imagined by Darl seamlessly merges into factual and simultaneous narration:

Down there fooling with that horse. He will go on through the barn, into the pasture. The horse will not be in sight: he is up there among the pine seedlings, in the cool. Jewel whistles, once and shrill. The horse snorts, then Jewel sees him.

The remainder of this section could very well be narrated by an heterodiegetic narrator, but then there has been no clear transition from Darl's narration. Section 12 is set in the cabin, and narrated *simultaneously* by Darl . . . who is miles away from the scene. Darl also exhibits an unaccountable knowledge of other people's secrets, such as Dewey Dell's pregnancy and Jewel's origin (32).

Such passages are common in Darl's sections.⁸ They stand in no clear relation to the factuality of the story, and help give the style of the novel its dreamlike texture. Darl's reportorial speech, his omniscience and his being "all prying awareness with no core of self" (Howe 131), the frequency and even distribution of his voice (Materassi 124), all make him a surrogate authorial narrator, with a problematical existence in this world of perspective: accordingly, he has disintegrated by the end of the novel. It is significant that Howe (138) complains of what he takes to be Faulkner's lack of ironic distance in dealing with Darl. This character is generally acknowledged to be the "representative intelligence" of the novel, and some critics point out that he is an artist-figure,⁹ but he is rarely considered to be morally reliable. Darl's powers do not seem to

puzzle Faulkner's early critics overmuch: they simply accept that Darl "knows" or "learns" this or that, or they complain about the unreality of the whole, and make an otherwise realistic interpretation of the novel.¹⁰ To my knowledge, none of the critics of *As I Lay Dying* has interpreted Darl's privileged knowledge as an attempt on Faulkner's part to exploit the literary possibilities of parapsychological phenomena. But while this is not wholly out of the question, another kind of explanation is more satisfactory.

A metafictional approach to the novel allows us to discern reflexive structures involving an interaction of fabula and text where other approaches have to postulate an explanation at fabula level.¹¹ For instance: when Darl suddenly starts referring to himself in third person forms, many critics will be content to give a (fabula-level) psychological explanation: the shift means that in the fabula Darl is mad, estranged from his own self;¹² the relation between text and fabula is simply mimetic. A metafictionally minded critic will not let his shifters get away with such a meagre burden. Kawin speaks of the "possibility that Darl's madness represents the inability of his imaginary to deal adequately with his having glimpsed the transcendent aspects of the narrative system whose absent center is his dead mother or some unnamable narratorial consciousness" (223). Darl's maddened shift to the third person in 57 should be understood as "a movement toward third-person omniscience" (261). But it is also a movement out of the novel. According to Materassi, this shift "grotesquely mimes in an unconscious way the wider design of objectivation of subjectivity which underlies the whole work."¹³ Darl has always been a "he" for the reader's consciousness as well as for his brothers' in spite of his quasi-authorial privilege: through this shift, the novel lays bare its own perspectival device.

Indeed, Darl's clairvoyance could be understood to point to a more encompassing imagining: Addie's conceiving the whole novel in her mind¹⁴ and Faulkner's own writing of the novel (and our reading of it) as an empathic experience. No "coherent" or "satisfactory"—i.e. purely mimetic—interpretation of the novel is possible: Darl's privilege (and perhaps Addie's as well) is neither realistic nor fantastic. It cannot be accounted for in a realistic way, but the place of the novel within the literary tradition (its theme, setting, treatment) forbids the intrusion of a fantastic element. Each of these senses points to the limitation of the other. The privilege is best read as a metafictional one, an objective correlative of the

excursion into the consciousness of others shared by the author and the reader of this extremely perspectivistic novel.

The other major "paranormal" phenomenon in the plot of *As I Lay Dying* can also be interpreted metafictionally rather than mimetically. Addie hovers between life and death during the whole of the novel, not merely through the extradiegetic analepsis which displaces her narration to a moment in the first narrative when Addie is "already" dead, but also through Darl and Vardaman referring to her now and then as being alive, breathing and stirring inside her coffin. In section 16, Vardaman bores the lid of Addie's coffin (and incidentally her face) full of holes, "so she can breathe" (15). And in section 49 we find the following exchange:

She was under the apple tree and Darl and I go across the moon and the cat jumps down and runs and we can hear her inside the wood.

"Hear?" Darl says. "Put your ear close."

I put my ear close and I can hear her. Only I cant tell what she is saying.

"What is she saying, Darl?" I say. "Who is she talking to?"

"She's talking to God," Darl says, "She is calling on Him to help her."

"What does she want Him to do?" I say.

"She wants Him to hide her away from the sight of man," Darl says.

Addie's life in death can be taken to be an objective correlative of the characters' experience in being forced to put up with her dead presence, to think of her and keep her alive in their minds during their odyssey, as well as of the reader's experience of Addie as a thematic and structural center of the novel, a "living" organizing principle in his own reading odyssey.

As I Lay Dying has been interpreted as a metaphor of being and language by some of its more adventurous critics.¹⁵ This reflection on metaphysics and language is simultaneous with a reflection undertaken by the novel on its own status as language, using the paradoxical events involving Addie and Darl as a commentary on its formal innovations.

In a narrative foil to Anse's facing reality, or rather shirking it, with mere words, without any real knowledge of what they stand for, Addie puts forward a view of communication as a shared and felt experience. Addie closely relates in her narration the central themes of the novel's story and technique: death, blood ties, and communication and understanding as the experience of infiltration into an alien consciousness:

I could just remember how my father used to say that the reason for living was to get ready to stay dead for a long time. And when I would have to look at them day after day, each with his and her secret and selfish thought, and blood strange to each other blood and strange to mine, and think that this seemed to be the only way I could get ready to stay dead, I would hate my father for having ever planted me. I would look forward to the times when they faulted, so I could whip them. When the switch fell I could feel it upon my flesh; when it welted and ridged it was my blood that ran, and I would think with each blow of the switch: Now you are aware of me! Now I am something in your secret and selfish life, who have marked your blood with my own for ever and ever.

This is the deep intention of Addie's forcing Anse to vow he would bury her in Jefferson: forcing herself into her family's consciousness through the grotesque epic journey that ensues. The reader shares this experience and is also marked with Addie's blood. He discovers through Darl the possibility of taking to an extreme Addie's concern with subjectivity and identity, and to get drowned in the eddy of reflexivity and hyper-consciousness. Darl's bracketing of his identity and his alienating self-objectivation of section 57 are already foreshadowed in section 17: "I dont know what I am. I dont know if I am or not. Jewel knows he is, because he does not know whether he is or not. He cannot empty himself for sleep because he is not what he is and he is what he is not." Darl becomes dehumanized through his attitude towards communication, which is also his attitude towards the trip to Jefferson. He is the only one who understands Addie's strategy, and wants the trip to end, regardless of the damage he may cause to innocent people such as Gillespie, whose barn he sets on fire in an attempt to burn the coffin with Addie's body. Darl perceives the trip to Jefferson only in its metaphysical dimension, a dimension directly linked to the metafictional significance of the novel's perspectivism. He is completely blind to the practical concerns of Cash, who thinks that in spite of the incommensurability of mental worlds "nothing excuses setting fire to a man's barn and endangering his stock and destroying his property" (53).

The reader can choose between the world-views of the different characters. A good reading, however, cannot help but draw a balance between the hate and vulgarity of Jewel, Anse and Dewey Dell (who remorselessly hand Darl to the authorities), the spite of Addie, the stolidity of Anse, and Darl's own crazed surrendering of his identity. Cash is a mediocre character throughout the novel, but he puts forward the closest approximation to a synthesis that we find in the

novel: "It's like there was a fellow in every man that's done a-past the sanity or the insanity, that watches the sane and the insane doings of that man with the same horror and the same astonishment" (53). That Cash speaks out of character here is all the more telling. The reader of *As I Lay Dying* cannot accept Darl's ending, but he cannot join his adversaries either, in what would be a celebration of bad faith and simple-mindedness. Cash emerges at the end as the most acceptable reader-figure. He may not be satisfactory (is life as depicted in *As I Lay Dying* satisfactory anyway?) but he rises for a moment to a prudent detachment and self-objectivation which should also be the reader's. Through the perspectivistic technique of *As I Lay Dying*, the reader can obtain a glimpse of himself through the mirror of the Other, a glimpse which is followed by horror and astonishment. The reflexivity of the novel, the metafictional thematization of its own narrative peculiarities, is also at work when in a sober movement of aloofness the novel invokes the "fellow in every man that's done a-past the sanity or the insanity." In doing so, *As I Lay Dying* puts forward the artistic objectivation performed by reflexive fiction as a metaphysical attitude which is also an interpretive role for the reader.

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NOTES

¹ William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying* (1930; New York, 1987). I will refer in bold type to the sections numbered as follows (with an indication of the narrative tense around which they are organized): 1—Darl, PR (present); 2—Cora, PR; 3—Darl, PR; 4—Jewel, PR; 5—Darl, PR; 6—Cora, PA (past); 7—Dewey Dell, PR/PA (incongruity or alternance between present and past); 8—Tull, PR; 9—Anse, PR/PA; 10—Darl, PR; 11—Peabody, PR; 12—Darl, PR; 13—Vardaman, PR; 14—Dewey Dell, PR; 15—Vardaman, PR; 16—Tull, PA; 17—Darl, PR; 18—Cash, PA; 19—Vardaman, PR; 20—Tull, PR/PA; 21—Darl, PR; 22—Cash, PR; 23—Darl, PR; 24—Vardaman, PR; 25—Darl, PR; 26—Anse, PR; 27—Darl, PR; 28—Anse, PR; 29—Samson, PA; 30—Dewey Dell, PR; 31—Tull, PR; 32—Darl, P/PA; 33—Tull, P/PA; 34—Darl, PA/PR; 35—Vardaman, PA; 36—Tull, PA; 37—Darl, PR; 38—Cash, PA; 39—Cora, PA; 40—Addie, PA; 41—Whitfield, PA; 42—Darl, PR/PA; 43—Armstid, PA; 44—Vardaman, PR; 45—Moseley, PA; 46—Darl, PR; 47—Vardaman, PR; 48—Darl, PR/PA; 49—Vardaman, PR/PA; 50—Darl, PR; 51—Vardaman, PA; 52—Darl, PR; 53—Cash, PA; 54—Peabody, PA; 55—MacGowan, PA; 56—Vardaman, PR; 57—Darl, PR; 58—Dewey Dell, PA; 59—Cash, PA. In

speaking of "incongruity or alternance" I disregard the frequent cases in which a past narrative is interspersed with speech activity verbs (*inquires*) which are in the present tense, obviously for the sake of immediacy (e.g. in 43, 45, 55).

² Carvel Collins, "The Pairing of *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying*," *The Princeton University Library Chronicle* 18.3 (1957):115. Cf. also Cleanth Brooks, *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country* (New Haven, 1963) 161; Michael Millgate, *The Achievement of William Faulkner* (London, 1966) 104; Olga W. Vickery, *The Novels of William Faulkner: A Critical Interpretation* (Rev. ed.; Baton Rouge, 1964) 59; Eric Mottram, *William Faulkner* (London, 1971) 30; Melvin Backman, *Faulkner: The Major Years* (Bloomington, 1966) 52. "Soliloquy," too, is a term used by some to describe Faulkner's technique (e.g. by Calvin Bedient, "Pride and Nakedness: *As I Lay Dying*," *Modern Language Quarterly* 29.1 [1968]:61-76), maybe in the sense defined by Robert Humphrey: "although it is spoken *solus*, it nevertheless is represented with the assumption of a formal and immediate audience (Robert Humphrey, *Stream of Consciousness in the Modern Novel* [Berkeley, 1954] 35).

³ See Irving Howe, *William Faulkner: A Critical Study* (New York, 1952) 134; also Vickery 51.

⁴ On this concept, see Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (1972; Ithaca, 1980) 27, 212 ff. As a rule, I follow here Genette's terminology for narrative analysis ("heterodiegetic," "focalized," etc.).

⁵ Dorrit Cohn, *Transparent Minds* (Princeton, 1978) 77, 182. Cf. Mario Materassi, *I romanzi di Faulkner* (Rome, 1968) 139; Alan Warren Friedman, *William Faulkner* (New York, 1984) 88.

⁶ Bruce F. Kawin, *The Mind of the Novel* (Princeton, 1982) 264.

⁷ Paul Casparis also supports this hypothesis in his *Tense Without Time: The Present Tense in Narration* (Bern, 1975) 43-44. Quoted in Cohn 309 n. 74.

⁸ See, e.g., 17, 21, 42.

⁹ Cf. Brooks 145; Backman 55; Donald M. Kartiganer, *The Fragile Thread: The Meaning of Form in Faulkner's Novels* (Amherst, 1979) 32.

¹⁰ See for instance Howe 135; Edward Wasiolek, "As I Lay Dying: Distortion in the Slow Eddy of Current Opinion," *Critique* 3.1 (Spring-Fall 1959):21; Backman 54; William J. Handy, "As I Lay Dying: Faulkner's Inner Reporter," *Kenyon Review* 21.3 (Summer 1959):444; Materassi 131; Walter Brylowsky, *Faulkner's Olympian Laugh: Myth in the Novels* (Detroit, 1968) 93; Wolf Kindermann, *Analyse und Synthese im Werk William Faulkners* (Frankfurt, 1984) 69. The structuralist/deconstructive readings by Richard Godden ("William Faulkner, Addie Bundren, and Language," *Studies in English* 15 [1978]:101-123) and Bruce Kawin are far more adequate in this respect. Bedient's and Kartiganer's readings also relate these anomalies to the novel's basic opposition between a formal and a formless consciousness, or between acting and being (cf. Handy 437, Kindermann 65 ff.) but in a less comprehensive way. Kartiganer follows Bleikasten's *Faulkner's As I Lay Dying* (Bloomington, 1973).

¹¹ I use the terms "fabula" and "text" in the sense found, for instance, in Meir Sternberg's *Expositional Modes and Temporal Ordering in Fiction* (Baltimore, 1978).

¹² See for instance John T. Irwin, *Doubling and Incest/Repetition and Revenge: A Speculative Reading of Faulkner* (Baltimore, 1975).

¹³ " . . . grottescamente mima, senza esserne cosciente, il più vasto disegno di oggettivazione della soggettività che sottende a tutta l'opera" (Materassi 134; translation mine).

¹⁴ Cf. also Quentin and Shreve's conjectures in *Absalom, Absalom!* which are seemingly accepted as factual truth in the chronology at the end of the novel.

¹⁵ On this matter, see the studies of the novel by Bedient and Kavin.