

Alienating Language and Darl's Narrative Consciousness in Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*

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Critics have pointed out that in spite of the apparent "directness" of the monologues, some characters/narrators in *As I Lay Dying* use a level of language absolutely incompatible with their plausible linguistic skills, as far as we can reconstruct them from their social background and the samples of actual "speech" contained in the text. In monologue #34, for instance, Darl, an uneducated farmer, describes the "thick dark current" of the river as "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" (141). If such stylistic distortions occur mostly, and, indeed, in a pervasive way in Darl's monologues, they are also noticeable, to a lesser extent in degree and frequency, in the "thoughts" of other characters like Cash, Dewey Dell or Vardaman, who describes Jewel's horse as "snuffings and stampings; smells of cooling flesh and ammoniac hair; an illusion of coordinated whole of splotched hide and strong bones" (56). As Warren Beck puts it:

At times it seems as though the author, after having created an unsophisticated character, is elbowing him off the stage . . . thus many of his characters speak with the tongues of themselves and of William Faulkner . . . on the whole, it is not an unacceptable convention. . . . (43)

Faulkner's style, if totally remote from what we could expect from a child's language, nonetheless successfully recreates what happens in Vardaman's mind, and, as adds Beck, the language used, "though not stylistically rooted in his [the character's] manner . . . is not inconsistent with his personality and sensibilities" (44).¹ Furthermore, in spite of the "external" incoherence of the language used by the narrators (the discrepancy between their linguistic competence as inferred from the story and some of their actual performances in the narrative), internal coherence is safeguarded. Each character uses the same "style" throughout, so that the very stylistic inferences, far from undermining their credibility as narrators, create specific timbres that the reader can progressively learn to identify. Darl's propensity to indulge in metaphysical reflexions, for instance, incongruous though it may seem on the story-level, contributes to fleshing him out as a character.

Faulkner's belief was that style was "the result of a need, of a necessity" (Meriwether & Millgate 141), and that "the work itself demand[ed] its own style" (181). Style in *As I Lay Dying*, moving beyond a realistic imitation of idiomatic speech and the conventions of modernist monologues based on an equation of language and consciousness, is a major key to the understanding of a novel which is also a novel about language and experience and experience in language. Faulkner's stylistic incarnations can be justified in the context of the strategies, notably verbal, developed by narrators desperately craving for a unity of experience and articulation, a reconciliation of language, self and world.

This perspective throws another light on the voices of the characters, in the context of Darl's tragedy in particular, and on the origin of his madness: the monologues or voices exhibit at least so many strategies aiming at enabling the Bundrens to overcome the trauma of death and loss.² In fact, all of the Bundren characters except Darl seem to be relatively successful in dealing with Addie's absence. Cash succeeds in converting his grief into a concrete

¹ Another factor ensuring the credibility of the monologues is the insertion of the whole passage into a framework of perception structures (what Vardaman sees, hears and smells), thus forcing us to consider directly what he feels rather than how he expresses it. The claims made by some critics that Vardaman is a psychological impossibility and, therefore, a failure, are rather inappropriate; Faulkner's concern is not to create a clinical case. What really matters is that Vardaman is a fictional creation through which Faulkner succeeds in generating the illusion that the reader gets an insight into the flow of thoughts of a suffering child (the same applies to Benjy's idiocy in *The Sound and the Fury*).

² Addie's central position in the novel is multiple. It is suggested by the thematic and structural importance of her monologue and by her concrete presence during the funeral trip (the body in

object: the coffin he decides to build for his dying mother. His technical-mindedness and his obsession with "a neat job" enable him to overcome his anxiety. While Dewey Dell is too preoccupied with her pregnancy, i.e., the presence of an alien, unwanted element in her body, to worry about her mother's absence, Jewel vents his frustration into (violent) action and curses. As for Anse, selfish motives—like his "new set of teeth"—gradually supplant his desire to respect Addie's last wishes. In other words, all of them are, in one way or another, involved in new experiences which, in the context of their emotional disruption, prove to be redeeming.

In contrast, the strategies used by Darl and Vardaman in order to come to terms with their mother's death are essentially verbal. Faced with the painful absence of his mother, Vardaman eventually overcomes his frustration by displacing his desire from its original focus (his mother's body and, later, the corpse in the coffin, to which he is still emotionally attached) to another, "transitional" object (the fish). Vardaman's desire for a substitute for his mother's presence comes about through language ("My mother is a fish" [84]) and provides him with a verbal means of re-presencing the mother's body he misses so tragically.

Vardaman's concretely assertive and reality-conjuring linguistic performance is radically opposed to his older brother's. Darl is mostly haunted by ontology and abstract verbalization. An analysis of the "stylistic habits" Faulkner puts in his mouth (or, more exactly, in his thoughts) brings out certain constants which are symptomatic and constitutive of the nature of his quest. In monologues #17 and #46, for instance, Darl's reflections on the essence of existence are punctuated by alternating patterns of positive/negative structures or *no* words.

... when you are emptied for sleep you are not ... I don't know what I am. I don't know if I am or not. Jewel knows who he is because he does not know that 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. (80)

How do our lives ravel out into the no-wind, no-sound, the weary gestures wearily recapitulant; echoes of old compulsions with no-hand on no-strings. . . . (207)

the coffin) and her absence as a mother figure. Peabody's interpretation of death as "merely a function of the mind—and that of the minds of the ones who suffer the bereavement" (43–44) is quite adequate, in that it establishes Addie not only as the *raison d'être* of what happens in the novel (the funeral trip), but also of what happens in the narrators' minds.

The rhetorical strategies at work in these metaphysical reflexions on being and nothingness are so many linguistic traces of the economy of psychical energy prevailing in his quest for self-definition. They can be appreciated in the light of Lacan's theory of symbolic language.

Darl, as a speaking and thinking subject, constitutes the Lacanian notion of *lack*. His mother's death is an avatar of the irremediable loss of imaginary plenitude and unity, the primordial lack of origin and being which may only be represented through (Symbolic) language, in which the subject subsists as a construct of words. Darl's rhetoric of negativity—like Vardaman's—is, again, a rhetoric of loss. His words are symbols of absent things; they aim at reorganizing his experience and (re)constructing a new sense of himself and his relationship to his environment. Darl's binary dialectic, however, is also emblematic of his failure to rethink or reencode his experience. His thought process is imprisoned in mutually exclusive categories of absence and presence, and, characteristically, ends up in a dead-end and his melancholy recognition of the vanity of his efforts: "How often have I lain beneath rain on a strange roof, thinking of home" (81).

Moreover, if Darl almost never uses any metaphors in the strict sense, similes abound. Darl sees the boards of the coffin "between the shadow spaces . . . like soft gold" (4) and "like gold seen through water" (157), the sun "poised like a bloody egg upon a crest of thunderheads" (40), Vardaman's "pale face fading into the dusk like a piece of paper pasted on a failing wall" (49), within Dewey Dell's eyes "Peabody's back like two round peas in two thimbles" (103), and the river looking "peaceful, like machinery does after you have watched it and listened to it for a long time" (163). The similes, lacking the positive, reality-summoning status of Vardaman's fish-assertion, suggest, again, that Darl's failure is inherent in his use of language and rhetoric. The copula "like," by making the link between the two terms of the comparison—i.e. the assertion of analogy—syntagmatically explicit (in a metaphor, the link remains simultaneous, paradigmatic and implicit), reflects Darl's awareness of the precariousness of Symbolic language. Whereas the forceful assertiveness of Vardaman's statement does not allow—at least in the child's mind—for any questioning of the validity of his analogies, Darl cannot help becoming aware of the distance between the two poles of the simile; the subject and the predicate will never be completely equated, and their irreconcilability implies Darl's incapacity to attain any ultimate certainty.

Nonetheless, another stylistic favorite sets the tone for the ubiquitous self-consciousness and tentativeness of Darl's monologues. In almost all of Darl's selections, the recurrence of words of estrangement (Uspensky 85) is very

high.³ In some passages, often coinciding with moments of intense meditation and observation, they are literally swarming:

The river itself is not a hundred yards across, and pa and Vernon and Vardaman and Dewey Dell are the only things in sight . . . as though we had reached the place where the motion of the wasted world accelerates just before the final precipice. Yet they appear dwarfed. It is as though the space between us were time: an irrevocable quality. 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 mules stand, their forequarters already sloped a little, their rumps high . . . their gaze sweeps across us with in their eyes a wild, sad, profound and despairing quality as though they had already seen in the thick water the shape of the disaster which they could not speak and we could not see. (146–47)

The words of estrangement, like the syntagma “like” in the similes, function as copulae explicitly connecting (or striving to connect) and thus underscoring the distance between the two terms of the comparison. This suggests not only the tentative and speculative quality of Darl’s statements but also his alienation from himself and the world around him (Darl will never fulfil his quest for identity and wholeness, what he himself calls “home”), which reaches a linguistic climax in another trope, the oxymoron, as exemplified in his vision of the river at the end of monologue #37.

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.* (163–164; emphasis mine)

Darl’s oxymoronic language—a linguistic aporia—is also emblematic of his failure in his verbal quest, whose ultimate aim is to reach a place where he could discover a new identity for himself by recovering an ersatz for a preoedipal, “Imaginary” sense of wholeness and presence. Darl’s rhetoric mirrors the dynamics of his perception of reality. It reflects his endeavors to organize experience through and in language. Darl’s failure is exemplified in Addie’s metalinguistic utterances, which not only convey a radically skeptical attitude towards language—“words” are destructive entities depriving life of

³ Monologues #17, #34 and #37 contain ten, nine and six words of estrangement respectively.

substance and motion, fossilizing experience—but also establish the terms of Darl's nemesis by proclaiming the irreconcilability of words and doing, of signifier and signified:⁴

I would think about his [Anse's] name until after a while I could see the word as a shape, a vessel, and I would watch him liquefy and flow into it like cold molasses flowing out from the darkness into the vessel, until the jar stood full and motionless: a significant shape *profoundly without life like an empty door frame* . . . I would think how words go straight up in a think line, quick and harmless, and how terribly doing goes along the earth, clinging to it, so that after a while the two lines are too far apart for the same person to straddle from one to the other. . . . (173)

Since Darl's attempts are themselves of linguistic and rhetorical nature, they are undermined by the inadequacy of their very medium: Darl is, in fact, defeated by language. Darl's quest is doomed to failure because language is one of the constitutive elements of the dichotomy he is desperately trying to abolish and, at the same time, the only "tool" or vehicle he can resort to, in order to abolish it.

If language is both a symptom of the incompleteness of the subject and the potential restorer of absent plenitude, then Darl can be seen as an embodiment of Lacan's conception of the subject as an unstable, decentered entity-in-progress, constructing itself by moving from signifier to signifier (and *not from signifier to signified*) and by displacing desire from object to object.⁵ Language as desire *cum* lack tries to generate substitutes for what is lost, and Darl, troubled by ontology and authenticity, is incapable of meeting this need for metonymic mobility.⁶ Unlike Addie's radical, horizontal sensualism,

⁴ According to Lacan, the fundamental "alienation" and the subsequent "fading" (or "aphanisis") of the subject originates in the bar or "vel" separating signifier from signified which "condemns the subject to appearing only in that division," so that, "if it appears on one side as meaning produced by signifier, it appears on the other side as aphanisis" (*Four Fundamental Concepts* 210).

⁵ In his discussion of "The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious," Lacan distinguishes metaphor and its "vertical dependencies on the signified" from metonymy and its operations in "the horizontal signifying chain" (*Écrits* 164). For Lacan, metaphor is related to knowledge, while "desire is a metonymy" (175).

⁶ Nonetheless, Darl, watching Jewel and Vernon in the river, seems to be able to envision the inevitable mobility of the subject: "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

unlike Vardaman's analogies, which remain partial and temporary (the train soon supplants the fish as Vardaman's object of attention and desire), Darl's language—an endless, vertical craving for essences and final, signified certainties—points at the realism of the Lacanian "Real," an inaccessible realm beyond the Symbolic and, consequently, beyond language and the signifying chain.⁷ His endeavors are, thus, bound to fail. They eventually lead him to schizophrenia and, ironically enough, to the asylum, where Darl's alienation is finally equated with his concrete environment.

However, the strategies of desire and the rhetoric of alienation developed by Darl and the other narrators outside language are also deeply related to Darl's linguistic failure. The Bundrens evolve spiritually and physically in a vacuum, a "present" limited in time (ten days) and in scope (the journey to Jefferson), a temporal continuum but also an enclosed space in which they are trapped and to which their actions, thoughts, perceptions and emotional reactions will be confined. Theirs is a tragedy of alienation and of loneliness. Though Darl may be the most tragic figure of all, the other Bundrens are also imprisoned in their own isolated selves and are virtually incapable of communicating—let alone sympathizing—with each other. Genuine dialogues are rare and they almost never lead to any mutual understanding or compassion. As a result of their isolation, the Bundrens are forced to retreat into positions of immobile and helpless observers.⁸ In other words, all of them are victims of what Michel Gresset called "the Aporia of the glance" in his analysis of the phenomenon of fascination in Faulkner's early fiction⁹: "The overt strategy of the Subject, which is one of mere, open watching, would always doom the subject to the oblique tactics of covert glances." The glance, "by putting the object of desire into a focus, leads to the confusion of the real

to it for a long time. As though the clotting which is you had dissolved into the myriad original motion" (163–64).

⁷ On the real's extrinsicness to language, see *Seminar II*, 255.

⁸ Addie, having learnt that "words are no good," sees in "the blows of the switch" (172) the only way of establishing a relation between herself and her children.

One of the few exceptions to the rule is the dialogue between Darl and Vardaman in Monologue #49, in which Darl—through dialogue—seems to be trying to establish a genuine understanding between himself and his youngest brother. Cash's untiring diligence and Jewel's propensity for violent action—itself the product of loneliness and his relationship to his mother, a mixture of love and hatred—are no exception. These features are mere pallatives and do not help them communicate with each other.

⁹ In French, "L'Aporie du regard." See *Faulkner ou la Fascination*, chapter 19.

and the imaginary; it creates a conjunction of desire and want: a sign of all power and of powerlessness" ("The God" 55). Consequently, Faulkner's early heroes (by "early fiction," Gresset refers to the novels written before *Absalom, Absalom!*) "all suffer from a relationship which has taken an absolute control, and which leaves them bereft of freedom" (56). Later, says Gresset, the tyranny of the glance in Faulkner's fiction gives way, with *Absalom, Absalom!*, to "another altogether different strategy, now almost entirely founded upon the power of the Word" (57). In that perspective, Darl—at once powerless gaze and desperate voice—can be considered a transitional figure in Faulkner's career (*As I Lay Dying* was published six years before *Absalom, Absalom!*), at a time when the power of the word, still smothered by the omnipresent tyranny of the gaze, is striving to establish itself as the major generative force of Faulkner's fiction.¹⁰

Nevertheless, if Darl enacts the dichotomous struggle between voice and gaze in Faulkner's fiction, he also represents the discrepancy between self and voice. As we have seen, Darl himself is an oxymoron, at least in the context of the novel's narrative mode. As a character/narrator, he exists both as "Darl the peasant" in the world of the story and "Darl the poet" in the world of the narrative consciousness, where Faulkner, in defiance of the external restraints of speech representation (the "free direct discourse" mode of the interior monologue), entitles him to use a language which is neither really Darl's, nor just Faulkner's.¹¹

Besides, Darl, an astoundingly prolix narrator, is also the most silent and introvert character of the novel. In other words, although Darl "thinks" eighteen verbose monologues, he hardly talks. Cora describes him at his mother's bedside "his heart too full for words" (25), while Anse thinks he "tends to his own business . . . his eyes full of the land all the time" (36). According to Tull, "that's ever living thing the matter with Darl: he just thinks by himself too much" (71). More than anything else, his bemused,

¹⁰ In all of the sections, the recurrence of verbs and nouns expressing perception—and sight, in particular—is exceptionally high. Darl's description of Addie's last moments exemplifies the tyranny of the gaze in *As I Lay Dying*: "For a while yet she looks at him [Anse], without reproach, without anything at all, as if her eyes alone are listening to the irrevocable cessation of his voice" (47–48). If Faulkner's novels can be characterized, to paraphrase Gresset, as a stage performance of the rivalry between the two "inevitable modalities" of fiction, gaze and voice, then in *As I Lay Dying*, the ubiquitous "eye" of the story always has the last word ("La métaphore" 125).

¹¹ Martin Green blames Faulkner for using language and style "in vacuo," showing little or no regard for the realistic necessities of speech representation (174).

uncompromising silence, combined with an intensely contemplative gaze, alienates Tull and most of the people around him:¹²

He is looking at me. He dont say nothing; just looks at me with them queer eyes of his that makes folks talk. I always say it ain't never been what he done so much or said or anything so much as how he looks at you. It's like he had got into the inside of you, someway. Like somehow you was looking at yourself and your doings outen his eyes.
(125)

Darl, silent and contemplative character, mirror-eyed onlooker and indefatigable narrator, is never but once actively involved—at least, in his own initiative—during the Bundrens' funeral trip. He seems to be swept along, against his own will, by an empty ritual whose absurdity and obscenity become so intolerable that he eventually decides to set fire to the barn, in order to “hide her [Addie] away from the sight of man” (215). For the first and only time, Darl acts, and, with the burning of the barn, the word is eventually made flesh. But the price he has to pay is heavy. The unexpected coalescence of Darl's “words” and his “doing” rings the knell of his final, multiple alienation. Violently rejected by his family, ostracized by the community at large, Darl also becomes estranged from his own voice and, eventually, from the narrative itself. On the train to Jackson, Darl, by describing and addressing himself in the third person, and by attending the last episode of his own tragedy, emblemizes “the self's radical excentricity to itself” (*Écrits* 71) both through and in language. He thus creates a final, supreme disruption in the narrative which echoes the above discussed disruptive relationships between characterization and narration, “realist” and “poetic” style and, eventually, self and voice.

In a novel whose dynamics are inherently and deliberately entropic, by virtue of its very monologic structure and the absence of any explicit authorial voice, Darl's ubiquitous consciousness (he also seems to know that Anse is not Jewel's father, that Dewey Dell is pregnant and is even able to relate his mother's dying moments without being present) provides the story with “some” authorial timbre. However, just like Faulkner's stylistic incarnations, Darl's omniscient quality, far from taming the hysterical structure of the narrative, creates even more disruption and dismemberment and, thereby,

¹² Except Cora, for whom, in the above quoted passage, Darl's silence proves the intensity of Darl's love for his mother.

underlines the novel's self-consciousness. When Darl's self is estranged from his voice (i.e., his attempts at fictionalizing himself¹³), the very monologues are detached from the body of the novel, a disassembling whole, more and more precariously held together, and continually threatened by the implacable oppositional dialectics of consciousness and its articulation into form. According to Darl himself, into whose mouth Faulkner puts the only metalinguistic consideration to be found outside Addie's section: "so with voices. As you enter the hall, they sound as though they were speaking out of the air above your head" (20). The voices are divested of their bodies, and the fifty-nine monologues of *As I Lay Dying* beget another splendid failure. The arrival of the new Mrs. Bundren with the "graphophone" hardly leaves the reader with a sense of closure, if only in a grotesque mode. *As I Lay Dying* remains primarily a novel of and about private and social loneliness, and about ontological and cosmic incompleteness with regard to the tragically tumultuous interaction of language and self, self and world.

Darl, as a narrator, thinks and speaks "where he is not." The impossibility of being simultaneously focalizer and focalized, speaker and spoken word, author and fiction, prompts him, in his last section, to disrupt and remodel the narrative technique into a self-dialogue, a more adequate medium for the expression of self-alienation.

Darl's endeavors to reach a unity of self and a sense of harmony between consciousness and the wor(l)d are nipped in the bud by the ontological gap between words and reality, signifier and signified. Subjectivity and narrative consciousness are a work-in-progress, always suspended in the meanders of *significance*. Likewise, *As I Lay Dying* is a novel struggling towards a unity of experience and articulation. Its unstable economy, created in and in spite of a multiplicity of experience and points of view, is founded on *différance* and mobility. The helpless tentativeness of the interior monologues mirrors the very structure of the novel. As they deconstruct themselves, the voices deconstruct the novel or, in deconstructionist terms, the novel is "always already" deconstructed by virtue of the dynamics of its genesis. Like Darl, it is both constituted and denied by lack, at least in the Sartrean sense:

¹³ Donald Kartiganer, in his excellent study of Faulkner's novels, *The Fragile Thread*, sees in Darl an incarnation of the *poète maudit*: "Darl's description of the barn fire and Jewel's rescue of the animals and the coffin is striking because of his remoteness from the event. He presents the fire as a piece of art, a kind of stage play at which he is only a spectator." Although Kartiganer barely touches on the issue of Darl's stylistic distortions, this perspective accounts for Darl's apparent emotional uninvolvedness, because "in the telling of the event he excludes himself from it" (32).

Of all internal negations, the one which penetrates the most deeply into being, the one which constitutes in its being the being concerning which it makes the denial along with the being which it denies—the negation is lack. . . . A lack presupposes a trinity: that which is missing or “the lacking,” that which misses what is lacking or “the existing,” and a totality which has been broken by the lacking and would be restored by the synthesis of “the lacking” and “the existing”—this is “the lacked.” (*Being and Nothingness* 135)

Jean-Paul Sartre's trinity of the lack and his conception of an autoconstitutive *lacked*, the starting point of Darl's quest, build the unstable ground of the Bundrens' polyphonic pilgrimage. As parabolized in Darl's vision of the mules, a *mise en abyme* of the novel's underlying dialectics, *As I Lay Dying*, ruthlessly torn between two rival and irreconcilable forces, voice and vision, seems to be tending towards inarticulation and silence:

They [the mules] too are breathing now with a deep groaning sound; looking back once, their gaze sweeps across us with in their eyes a wild, sad, profound, and despairing quality as though they had already seen in the thick black water the shape of the disaster which they could not speak and we could not see. (146–47)

Ultimately, all that is left of Darl is a caged, self-estranged self, peacefully musing on a last image of irreducible duality and incompleteness, and, after the fire, a disembodied, still small voice of tranquil stupor and dazed perplexity, a few moments before the fade-out.

. . . the state's money has a face to each backside and a backside to each face. . . . A nickel has a woman on one side and a buffalo on the other; two faces and no back.

.....

“Is that why you are laughing, Darl?”

Darl is our brother Darl, our brother Darl. Our brother Darl in a cage in Jackson where, his grimed hands lying light in the quiet interstices, looking out he foams.

“Yes yes yes yes yes yes yes.” (254)

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