Fathers and Lovers: 
*As I Lay Dying* by William Faulkner

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**Abstract**

This essay analyzes William Faulkner’s experiment in *As I Lay Dying*. Among other readings, the novel can be seen as an interrogation of the notion of fatherhood and (perhaps surprisingly) as an attempt to ask what love is. The essay focuses on two fathers, Anse Bundren and Vernon Tull, reading them as, on the one hand, lovers and, on the other hand, as the instance of the Lacanian Name-of-the-Father, something ignored in the Bundren family by Addie, whose control over the minds of her children bars them from achieving a viable sense of self and access to desire. Using psychoanalytical (mostly Lacanian) concepts, the essay concludes with the proposition that *As I Lay Dying* can be seen as an exploration of one’s possibilities of life.

**Introduction**

“If there is a villain in that story, it’s the convention in which people have to live” (Faulkner, *Faulkner at the University* 112). Authors may not be their best critics, but there is no reason not to pay attention to what they say about their own works. William Faulkner speaking at the University of Virginia three decades after the publication of *As I Lay Dying* is perhaps a more perceptive critic than many of his scholarly commentators, even if he did not supply the conventionally expected footnotes and references. It is the contention of this essay that he is. Most studies write Anse Bundren off as a walking cliché: he is the prototypically shiftless, selfish, ridiculous ‘White trash,’ whose only objective is to exploit his family and his neighbors. Anse is all of that, but he is not only that. His notorious line, “[b]ut now I can get them teeth” (Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying* 47), is often taken out of context, and throughout the novel he voices many other preoccupations. Just as it is impossible to separate farce from tragedy in the novel, one cannot understand the father if one does not analyze him in all his dimensions, rather than simply focusing on the Southern stereotypes.

One of the most revealing comments made on the novel can be found in the opening of Calvin Bedient’s famous 1968 article: “The force of *As I Lay Dying* is in its opacity” (61). To a large extent, Faulkner conceived his works as a series of problems and interrogations. One of these is fatherhood and its implications and conceptual ramifications. This prom-
ising critical approach to Faulkner’s novels was explored four decades ago in a pair of seminal essays by Robert Con Davis (1980) and André Bleikasten (1981), but this line of research has not been extensively pursued, with the exception of my own 2013 article. There are four fathers in the novel: Vernon Tull, with his two daughters Kate and Eula; the Reverend Whitfield, Jewel’s biological father; the mysterious Lafe; and, of course, Anse Bundren. In addition, in a contrapuntal manner, the novel questions the elusive notion of love; indeed, As I Lay Dying can be seen as an attempt to define and understand the highly paradoxical link between the two concepts of love and fatherhood. As I Lay Dying is, to all intents and purposes, two books in one: Addie’s novel, the novel of a mother who controls her children’s souls, and Anse’s novel, the novel of a character radically outside Addie’s power, which enables him to embody another type of conceptual implication: the possibility of love.

This essay will show that Faulkner discovered with his own literary means the importance of what Jacques Lacan later theorized as the Name-of-the-Father and its occasional “foreclosure” (Seminar III 321). When that unconscious structure does not exist, the subject is unable to develop a self-sufficient sense of self, possess desires of his own, and play an active role in society, which includes founding a family. Such is the case of the Bundren children, whose minds are controlled by the image of Addie (with the possible exceptions of Vardaman and Dewey Dell, if one believes some textual indications hinting at the fact they might evolve and adapt to the community in the long run). Conversely, Anse and Vernon Tull, who are immune to that foreclosure, develop their own conception of love, a notion to them closely bound up with home and family.

The fundamental presupposition behind this essay is derived from the work of Friedrich Nietzsche, who insisted on the importance of literature as a human activity that shows us what is essential and even extreme about ourselves and our world. As he writes in the introduction to Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks, “[t]here is as much invention, reflection, boldness, despair and hope here as in the voyages of the great navigators; and to tell the truth these are also voyages of exploration in the most distant and perilous domains of life” (12). Nietzsche sums up his position with the following phrase which will be our categorical imperative: “If only someone could rediscover ‘these possibilities of life!’” (12). What we should understand is that reading literary texts need not primarily be about the past, but first and foremost about the future, our future, and the way we can shape it. We do not know, for instance, if the mysterious Lafe is in love with Dewey Dell, but the young woman is undeniably in love with him, or at least with his name. The essay will interrogate what love means for her and in what way her life will develop when presumably her baby is born. In addition, it will also ask what is implied in Anse’s or Tull’s own conceptions of love. These questions should thus help us unfold what Faulkner had to say about these ‘possibilities of Lafe.’
What is in a Name?

There is something peculiar about the Bundren family. Paradoxically, they are all Bundrens, mother and children, except Anse. At an unconscious level, it is as if their minds were possessed by their image of Addie. As a consequence, they are unable to become autonomous, let alone achieve any sense of self or fall in love with another person. The mental hold the mother has upon her children is, in large part, what the novel is about. On the other hand, Anse does not appear to suffer from this condition. He knows what he wants and he gets it. What matters, however, is that although he is not a “Bundren,” he possesses the Name-of-the-Father. It could be argued that one of the reasons Faulkner invented Anse was to interrogate the concept of fatherhood. This essay will explore a similar line of questioning, drawing primarily on Lacanian concepts and try to show that, if psychoanalysis enables us to understand the logic behind Faulkner’s novel, *As I Lay Dying* should conversely help us clarify the often obscure formulations of the French theorist.

According to Lacan, there are always three fathers, conceptually speaking; put differently, fatherhood can be apprehended at three separate levels. A father can first be a biological father, like Lafe or Whitfield. A child may, however, never know who his or her biological father is. It follows that this level is of no relevance to this essay, which focuses on the mental relationships between identity, desire, and fatherhood. Secondly, a father can be seen as an image or model, a purveyor of roles one would or would not like to play, such as, for instance, a figure of authority or a figure of fun like Anse for his neighbors. In his terminology, Lacan calls this the *imaginary* level, as it deals with images and is bound up with consciousness and our sense of self, the image we have of ourselves. Lastly, on what Lacan calls the *symbolic* level, the father is a signifier. This is a term that Lacan derived from Ferdinand de Saussure’s famous pronouncement that “[i]n language there are only differences without positive terms” (120). Words do not relate directly to reality and a chair is a chair because it is not a stool or an armchair, and a *hat* is not a *cat* nor a *mat*. Accordingly, a father is not a mother or brother, aunt or cousin, etc.

What Lacan calls the *signifier* is thus not a word. Rather, it consists of a virtual, abstract system or structure made up of a series of differences. Everyone knows the usual definition of the word *father*, but unconsciously some individuals cannot rely on that unconscious networking when it becomes a necessity. A good illustration could be Dr. Daniel P. Schreber who, when he was appointed President of the Dresden Court of Appeal, found himself figuratively in a fatherly position, which coincided with one of his wife’s numerous miscarriages. At that juncture, his mind sank once again into confusion and psychosis. It is as if unconsciously the signifier *father* and the system in which it exists had never been present in Schreber’s unconscious.₁ Faulkner had

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₁ Daniel Schreber’s autobiographical *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness* (1903) is the classic compendium of the symptoms of psychosis. Sigmund Freud published his *Schreber’s Case* in 1911 in which he offered his theory of paranoia and madness. Jacques Lacan took up the case in his Seminar III (1955-1956), where he developed his concept of the Name-of-the-Father with its possible “foreclosure” (i.e., non-existence).
One can find a similar conceptual approach to literary texts with developments on *The Sound and the Fury* in my 2013 article.

It is always extremely difficult to refer to Jacques Lacan’s publications, as he kept rephrasing and complexifying his concepts from one seminar to the next. It is almost as though a Lacanian concept was first and foremost an invitation to create ad hoc notions and adapt them to ever new problems. Such is the approach taken in this essay. The two main texts that discuss the problems of the Name of Father are Seminar III on *The Psychoses* (1955-1956) and “On a Question Preliminary to Any Possible Treatment of Psychosis” (1958) published in *Écrits*.

According to Lacan, it is the signifier *father* in the symbolic order that prevents us from falling into the abyss of madness, the mental chaos in which everything seems to flow without landmarks or terms of reference (something Lacan called “point de repère,” with one of his favorite puns on “père” [father] / “repère” [landmark, identifying mark]). Here again, what matters is a triadic structure: child / mother / father. It is the possible malfunction of this triad that Faulkner represents in his account of the control Addie holds over her children’s minds. There is, already questioned the concept of fatherhood in a related fashion in his previous novel, *The Sound and the Fury*. Quentin can indeed be seen as a younger Schreber. One of the most revealing phrases in the young man’s monologue is the unfinished statement which he repeats (twice): “If I could say Mother” (Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury* 79, 145; emphasis in original). The problem has nothing to do with factual reality. He had a mother, even if Caroline Compson (Bascomb?) was not a good mother. The true problem lies in his unconscious: he has been deprived of that key signifier, the Name-of-the-Father, which would shield him from the “dungeon” he often compares his mother to, that is, from that dark chaos into which he is always about to fall without anything to cling to: “I’d have to turn back to it until the dungeon was Mother herself she and Father upward into weak light holding hands and us lost somewhere below even them without even a ray of light” (146). It is as though the only option open to him was sooner or later to plunge into the Charles River. Quentin can neither HAVE nor BE a FATHER: Quentin never says *mother*, either to his own mother, or to a woman of his own generation that could bear his children, and, of course, he will never be able to say *father* when speaking of himself.

Faulkner returned to that interrogation in *As I Lay Dying*, this time with a particular emphasis on the importance of the father rather than of the mother. The problem is first and foremost social, something that has to do with the specific nature of the signifier *father*. Two points of view are always involved: the point of view of society, which only wants its own continuation, that is to say, which is only concerned with procreation, no matter whether its individual members who experience pleasure when conceiving children or not; and, secondly, the point of view of the individual, who may or may not be interested in procreation. The Name-of-the-Father corresponds to the first point of view. It consists of an articulated series of two differences without positive terms: a difference between generations (there should always be three generations: if I am a man, I have a father, then comes my generation, then I am a father), and a difference between sexes, as it takes a man and a woman to produce a child. Anse has a word for that social obligation for which the Name as Father stands: “you and me ain’t nigh done chapping yet, with just two” (161). He specifically does not stress sexual gratification in his relationship to Addie, but privileges another purpose: “chapping,” that is “breeding, producing children” (Brown 50).

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Lacan argues, always a danger that the baby will remain the mental prisoner of the mother, that is, of the pre-oedipal symbiosis in which it lives with her, just as there is a danger that the mother will not accept that the child is no longer part of herself but that it must become free and autonomous. A third party is necessary to say “no” to the child (you are not part of your mother’s universe), as well as to the mother (that child is no longer part of your body and more generally of yourself).

Lacan calls this “no” the “Non du Père” (the No of the Father), which, of course, is another pun, as, in French, “non” (no) is pronounced the same as “nom” (name). The Non du Père is also the Nom du Père, if only because in a traditional patriarchy a child is given his or her father’s name. Lacan also equates the Nom du Père with a metaphor, the ‘Paternal Metaphor.’ In the same manner as ‘angel’ replaces a woman’s name in a phrase like ‘Estelle is an angel,’ the Paternal Metaphor replaces the pre-oedipal confusion and a general absence of identity in which the infant first lives its existence.

Understood in this way, the position of the father is, as it were, a third party. He obviously does not have to be the child’s biological father. It can be another adult, an uncle, a neighbor, etc., but Lacan argued that at bottom it should be the Name-of-the-Father in the mother’s mouth: “We should concern ourselves not only with the way in which the mother accommodates herself to the person of the father, but also with the way she takes his speech, the word (mot), let us say, of his authority, in other words, of the place that she reserves for the Name-of-the-Father in the promulgation of the law” (“On a Question Preliminary to Any Possible Treatment of Psychosis” 218). It is not necessary for it to be a word or a spoken statement from the mother. Looking, or even better, smiling at the child suffices. Addie does not look, let alone smile, at her children. She never acknowledges them. In As I Lay Dying, this deficiency at the level of factual reality is what prevents the characters from constructing the unconscious system of the Name-of-the-Father. It is not an unpleasant memory that is repressed. The logic is different: the Name-of-the-Father as structure either is present and working or does not exist in the unconscious of the character.

It follows that the Bundren children are by and large unable to develop a sense of self. Unconsciously, they remain prisoners of a pre-oedipal vacuum inherited from their mother. They obviously know their father’s name, but, because of Addie’s forceful self-absorption, the unconscious system behind that name and the symbolic power of the Paternal Metaphor are missing:

Why Anse. Why are you Anse. I would think about his 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 of the darkness into the vessel, until the jar stood full and motionless: a significant shape profoundly without life like an empty door frame; and then I would find that I had forgotten the name of the jar. (161)
It has often been remarked that, in its descriptions of the natural elements, Faulkner’s novel is built upon a series of metaphorical oppositions between chaos, seen as a liquid flow, and solid shapes acting as meaningful landmarks. At a mental level, a similar opposition is also present, as evidenced in the above quotation. It is this chaos devoid of landmarks which the Bundren children inherit from their mother.

What the children could not construct was the connection between Desire and what Lacan called “the promotion of the Law”: the Name-of-the-Father did not exist in their unconscious, whereas it should have been the key enabling the subject to become part of society and consequently subject to the Law, the first instance of which is that the child must become separate from the mother. Then and only then will the child discover which objects he or she is in a position to desire or not desire. As Lacan puts it: “The true function of the Father, which is fundamentally to unite (and not to set in opposition) a desire and the Law, is even more marked than revealed by this” (“The Subversion of the Subject” 321). In this respect, the Bundren and Tull families are structured in completely different ways. Cora is almost a caricature of social conformity. Interestingly, she seems to be aware of the importance of the father’s name, as she always refers to her husband as ‘Mr. Tull’ and never by his first name. Their daughters, Kate and Eula, know who they are and what they want. Unfortunately, their desires remain unfulfilled, as Cash and Darl are not responsive to them.

Five Characters in Search of a Mother

Faulkner devotes most of As I Lay Dying to probing the dysfunctional nature of the Bundren family, which, as indicated above, does not include Anse. The children, however, are unable either to develop a satisfactory sense of self and/or possess desires of their own for a member of the other sex. In contrast to The Sound and the Fury, the problem does not stem from a too weak father or a too strong and too remote ancestor, but in a too powerful and too self-centered mother. Addie’s overriding desire “I would be I” (162), whatever it might mean for an individual who refuses all the conventional definitions of identity, is not in itself reproachable. But her desire ignores the Name-of-the-Father and prevents her children from attaining true autonomy. When he was a child, Cash naïvely wanted to present his mother with a plateful of cow dung when she decided to grow flowers, and the coffin will be his last gift to her, but she never shows any interest. Neither is Vardaman thanked for the big fish he catches for her, and, on her death-bed, she never once glances at Dewey Dell, who never stops fanning her. Darl she always ignored; in his case, his tragedy is that Jewel, his rival, will not look at him. As for Jewel, he reveals in his monologue that he dreams of being alone with Addie and the sole object of her gaze, a mad fantasy that will never be realized.
Cash, importantly, is a man with an obsession: balance. He is not just concerned with the coffin but unquestionably with himself. This obsession is what constitutes his central desire: desire not to have, but to be. Balance is the identity he dreams of. In particular, he wants to be accepted by both the mother and the father. First he gave Addie cow dung, then the perfect coffin. He gives his father his leg. It is clear that he is going to lose it, or at the very least be a cripple for the rest of his life, but he accepts the cement and the unbearable pain that goes with it without complaining because—as he justifies it to Dr. Peabody—“[h]it’s what paw says” (228). This futile attempt to shape his life “on the bevel” can symbolically be construed as an attempt to reconcile the verticality praised by Anse (30) with the horizontality emphasized in Addie’s contention on “how terribly doing goes along the earth” as opposed to words going “straight up” (162), which she sees as empty of meaning.6

With Cash, readers have to distinguish the truth, the inner emptiness, from the gratifying image he tries to give of himself. He is not the consummate craftsman he is commonly believed to be. His thirteen points (75) do not make any sense: contrary to what he claims in point 3, for instance, water does not move more quickly upward or downward than obliquely, while point 6, which is made up of only one word, “[e]xcept,” would seem to logically negate everything Cash has said before this point. And he certainly does not evolve into the only sensible character in the novel, contrary to what a large majority of literary critics usually take him to be. “[I]t’s better to build a tight chicken coop than a shoddy courthouse” (221) is surely good common sense, but immediately adding that “when they both build shoddy or build well, neither because it’s one or the other is going to make a man feel the better nor the worse” (221) implies that everything is equivalent and consequently that nothing is important. Symptomatically, he recovers all his tools from the river, except his saw-set. According to Calvin S. Brown’s *Glossary of Faulkner’s South*, “[t]he teeth of a saw are not in a straight line. Some are bent to the right, some to the left, and some are straight. [...] A saw-set is a device for setting the angle of the bent teeth accurately and uniformly” (169). No loss could have been more symbolic, or crueler, for the personal identity he would like to create for himself: Cash will never be a balanced individual.

As for Darl, he suffers from an extreme absence of a sense of self manifested by an inability to find the correct distance between himself (or rather his empty self) and his father, his mother, and the others more generally. As a child looking into the water in the bucket, he was able to see only “a round orifice in nothingness” (7). In Lacanian terms, this suggests a failed instance of the mirror stage: the subject cannot identify with himself, that is, with his reflection. Lacan adds that, if the experience of the mirror stage goes wrong, there is a risk that the individual will become the prey of doubles, who are often seen as rivals.7 In this respect, Darl’s overriding obsession with his rival is clear in the very

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6 The pattern vertical vs. horizontal is perceptively studied in Hattenhauer’s 1994 “The Geometric Design of As I Lay Dying.”

7 Lacan’s essay “The Mirror Stage” is a very economical study as it accounts both for the birth of the sense of self and the birth of aggressivity, the latter in its developments on the jealousy and the violence that may appear when the mirror stage goes wrong and the reflection becomes a double and then a rival (6).
first words of the novel: “Jewel and I” (1). It is as if “I” could not define himself without “Jewel,” the hated image of the brother supposedly acknowledged by the mother. Later, Darl will try to imagine that he is part of a “we” with his other brother, Cash:

Cash’s face is also gravely composed; he and I look at one another with long probing looks, looks that plunge unimpeded through one another’s eyes and into the ultimate secret place where for an instant Cash and Darl crouch flagrant and unabashed in all the old terror and the old foreboding, alert secret and without shame. (129)

If Jewel will not share Darl’s gaze, then Cash will be part of the “we” he dreams of. When Cash betrays him by joining the plot to send him to the lunatic asylum in Jackson, his consciousness collapses. He is no longer able to use the first-person pronoun to refer to himself and falls into division and schizophrenia: “Is that why you are laughing, Darl?” Darl is our brother, our brother Darl” (242).

It is evident that the signifier “father” is missing at some deep unconscious level, that it has in fact never existed, which bars Darl from articulating the Law with desire. Accordingly, he looks upon sexuality as something dirty and preposterous that terrifies him, as is made clear in his thoughts about Dewey Dell’s naked body (86) and the pornographic spyglass he brought back from France (241). He rejects the abjection of what he sees as obscene, and it follows that he will never be a lover or a father. Suffering, like Quentin Compson, from a foreclosure of the Name-of-the-Father, Darl cannot “say mother” and always refers to his own mother as “Addie Bundren.” Admittedly, he has a mother and is helping take her to Jefferson to be buried, and he has a father he respects, but, on a deep unconscious level, the network of family relationships is not something he can rely on to bolster his sense of self and build relationships with others. In this way, he will dutifully accompany that unnamable mother in her coffin, but, unlike his siblings, who in the end more or less successfully succeed in mourning her, he will never come to terms with Addie. In his case, the novel implies that you cannot mourn someone who does not exist for you, and Darl is the Bundren who does not have a mother.

Darl’s fundamental desire is to merge with nothingness and annihilate his consciousness completely: “If you could just ravel out into time. That would be nice. It would be nice if you could just ravel out into time” (196). Unlike Quentin, he does not commit suicide, but he does seem to be trying to erase all of the words that he has said, in a futile belief that in this way he will erase himself. In his nineteenth and last monologue, he repeats the word “[y]es” nineteen times (241-42), as if each repetition could cancel each one of his earlier monologues. Then, there is only silence.

Jewel is a true Bundren, even though Anse Bundren is not his biological father. Like Cash and Darl, he will never find the right distance from the others, something that could have allowed him to achieve
stability and identity. On the one hand, the mother is too close, as is revealed in the incestuous fantasy that makes up most of his sole monologue: “It would just be me and her on a high hill and me rolling the rocks down the hill at their faces, picking them up and throwing them down the hill, faces and teeth and all by God until she was quiet and not that goddamn adze going One lick less. One lick less and we could be quiet” (12). With his fantasy about time stopping, Jewel, like Darl, experiences the temptation of nothingness and annihilation. On the other hand, he decides to get rid of the mother’s influence, replacing her with the horse, which Addie understands perfectly, and she then starts crying the moment she sees the animal. He repeats the ambiguous relationship he had with his mother, caressing the horse and flogging it at the same time, in the same way that Addie “always whipped him and petted him more” (14). He even invents an oxymoron, referring to the horse as “[y]ou sweet son of a bitch” (10). Jewel is no more capable than his brothers of discovering desire for other human beings, as his desire seems to limit itself to a parody of sexual intercourse with the body of the horse, almost in the same way that Cash seems to make love to the coffin.

Only the two youngest children are finally able to evolve as the Name-of-the-Father constructs itself in their unconscious. Faulkner uses Vardaman to experiment with the birth of the self and Dewey Dell with the possibilities of desire. After Addie dies, Vardaman experiences a total loss of identity. But it turns out that he is a more resilient character than Darl, and at the end he finally recovers sufficiently as he starts to accept reality and the loss of his mother. Here again, Lacan posits a theoretical pattern Faulkner also discovered on his own. In Lacan’s mirror stage, the baby first achieves a sense of the unity of its body and then, by analogy, a sense of identity. However, in a crisis, the subject may suddenly be engulfed in a process of mental regression in which he or she not only loses his or her sense of identity, but becomes the prisoner of the so-called “fragmented body,” in which he or she is no longer sure of his or her physical integrity. That is what happens when Vardaman realizes that his mother is no longer here: “his mouth full open and all colour draining from his face into his mouth, as though he has by some means fleshed his own teeth in himself, sucking” (43-44). As he then says: “I am not anything” (51).

Vardaman will, however, reverse that regressive process and rebuild his sense of self, replaying the mirror stage, as it were, when he confronts the horse:

It is as though the dark were resolving him out of his integrity, into an unrelated scattering of components—snuffings and stampings; smells of cooling flesh and ammoniac hair; an illusion of a co-ordinated whole of splotched hide and strong bones within which, detached and secret and familiar, an is different from my is. I see him dissolve—legs, a rolling eye, a gaudy splotching like cold flames—and float upon the dark in fading solution; all one yet
neither; all either yet none. I can see hearing coil toward him, caressing, shaping his hard shape—fetlock, hip, shoulder and head; smell and sound. I am not afraid. (51; emphasis in original)

In spite of the general impression of disintegration, the horse is finally perceived as a whole with its own physical unity. It is endowed with “an is different from my is.” In other words, if it possesses an “is,” that can only mean that Vardaman too has an “is.” In this manner, the child is able to escape from his trauma: “I am not afraid.” It should, however, be pointed out that unity and identity are never definitively achieved. At the end of the novel, Vardaman will again be threatened by mental chaos when he loses Darl, to whom he had become closely attached.

Dewey Dell suffers from two traumas which she cannot separate: her pregnancy and the death of her mother. Like Vardaman, it is as if her body had lost its unity: “I feel my body, my bones and flesh beginning to part and open upon the alone, and the process of coming unalone is terrible” (55). She is in the shed and almost identifies with the cow, symbolically seen as a mother, like her. Unlike her brother, however, she is unable to perceive any unity in the cow, let alone in herself, only “the darkness [which] rushes on upon the sweet blast of her moaning breath” (55-56). The cow acts as a double, and the young woman’s alienation is in some ways similar to Darl’s when he sees Jewel as a double. There is only Dewey Dell and the cow, without a third party telling her that she is whole, different, and that she should be autonomous. In a flashback to some unspecified moment of the past, she then experiences her own complete loss of identity: “I couldn’t see and couldn’t feel I couldn’t feel the bed under me and I couldn’t think what I was I couldn’t think of my name I couldn’t even think I am a girl I couldn’t even think I nor even think” (108; emphasis in original). She only perceives change in reality, as, in her nightmare, she has the intuition that her existence is summed up by the term “passing” (108; emphasis in original) and that inside herself there will never be any stability or identity, something that would remain identical and with which she could identify.

Here again, the problem has to do with the absence of a proper relationship. The mother is too remote and will not acknowledge her daughter who never stops fanning her, and, at the same time, she is too close. When she dies, she is a body with which Dewey Dell spontaneously tries to merge in a panic reaction: “Then she flings herself across Addie Bundren’s knees, clutching her, shaking her with the furious strength of the young before sprawling suddenly across the handful of rotten bones that Addie Bundren left, jarring the whole bed into a chattering sibilance of mattress shucks, her arms outflung and the fan in one hand still beating with expiring breath into the quilt” (43). In her nightmare, Dell is deprived of a sense of self to the extent that she seems to be a mere repetition of her mother (Dell for Adele / Addie?). She discovers that she is only a body, or, more accurately, a body whose only function is to become pregnant, something Addie never stopped deploring. One can
also read her name as Dewey Dell / Dale (this time), symbolizing her inescapable fate as woman and future mother: wet vagina.\(^9\) Strangely, she uses the same vocabulary as her mother (“terrible,” “alone” / “un-alone”) and, like Addie, discovers that she has missed her period after “two” months (164, 189). She cannot mourn owing to the absence of a good distance from the lost object. “I heard that my mother is dead. I wish I had time to let her die. I wish I had time to wish I had. It is because in the wild and outraged earth too soon too soon too soon. It’s not that I wouldn’t and will not it’s that it is too soon too soon too soon” (107). If the Name-of-the-Father is absent, it is because she experiences relationships as instances of fusion, and consequently she cannot possess a distinct sense of self enabling her to play a role in society.

Dewey Dell remains a prisoner of her mother’s conception of language, which was based on a desire to make do without words, as when Anse’s name disappeared for her. In the above quotation, Dewey Dell is no longer conscious of her own name or gender, and she appears unable to use such words as baby, pregnant, or abortion. What she has inherited from her mother is that pre-oedipal chaos in which she is only a fragmented body inseparable from the earth: “I feel like a wet seed wild in the hot blind earth” (58). More importantly, when she thinks of herself, she cannot “say mother” and accordingly naïvely believes that pharmacists sell pills that would solve her undefined problem. Readers, however, surmise that things will be simpler, something Faulkner commented on in a 1956 interview: “The pregnant daughter failed this time to undo her condition, but she was not discouraged. She intended to try again, and even if they all failed right up to the last, it wasn’t anything but just another baby” (“William” 140). Like Vardaman, Dewey Dell seems likely to evolve, freeing herself from her mental confusion and presumably accepting reality.

The Definition of Love

Although a great deal of the imagery in As I Lay Dying deals with nightmare, especially as far as natural elements are concerned, all is not “passing” (108; emphasis in original) for human beings, nor is the last word “a outrage” (176). Read from a different perspective, the novel can also be seen as a celebration of love, home, and identity. Like Nietzsche, Faulkner clearly believed that one of the key functions of literature was to promote “possibilities of life.”

Anse Bundren, the man with the Name-of-the-Father, is unquestionably selfish and ridiculous, but he is also something else. He has not been to town for twelve years, but, like Jewel, whose hairdresser is in Jefferson, he could easily have gone to buy a new set of teeth at any time, and nobody would have reproached him. In other words, even though “them teeth” are important for Anse, Addie’s interment possesses a second objective and follows a different logic. Anse embodies

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\(^9\) This possible pun has not escaped critics, as evidenced by Diane Roberts’s seminal study Faulkner and Southern Womanhood when she explains that the young woman’s name “locates her identity in her vagina, marking her as a vessel for creation, defining her through ‘old biology’” (202).
three essential characteristics fundamentally bound up with life: love, promise, and family.

Firstly, Anse is able to be a lover because, unlike the Bundren children, he is not incapacitated by a foreclosure of the Name-of-the-Father or by the mental paralysis induced by Addie’s ignorance of the paternal metaphor. “The somebody you was young with and you growed old in her and she growed old in you, seeing the old coming on and it was the one somebody you could hear say it don’t matter and know it was the truth outen the hard world and all a man’s grief and trials. You all don’t know” (221). Practically all the critics who discuss Anse maintain that he is only a ridiculous character who clearly does not love Addie.\(^4\) He expresses himself in an awkward manner, but there is nothing in this quotation that allows us to conclude that he is not sincere. For him, love is both a slow process in which the other helps you complicate your sense of identity and a sharing of all that life brings, including suffering and getting old. These are not romantic pronouncements, but they must be accepted as genuine definitions of love. In Anse’s unconscious, the system of oppositions making up the Name-of-the-Father is never a problem, and it is something the implications of which he has fully accepted. Fatherhood here stands for what Lacan famously summarized as “the figure of the law” (Lacan, “The Function and Field of Speech and Language” 67), that is to say the primordial law which says that one should, for instance, shun idealized conceptions of love in order to accept reality. In other words, for Anse, sex is fully synonymous with procreation and the reproduction of the community.

Secondly, Anse is not only the man of the Name but also the man of the Word. In this respect, he can be seen as a rural version of Antigone, the woman who promised to bury her brother whatever the consequenc-es. Both Anse and Antigone kept their word, and, in both cases, the consequences proved extreme. Lacan underlines that Sophocles’s heroine never “giv[es] ground relative to [her] desire” (Seminar VII 321)\(^5\) and that this is for her a question of identity: only by not ceding will she be able to be herself. In Anse’s case, he excels at manipulating his neighbors into helping him with his farm, but, when it comes to taking Addie to Jefferson, he tells the truth when he repeats in variations “[w]e wouldn’t be beholden” (cf. 16, 103, 104, 184, 194, 214). The family literally does not accept anything from the people they meet on their way, and while Anse does eventually borrow spades from a seemingly unknown woman, it is because she is then in a sense already called “Mrs. Bundren,” at least in Cash’s monologue, which is told in retrospect when they are back at the farm as a new family. Faulkner has the essential intuition that only a promise can guarantee identity, something Paul Ricœur theorized in one of his last books, Oneself as Another.\(^6\) A promise is a performative act whose main function is to create a connection between the present (when the promise is made) and the future (when the promise will, supposedely, be kept). Ricœur points out that most promises are never kept,
which makes the minority that are kept and consequently the self that they help bolster especially precious. Promises thus create the possibility of stability and continuity, and as a consequence the subject is able to remain identical, and it is this identity which guarantees the existence of one’s sense of self. Anse Bundren is an exception, or, at the very least, he belongs to the small number of human beings who keep their word. In this way, he knows who he is and what he wants.

Anse is scrupulously faithful to Addie. He does marry again, but he only does so when he is a free man and his first wife is buried. This reveals his third value, after love and promises: home and family. Indeed, the novel can be read as the story of a quest for a new family. The cost is enormous, both bodily and economically, but in the end “Mrs. Bundren” has been restored (248). The family began in Jefferson with the first Mrs. Bundren, and Anse goes to the same place a second time in order to start his family anew with a replacement of Mrs. Bundren. And, as the final words of the novel bear out, he once again asserts the Name-of-the-Father: “Meet Mrs. Bundren,” he says” (248). The trip may have had its origin in Addie’s decision to avenge herself after Darl’s birth, but the winner is her husband, or, rather, it is the concept of family. When she stopped trying to rebel, Addie declared that she would set her house in order, explaining that “a man cannot know anything about cleaning up the house afterward” (164). Ironically, Anse is much better at cleaning up than she is.

The second father of the novel is Lafe. If Anse Bundren represents the Name-of-the-Father, Lafe, a strange entity with no last name, seems to stand for that which comes before the Name-of-the-Father, which means that he should be considered as being more than a full-fledged human being. He seems to raise the problem of an essential psychological dimension. Dewey Dell confesses to the pharmacist in Mottson that she has been pregnant for two months, and she had her first sexual encounter with Lafe when they were picking cotton and he “filled her bag” both literally and metaphorically. It is July as the family is taking Addie to Jefferson, which would put the harvest-time encounter in May, but as any reader vaguely familiar with Mississippi would know, cotton is picked in September. In other words, this jarring detail seems to suggest that the young man embodies some symbolic principle possibly associated with May and spring.

Lafe is a generous man and gives Dell $10 so that she can get an abortion. This was a large sum of money at the time (Anse pays $50 for two mules). Lafe could simply have gone away if what he wanted was sex rather than love or marriage. He seems to have been a White journeyman hiring himself out without a farm of his own, and it would not have been a disgrace for the Bundrens if he had married the woman who apparently matters to him, unless the White man was after all not White. Faulkner does not say that Lafe is Black, but he does not say that he is White either. Here again, the novel moves beyond factual realism:

\[\text{No critical attention has been paid to the time problem raised by Dewey Dell’s pregnancy, with the exception of Candace Waid’s The Signifying Eye: Seeing Faulkner’s Art (see Chapter III: “Dewey Dell, Dead Center”).}\]
Dewey Dell’s lover is a mystery whose function is first and foremost to point to the realm of possibilities.

The problem that Dewey Dell poses involves the question of what love implies for her. She associates Lafe with the mystery of sexuality as well as with the metamorphoses of her body opening and becoming “unalone” (55). She also associates him with May, supposedly the month in which she met him, which suggests that he symbolizes the renewal of life after winter, the growth of nature, and the wind blowing “like a piece of cool silk dragging across [her] naked legs” (108; emphasis in original), as well as a new identity which she can only apprehend in a vaguely sensual manner referring to the unknown reality of her body (“He is his guts and I am my guts” [53] and “the dead earth in the dead darkness” [57]). Above all, he is a name, or, more precisely, a word which she repeats in her masturbatory delirium in the shed: “Lafe. Lafe. ‘Lafe’ Lafe. Lafe.” (55). If “Lafe” followed by a full stop is the man who went away, “Lafe” without punctuation and enclosed in quotation marks seems to be something more abstract, outside time and place, part of some mythic springtime in “the secret shade” (22), and also outside society and outside the normative oppositions and classifications of Southern society, like White / Black. It is an entity open-ended to the right taking us into the future: “Lafe” for Life? What remains unclear is how these as yet undefined possibilities will be defined in the future.

Interestingly, Dewey Dell seems to acquire a completely new perspective when she finally says: “If I could just feel it, it would be different, because I would not be alone” (52). “Could” points to the future and raises the question of the meaning Dewey Dell attaches to the indefinite pronoun “it.” It is clear that at that stage Lafe no longer exists. He was just a word for the new life that is being born in her womb. The future means not being alone thanks to that “it” which / who will presumably have a name of its own. It will not have to be the name of his or her biological progenitor. It will be the Name-of-the-Father: the novel moves from one (Life) to two (Dewey Dell and “it”) and finally to three (Dewey, the baby, and thirdly society, time, place, facts, that is the third party of Lacan’s symbolic level). “It” is a possibility. The process inside the young woman’s mind started with physical desire and love and now points to the realm of possibilities: home and family. This constitutes an especially clear pattern if one looks at Anse or Tull.

14 Faulkner was never averse to playing with puns. In The Sound and the Fury, Ames, for instance, does not exist, otherwise Benjy, in whose mind everything is always present, would presumably have mentioned him. Why would Quentin try to threaten him in particular when we know that Cad-die had a long collection of lovers? Ames for Same? The anagram suggests that he is a double whose function is to say “They’re all bitches.” Obviously, Quentin cannot but agree, and he accordingly punishes himself when he tries to hit his double cum rival.

15 The Bundrens are not the Compsons with their empty aristocratic values. Unlike Caddie, Dewey Dell will presumably not be rejected by her family. Strangely enough, after their trials, the family has become almost “black” by the time they reach town. The young mother will definitely be more like Frony Gibson and her illegitimate son, Luster.

You Are a Man

In a novel that foregrounds the interplay between, on the one hand, the liquid flow of chaos, and, on the other hand, a desire for stability and identity, Vernon Tull seems to embody a form of balance and wisdom. This peculiar insight is hidden right in the middle of As I Lay Dying. Like Darl, Tull has his own spyglass, but he does not see bottomless nihilism in it.
When I looked back at my mule it was like he was one of these here spy-glasses and I could look at him standing there and see all the broad land and my house sweated outen it like it was the more the sweat, the broader the land; the more the sweat, the tighter the house because it would take a tight house for Cora, to hold Cora like a jar of milk in the spring: you’ve got to have a tight jar or you’ll need a powerful spring, so if you have a big spring, why then you have the incentive to have tight, well-made jars, because it is your milk, sour or not, because you would rather have milk that will sour than to have milk that won’t, because you are a man. (126)

Tull declares his love for his wife, knowing that our identity requires the other to become tangible. In Oneself as Another, Ricœur emphasized that this recognition was the greatest invention of the twentieth century, and perhaps a compensation for the horror of wars and concentration camps whose only purpose was to destroy the other. Anse’s promise was a form, a word stopping time, connecting past and present. Fundamentally, we need both the form and the flux, and Tull seems to have succeeded in combining both dimensions.

Cora may have been an unpleasant human being, “sour” like the milk, but Tull names her as his wife and builds their home around her. The quotation is somewhat sexualized, with its female jar and male water gushing from the spring and, in a way reminiscent of Anse’s expression of love for Addie, it offers an entirely non-idealized definition of love, implying that one should create environments in which sex, family, and home are inseparable. In the case of Anse or Tull, what Lacan called the Name-of-the-Father fulfills its function. As a consequence, impervious to the kind of unconscious control Addie possessed over her children, the two men are able to construct a sense of self as well as viable relationships with others. It is very little, and it is a lot. And we are back to our first question: what is in a name, or, rather, what is in a word? One of the conclusions of As I Lay Dying is thus to provide a tentative Faulknerian definition, not just of love, but also of a word so difficult to apprehend: “You are a man.”

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