Eyes, Desire and Gaze: Darl Bundren's Visual Representation in *As I Lay Dying*

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Introduction

*As I Lay Dying* is a modernist classic which Faulkner calls a tour de force. This novel focuses on the Bundrens' burial journey to Jefferson. In his biography of Faulkner, Jay Parini writes that "[f]or modernist authors, the journey from one place to another is a form of dislocation [...] modern life, with its serial uprootings and the demand for mobility, created an existential crisis that literature simply reflected" (Parini 143). The journey in *As I Lay Dying* is represented by fifteen narrators, each of whose points of view denotes a peculiar coloring of the world and, therefore, an exposure of self. In this sense, the dislocation and existential crisis in *As I Lay Dying* result from the alienation in the visual field. It is particularly so for Darl Bundren who unsettles the neighbors with a pair of "queer eyes" (Faulkner 125, hereafter page only), a second sight capable of juxtaposing different spaces. It is also this pair of queer eyes that denote Darl's complete madness in his last monologue.

One focus of Lacanian theories is the alienated subject. As for the alienation of the subject concerning the scopic field (the visual field), Lacan had a discussion under the title of "Of the Gaze as *Objet Petit a*" in his eleventh seminar titled "The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis". Focusing on Darl's scopic...
representation from the perspective of the Lacanian gaze theory, the following part of this essay is aimed to interpret Darl’s mental dislocation which gradually takes place during the journey.

I. The Symbolic Construction of Darl’s Subjectivity in the Scopic Field

The symbolic order is the place where subjectivity emerges at the level of the Other. This big Other means radical alterity (or otherness) which inhabits the innermost core of the subject. Dylan Evans suggests that “Lacan equates this radical alterity with language and the law” (Evans 133). Thus, the Lacanian subject, from the very beginning, is an alienated one due to the law of the father. Attaining subjectivity requires the symbolic castration by the symbolic father who in return, provides the subject with an identity by positioning him within the symbolic order.

In Darl’s narrative, he is obsessional about his brother Jewel whose exclusionary bond with Addie makes it impossible for Darl to link with her. According to Elizabeth Hayes, among Darl’s nineteen monologues, eleven open with a focus on Jewel and twelve end on him. (Hayes 51) Thus, Jewel functions like a frame of reference which enables Darl to locate himself through measuring himself against his brother. Lyall Powers attributes Darl’s obsession to “[the] subject that preoccupies him—Jewel’s paternity” (Powers 58). But he did not discuss the construction of Darl’s subjectivity. A Lacanian approach to Darl’s scopic representation may reveal this process. This novel begins with Darl’s visual obsession about Jewel:

Jewel and I come up from the field, following the path in single file. Although I am fifteen feet ahead of him, anyone watching us from the cottonhouse can see Jewel’s frayed and broken straw hat a full head above my own [...]. Square, with a broken roof set at a single pitch, it [the cottonhouse] leans in empty and shimmering dilapidation in the sunlight, a single broad window in two opposite walls giving onto the approaches of the path. 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. [...] he crosses the floor in four strides with the rigid gravity [...] and steps in a single stride through the opposite window and into the path again just as I come around the corner. In single file and five feet apart and Jewel now in front, we go on up the path toward the foot of the bluff. (3-4, italics by this author)
Darl's anxiety is showed in his precise measurement of the distance between himself and Jewel. This measurement ends with a change of their order in the single file. What Darl's eyes represent in this excerpt is a typical pattern in the Bible: the takeover of an elder brother's birthright by a younger brother, such as the forced sale of Esau's birthright to Jacob when Esau was almost faint due to hunger in Genesis, and Moses' gradual empowerment over Aaron who was initially appointed as God's priest in Exodus. From the perspective of psychoanalysis, the birthright here is a metaphor of paternal function in the symbolic order. Darl's point of view changes a little in the second sentence. This enables his eyes to focus on Jewel's straw hat which is a phallus image. Darl's judgment that this point of view belongs to “anyone” reveals his deep recognition of Jewel as a father-surrogate. The following scene of Jewel's striding through an empty cottonhouse is also symbolic, because under Darl's observation Jewel himself becomes the incarnation of phallus. In this scopic representation which is Darl's first one, he identifies Jewel as the father-surrogate who dominates the line of male descendence symbolized here by a “single file”.

In the symbolic order, the mother-child dyad does not function anymore due to the intervention of the father and therefore is replaced by the symbolic triad. This intervention is the Oedipal prohibition that a subject should give up his desire for the mother and accept the name-of-the-father. Phallus occupies a central role in this prohibition because it stands for the separation of the mother and the child, and denotes the father's authority. In this novel, Darl always feels that Addie's affections belong only to Jewel. In Jewel's only monologue, this furious father-surrogate narrates that “[i]t would just be me and her on a high hill and me rolling the rocks down the hill at their faces, picking them [people whom Jewel hates including Darl] up and throwing them down the hill faces and teeth and all by God until she was quiet” (15). Occupying the crest of a hill which is the phallus image, Jewel prohibits Darl's desire for Addie. Freud writes that the dream scene of losing teeth symbolically represents castration. (Freud 370) Therefore, Darl's teeth which is imagined in Jewel's furious mind to be hurled off a mountain means the symbolic castration by Jewel.

Influenced by Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter, Faulkner endows the name of Jewel with the meaning of being precious. The word “jewel” refers to a precious gem on a crown which indicates both the image of phallus and the patriarchal position. In contrast, Darl's name is more like a fragment of the word “darling” which denotes, to some extent, affections or desire. The core of subjectivity is its radical alterity.
which derives from the language and law of the father. In Darl’s naming, the loss of “ing” indicates the symbolic castration by Jewel. The giving-up of desire indicated by this loss is obviously expressed in Darl’s weird sentences: “I cannot love my mother because I have no mother” (95); “I haven’t ever got one [mother]” (101).

Just as a subject’s deeds must be in accordance with the law of the father, in the scopic field, his eyes are not autonomous, but pre-regulated and guided to see. Lacan cites Aragon’s poem to illustrate this pre-regulation: “I am the wretch comparable with mirrors / That can reflect but cannot see.” (Lacan, 1998: 17) After the symbolic castration, a subject accepts his appointed position in the symbolic order. Then, his visual activities are in the state of what Lacan calls “I see myself seeing myself” (Lacan, 1998: 80). The pre-regulation means that the subject is determined by the Other and, in this sense, is seen by the symbolic order. His own acceptance of the appointed place, however, results in a misrecognizing tendency: A subject denies the fact that he is seen and pre-regulated, and does not realize that he is the mirror which only reflects but never sees. “I see myself seeing myself” indicates the seeming autonomy and the alienated nature of the subjectivity in the scopic field.

The scopic alienation is most obvious in Darl’s adoption of points of view. His choosing of points of views is not stable in that many of his monologues are narrated in the omnipotent point of view. It is particularly so for Monologue 12 and Monologue 17 when Addie was dying at home and Darl was far away in the road loading timber. In these two monologues, Darl’s eyes not only represent what is within his sight, but also juxtapose different scenes in these two spaces. Addie’s dying, at this moment, is like the inevitable loss of the primal completeness which accompanies Darl’s entry into the symbolic order. Thus, Darl’s unusual visual representation of Addie’s disappearance, in an artistic way of Faulkner, denotes his forced yet at the same time active renunciation of his desire for the mother. This paradoxical visual phenomenon reveals that Darl is like the mirror wretch in Aragon’s poem, who only reflects the paternal law yet owns no autonomy.

II. The Imaginary Denial of Darl’s Desiring Eyes

The basis of the imaginary order is the mirror stage in which the identification with the specular image takes place. Since the mother often functions as the specular image, the essential feature of the imaginary order is the mother-child dyad. Due
to the paternal prohibition, this dual relation with its original completeness later will inevitably be replaced by a primal rupture which results in the maternal absence. By projecting the lost imaginary dyad onto substitutes, a subject's desire functions as a force which relentlessly yet vainly attempts to restore the original completeness. In this sense, an alienated subject sustains himself in desire which denotes his lack.

Once entering into the symbolic order, Darl needs to find substitute objects of desire. Lacan writes that "the domain of vision has been integrated into the field of desire" (Lacan, 1998: 85). Darl's scopic representation is one place where the substitution of the object of desire happens as a vain way to overcome the symbolic rupture.

Addie has a close relation with nature. In Peabody's eyes, "[b]eneath the quilt she is no more than a bundle of rotten sticks." (44) Meanwhile, Vardaman repeatedly states that his mother is a fish and Darl equates her with Jewel's horse. In her own monologue, Addie narrates that she frequently goes down to the spring where "[i]t would be quiet there then, with the water bubbling up and away and the sun slanting quiet in the trees and the quiet smelling of damp and rotting leaves and new earth" (169). Just as nature, especially land and earth, means fertility, the mother embodies the human fertility. From this perspective, indicating a sense of completeness, nature is a synecdoche of the mother. Darl's visual substitution is recorded in Dewey Dell's monologue: Darl "sits at the supper table with his eyes gone further than the food and the lamp, full of the land dug out of his skull and the holes filled with distance beyond the land" (27). Given the homogeneity between mother and nature, Darl's way of seeing here indicates his desire to return to the maternal womb. So this scopic representation reflects Darl's yearning for the primal completeness by merging into the land. Faulkner sets the Bundren house in a bluff of a hill which is so steep that the overweight doctor Peabody has to climb with the help of a rope. Thus, both the hill image as the phallus and the presence of Jewel at supper here indicates that, as an alienated subject in the symbolic order, Darl cannot restore the imaginary completeness.

A subject's desire can never be satisfied due to the lack by the traumatic castration. Then, the substitution of object of desire is relentless. Dewey Dell shares with Addie a sense of aloneness. Besides, her pregnancy denotes her link with the fertile land: "I feel like a wet seed wild in the hot blind earth." (64) Even the word "Dell" in her name is a natural image which suggests fertility: a small valley with trees growing in it. Deborah Clarke thinks that "Dewey Dell, though she lacks
her mother's more philosophic recognition of language's limitations, views it with suspicion and takes every opportunity to avoid using it” (Clarke 191). Dewey Dell finds it difficult to say the words which will enable her abortion. If abortion symbolizes the original separation between the mother and the child, Dewey Dell's suspicion of language with which the symbolic order is constructed, to some extent, locates her safely in the imaginary order. So for Darl, her pregnant body signals the primal completeness.

Immediately when the journey begins, Darl's eyes begin to focus on this pregnant body: “She sets the basket into the wagon and climbs in, her leg coming long from beneath her tightening dress: that lever which moves the world; one of that caliper which measures the length and breadth of life.” (103 - 104) The reason why the caliper as a metaphor of Dewey Dell's two legs can measure life is that the two legs of a caliper intersect in a point which is a metaphor of Dewey Dell's womb beneath the tightening dress. This point is the place of Darl's lost completeness.

As the journey continues, Darl's visual substitution takes place in the river-crossing scene. The search in the water for the coffin enables Darl to experience the lost dual relation ensured by the amniotic fluid in the womb. Once out of water, Darl makes his substitution in the following scopic representation on the bank:

It [The water surface] looks peaceful, like machinery does after you have watched it and listened to it for a long time. As though the clotting which is you had dissolved into the myriad original motion, and seeing and hearing in themselves blind and deaf; fury in itself quiet with stagnation. Squatting, Dewey Dell's wet dress shapes for the dead eyes of three blind men those mammalian ludicrosities which are the horizons and the valleys of the earth. (163 -164, italics by this author)

In the water, Darl was the clotting which was merged into the womb's amniotic fluid. But out of water, Darl is a mere symbolic clotting, which is not able to become the imaginary fluid anymore. Even now the water surface, in the symbolic eyes of Darl, “looks peaceful” (instead of “is peaceful”), which indicates a sense of uncertainty and loss. Darl’s scopic representation echoes T. S. Eliot’s “The Hollow Men”: “The eyes are not here / There are no eyes here / In this valley of dying stars / In this hallow valley / This broken jaw of our lost kingdoms / In this last of meeting places / We grope together / And avoid speech / Gathered on this beach of tumid water.” (Eliot 84 - 85) Eliot's lost kingdom is the primal completeness demonstrated by the river into which Darl once merged. Associated with the lack, the
scopic desire can never be satisfied by Darl’s eyes. In this sense, Darl realizes that his eyes are dead, or, as it is in Eliot’s lines, there are no eyes in the lost kingdoms.

At the beginning of this poem, Eliot writes: “We are the hollowed men / We are the stuffed men.” (Eliot 83) From a Lacanian perspective, these two paradoxical lines reveal Darl’s dilemma: As a symbolic subject, he is stuffed in the sense that he is appointed to a symbolic position because of his acceptance of the paternal law, while his hollowness is due to the Oedipal trauma which results in the lack. The phrase “mammalian ludicrosities” reveals Darl’s disillusion that some illusion is deep-rooted in his substitutions of Dewey Dell’s womb and fertile land for the lost completeness. In this sense, the imaginary order denies Darl’s return.

Another denial of Darl from the imaginary order is made by Vardaman. Vardaman grasps tightly the concept of the fish which is “nigh long as he is” (30), and repeatedly asserts that his mother is a fish. Thus, with this fish as his specular image, Vardaman locates himself in the imaginary order just like innocent Benjy who maintains the imaginary completeness by clinging to Caddy’s shoe. The denial from the imaginary order is represented in Darl’s conversion with Vardaman when they approach Jefferson:

“Then what is your ma, Darl?” I [Vardaman] said.

“I haven’t got ere one,” Darl said. “Because if I had one, it is was. And if it is was, it cant be is. Can it?”

“No,” I said.

“Then I am not,” Darl said. “Am I?”

“No,” I said.

I am. (101, italics by Faulkner)

For Darl, “was” of the past tense is a state of the imaginary order while “is” and “am” of the present tense denote that he is in the symbolic order. He has the uncoordinatable trouble between the past state and the present one. Vardaman, however, is free of this kind of trouble, because he is always in the “am” which, like Darl’s “was”, means the imaginary completeness. For Darl, the two successive “no” of Vardaman is the denial from the imaginary order.

III. Addie: The Impossible Gaze as Objet Petit a in the Real Order

Lacan links impossibility with the real order which denotes the traumatic lack and resists language and symbolization. The core of the real order is objet petit a, a
privileged object which can never be attained and, unlike the substitute objects, is
the object-cause of desire\(^5\). According to Dylan Evans, the italicized *a* in *objet petit a* means the little other which is the specular image in the imaginary order. (Evans 125) So *objet petit a* is the leftover libido beyond the temporal satisfaction related to
the substitute objects. In this sense, *objet petit a* emerges in the primal separation
and marks the lost completeness. In his discussion of the gaze, Lacan writes that
"[i]n the scopic relation, the object [*objet petit a*] on which depends the phantasy
from which the subject is suspended in an essential vacillation is the gaze" (Lacan,
1998: 83). This suggests that, different from the Sartrian gaze which determines
one subject to be objectified under the gaze of another subject, the Lacanian gaze is
the object-cause in the subject's scopic representation.

Unlike the pregnant Dewey Dell, Addie means some permanent loss for Darl due
to her rejection of him at birth. In Addie’s only monologue, she repetitively asserts
the inadequacy of language: "words like spiders dangling by their mouths from a
beam, swinging and twisting and never touching" (172); "names would die and
solidify into a shape and then fade away" (173); the line of words and the line of
doing “are too far apart for the same person to straddle from one to another” (173).
Since in common sense language is only available to living people, Addie’s challenge
to language can be noticed in the narrative form itself; her strange posthumous
narrative. If the suspicion of language locates Dewey Dell in the imaginary order with
its primal completeness, with her maternal absence, Addie’s resistance to
symbolization means that she is Darl’s *objet petit a*, the traumatic nucleus in the real
order. In the scopic field, Addie is the gaze which is the object-cause of Darl’s visual
desire.

Christopher White suggests that “Addie haunts the text as an unassimilated—
that is, incorporated, or encrypted—presence” (White 84). The three adjectives in
this comment, to some extent, also express a sense of absence. The Lacanian gaze
concerns this absent presence: “the pre-existence of gaze—I see only from one
point, but in my existence, I am looked at from all sides” (Lacan, 1998: 72).
The pre-existence of gaze refers to that before the subject carries out his visual
activities, the gaze is already there, looking at him and determining these activities to
happen. Under the gaze, the desiring eyes can only see substitute objects instead of
the privileged object-cause of desire. Addie’s decaying body and her disappearance in
the coffin means some kind of absent presence for Darl, because her body decays yet
still exists and the coffin which hides her body frequently catches Darl’s eyes along
the journey. Darl’s eyes continuously linger on different substitute objects, but he always fails to realize what he really desire is actually Addie, the gaze. This paradox can be illustrated by Aragon’s poem which Lacan cites: “Like them [the mirrors] my eye is empty and like them inhabited / By your absence which makes them [my eyes] blind.” (Lacan, 1998: 17)

Lacan states that the function of gaze “is that which governs the gaze most secretly and that which escapes from the grasp of that form of vision that is satisfied with itself in imagining itself as consciousness” (Lacan, 1998: 74). This indicates that, in the Lacanian gaze theory, there involves three elements: the subject who is looking, the visual object which is seen, and the gaze which escapes from the eyes. In Darl’s seeing of Jewel, in a psychoanalytic sense, he is looking for a symbolic position that is supposed to compensate for the rupture which results from the paternal prohibition and features the maternal loss. The land denoting fertility and Dewey Dell’s body also function as the visual objects mediating between the subject and the gaze. Then, due to the escape of the gaze, what Darl looks at is not what he unconsciously wishes to see. Lacan suggests that “in the dialectic of the eye and the gaze, there is no coincidence, but on the contrary, a lure” (Lacan, 1998: 102).

In Darl’s scopic representation, he is trapped by the unattainable gaze. To this extent, Darl resembles Sisyphus, a hero in Greek mythology who has to roll a huge stone up a hill yet could never stay in the summit.

IV. Darl’s Madness: The Split of Subjectivity

Subjectivity is tragic in the scopic field because the gaze as objet petit a never belongs to the subject and, to some extent, cannot even be called “lost”. The primal completeness is a misrecognition in the imaginary order. Discussing the mirror stage, Lacan thinks that “the specular image seems to be the threshold of the visible world” (Lacan, 2006: 77). The relation between the subject and the visible world starts from his identification with the specular image. Lacan also points out that this identification turns out to be “fantasies that proceed from a fragmented image of the body to what I will call an ‘orthopedic’ form of totality” (Lacan, 2006: 78). The word “fragmented” is in the sense that, without some prop, the baby cannot even steadies itself in front of a mirror. And its sense of wholeness attained through the identification with its specular image is essentially an illusion which does not exist. Lacan writes that, in the mirror stage, “the finally donned armor of an alienating identity will mark his entire mental development with its rigid structure” (Lacan,
So in Lacan’s view, the visible is a trap from which the subject can never escape.

Initiated by Addie, this journey leads to the real order. According to Dylan Evans, “the subject is a subject only by virtue of his subjection to the field of the Other” (Evans 196). Since the real order means impossibility and resists the symbolic order, the subjectivity will necessarily be lost when a subject approaches the real order. As the journey goes on, Darl’s desiring eyes gets frustrated time and again. During the evening and the night just before the Bundrens reach Jefferson, Darl finds himself on the edge of split:

How do our lives ravel out into the no-wind, no-sound, the weary gestures wearily recapitulant: echoes of old compulsions with on-hand on no-strings; in sunset we fall into furious attitudes, dead gestures of dolls. Cash broke his leg and now the sawdust is running out. He is bleeding to death is Cash. (207, italics by this author)

The breeze was setting up from the barn, so we put her under the apple tree, where the moonlight can dapple the apple tree upon the long slumbering flanks within which now and then she [Addie] talks in the little tricking bursts of secret and murmurous bubbling. (212, italics by this author)

The italics in the first excerpt again corresponds to Eliot’s hollow men which are depicted as scarecrows: “Shape without form, shade without colour, / Paralysed force, gesture without motion.” (Eliot 83) Darl’s language here expresses the recapitulant status in which his desiring eyes are trapped by the gaze. Dead gestures in the sunset demonstrate some Sisyphusian essence of eternality. For Darl, Cash’s bleeding to death indicates the anxiety caused by the forthcoming split in his subjectivity. The second excerpt echoes Eliot’s lines: “There, is a tree swinging / And voices are / In the wind’s singing / More distant and more solemn / Than a fading star.” (Eliot 83 –84) Faulkner specifies Eliot’s swinging tree as the biblical apple tree which holds the destructive knowledge for Adam. (The knowledge is destructive in the sense that getting the knowledge results in Adam’s exile by God.) Addie’s “bursts of secret and murmurous bubbling” may be derived from the last stanza of “The Hallow Men”: “This is the way the worlds ends / This is the way the worlds ends / This is the way the worlds ends / Not with a bang but a whimper.” (Eliot 86) In this sense, this seemingly peaceful scopic representation by Darl is indeed an omen for some forthcoming ending.
It is at this night that Darl sets fire to Mr. Gillespie's barn as an attempt to destroy the coffin and get rid of Addie’s absent presence. But he fails and Addie still remains as the impossible gaze. Since the barn is a property protected by the law, Darl’s arson puts himself in opposition to the symbolic order and results in his exile by it. Once out of the symbolic order, the subject loses his subjectivity and is faced with mental split. In Darl’s last monologue, this split is demonstrated in his unusual point of view that he is both the focalizer and the focalized. As the focalizer, Darl colors what he sees with some sexual implication[6], and then his desiring eyes are without control. As the focalized, his body is under strict control which means his exile from the symbolic order: “Darl in a cage in Jackson where, his grime hands lying light in the quiet interstices, looking out he foams.” (254) This alienation in his scopic representation is the very symptom of Darl's loss of subjectivity and his complete madness.

Conclusion

Darl’s tragedy, in a great sense, is one in the scopic field. His switch among several different points of views reflects that his subjectivity has no firm basis. In this sense, Darl is the Lacanian alienated subject who is never autonomous and has to solidify himself by reference to others. Darl’s desiring eyes, on the one hand, fulfill this reference, but on the other hand, trap Darl in the endless pursuit of desire which cannot be fully satisfied. The fundamental cause is the traumatic gaze behind the substitute objects. As the nucleus in the real order, the gaze refuse to be seen by the desiring eyes, but continues to lure them, which leads the subject to the final split. Darl’s scopic representation demonstrates this Lacanian dialectic between the eyes and the gaze.

The journey in modernist works means dislocation and existential crisis of the modern life. It is particular so for As I Lay Dying, the route of whose journey is designed not only for Addie who is the impossible gaze, but also for Darl whose desiring eyes have the potential to cause his existential crisis. If Darl can be called a modernist tourist, his scopic representation unfolds the modernist scenery of As I Lay Dying.

Notes:
[1] Lacan distinguishes “other” from “Other”. The little other refers to the specular image at the mirror stage and it belongs to the imaginary order. The big Other
corresponds to the symbolic order.

[2] This term emphasizes paternal function and does not necessarily refer to the biological father.

[3] Faulkner's interest in creating a child character with some parental function is also showed in The Sound and the Fury: Critics regard Caddy as Benjy's psychological mother.

[4] A baby likes to imitate the gestures of people around it, so its imitative gestures enable the imitated person who is often the mother to function as the specular image.

[5] The object-cause of desire, indicates that objet petit a functions both as an object of desire and as the reason for desire's being unsatisfiable.

[6] Some critics think that the nickel and what Darl sees in his spy-glass ( "two faces and no back", "a woman and a pig with two faces and no back" ) are the images which may be related to Iago's lustful depiction of Othello's sexual intercourse in Shakespeare's Othello: "Your daughter and the Moor are making the beast with two backs."

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