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“too soon too soon too soon”:
Continuity, Blame, and the Limits
of the Present in *As I Lay Dying*

“There is no such thing as *was*—only *is*. If *was* existed, there would be no grief or sorrow.”

William Faulkner (1956)

THOUGH THE TERM AND ITS VARIANTS CONTINUE TO ELICIT debate, the formalist turn in recent literary study has at the very least provided those who take form to be a critical point of entry into a text’s myriad concerns, the shelter of a movement.¹ What Annette Trefzer suggests to be the case about Faulkner Studies in her introduction to *Faulkner and Formalism* (2012) can also be said of pockets of the new modernist studies as well as literary studies more broadly. More so than a return “of the text,” she writes, critical attention is returning “to the text,” indicating “the critics’ (perhaps long repressed) desires to focus more centrally on the work itself, its language, and its formal characteristics” (x).

Despite the return to the text, critics remain committed to certain received ideas about modernism’s negative commitments vis-à-vis realism. Though there has emerged superior scholarship on modern narrative form—most notably from Fredric Jameson (2014), Michael Sayeau (2013), and Jacques Rancière (2014)—many still argue that the modern novel grows skeptical and dismissive of plotted structure, teleology, and total closure, that modernism enacts its aesthetic freedom and socio-political resistance through experiments with the aleatory and the contingent. This prevailing assumption about the strength of modernist negation, however—its defiant oppositional stance with respect to realism’s more aesthetically and politically conservative form—has precluded the ability to perceive the modern novel’s far more complex

orientation toward realism and its politics. In the spirit of recent efforts in modernist studies to imagine alternative, “weaker” modernist modes than those of defiant opposition,² I argue that the themes of mourning, madness, and blame, that permeate *As I Lay Dying* all participate in the novel’s broader interrogation of the existential, psychic, and historical consequences of abandoning the formal armature of realist plot. Lauded as Faulkner’s most antirealist novel, *As I Lay Dying* also registers with enormous pathos what Caroline Levine would call the “affordances” of realist form, the kinds of social belonging, normative security, and epistemic privilege promised by nineteenth-century plot.³ Faulkner enacts his modernism in *As I Lay Dying* by seeking recourse to a present tense that undoes the formal armature of realist narration; but in the process he also interrogates the refusal of the embodied present to enable aesthetic, emotional, and ultimately historical, intelligibility.⁴ In a high-constant state of presence to the scenes they narrate, the characters of *As I Lay Dying* are severed from a diachrony, a continuity that would lend them the formal and psychological coherence once afforded by the preterit grammar of the realist novel.

Philip Weinstein has drawn out Faulkner’s preoccupation with the disparity between aesthetic orderliness and the instability of experience in time. In his biography *Becoming Faulkner* (2010), Weinstein argues that while narrative “seizes life trajectories condemned to stumbling and—by the act of *telling* them—binds those trajectories into retrospective order,” Faulkner’s great work tries to “grasp” at the “cascading trouble” that is the present, the “unpreparedness” and “cumulative stress” of lived time, whose inherent “unmanageability” Weinstein sees as having also characterized Faulkner’s own life (8–10). What remains underexamined in Weinstein’s formidable account, however, are the implications of the authorial mastery underpinning Faulkner’s aesthetic rendering of the un-masterable. Weinstein rightly points out the “dialectical” interchange between the risk-filled, “turbulent” life of Faulkner the man and the aesthetics of risk and turbulence that he would go on to craft (*Becoming Faulkner* 5). But Faulkner’s is indeed, and emphatically, an aesthetics of risk—an aesthetics of the unmanageable—and thus a living testimony to what Weinstein acknowledges is Faulkner’s self-conscious failure to altogether undermine that “precious ordering” endemic to the very gesture of art (8). Faulkner may have experienced his life as a dizzying assemblage of troubles for which he seldomly felt

prepared, but in the moment of writing, he is subjecting other beings, his own literary creatures, to that trouble internal to the uncooperative now, and in so doing, exercises a subtle but irrevocable form of authorial leverage with whose ramifications our accounts of Faulkner—and of modernism as such—have yet to grapple. Like *The Sound and the Fury*, *As I Lay Dying* traces “the dependency of children on their parents and the frustration that occurs when that dependency is betrayed” (62). Making that betrayal brutally literal, *As I Lay Dying* kills off the only competent creator in the lives of the Bundren family, leaving its remaining members not just to the devices of an incompetent patriarch, but also to an existentially and historically incomprehensible present. *As I Lay Dying*, perhaps more than any other of Faulkner's novels, performs an aesthetics of turbulence just as it stages the repercussions of that aesthetics—just as it ponders, that is, what happens to the living when the teller absents himself. To what, it asks, must the living resort?

For while certain characters in *As I Lay Dying* navigate that turbulent present unproblematically, most attempt to deliver themselves from it—either by protracting the present through aesthetic stretches, or by forging artificial bonds of culpability and blame where the formal bonds of causation have been denied them, thus creating narrative continuity where it is frustratingly absent. In its various attempts to have present tense grammar perform retrospective work, *As I Lay Dying* stages a reluctant surrender of preterit narration to the turbulence of experience, generating moments in which the body insists on its unaccountable presence to any aesthetic labor that would attempt, however imploringly, to abstract it out of existence; or in which blame assignment becomes a form of surrogate retrospection, localizing the cause of personal or historical pain to a nameable albeit inaccurate source in order to make narrative sense of that pain and thus render it manageable. *As I Lay Dying* is often considered the zenith of Faulkner's modernist project, him in his quintessentially antirealist mode. But in line with James M. Mellard's refusal to take the novel's modernism for granted—his choice, instead, to tease out its various engagements with the representational strategies and ideological assumptions of not just modernism but also realism and naturalism—I argue that *As I Lay Dying* is profoundly troubled by its own modernism, its use of the present tense not an emphatic declaration of its break from the grammatical prohibitions of realism, but an elegy to the imaginative and contemplative

provisions of realist temporality. As such, it is a representative example of the more broadly modernist preoccupation, unacknowledged by scholars, with the following dilemma: to abandon realist temporality may be to claim one's authentic literary modernity, but it also amounts to a form of authorial cruelty.

The materialist turn in Faulkner criticism awakened critics to the ways in which Darl's linguistic indulgences could be regarded as indicative of a purely, if not perilously, aestheticist modernism, a drastic instantiation of the modernist doctrine of aesthetic autonomy in conflict with the novel's inscriptions of the uneven economic and social development of the New South. The most elegant and influential articulation of this view comes from John T. Matthews, who has argued that Darl's "regular efforts to expunge a certain kind of reality through aesthetic treatment" represents a "falsifying modernism . . . [that is] overly aesthetic" in its retreat from the historical circumstances with which the Bundrens are coming to terms ("Machine Age" 88–90).⁵ More recently, Ted Atkinson has repeated the sentiment in his suggestion that Darl's aesthetic work testifies to the extent to which he is "entranced by the [modernist] ideology of autonomy" (22). Yet, while Darl's abstractions certainly "de-substantializ[e]" the material world in a way that dislocates the lived from the aesthetic (Matthews, "Machine Age" 88), the ideological underpinnings of those linguistic adornments are not modernist tout court, but rather a modernism that is cut with a fundamentally realist impulse. Darl is, after all, engaging in the kind of aesthetic contemplation that Walter Benjamin argued was a category of experience inherent to the discourse networks of the nineteenth century rather than those of the age of mechanical reproducibility, which thrive on precisely the sort of sensorial onslaught that Darl is attempting to avoid.⁶ Darl may be wresting art from reality, but he is waging that battle along a temporal axis, attempting to recover narratable and aestheticizable experience by wresting the time needed for aesthetic contemplation. Darl's effete aestheticism is just as much, if not more, a sign of a vestigial realism—what Mellard, borrowing from Raymond Williams, might call a "residual" realism—clamoring for the privilege of preterit retrospection than it is a relishing in self-insulated modernist negation.

Early on in the novel, Darl invokes an image of his brother so aestheticized that it puts strain on its own grammar. "Standing in a litter of chips, he is fitting two of the boards together. Between the shadow spaces they are yellow as gold, like soft gold, bearing on their flanks in smooth undulations the marks of the adze blade: a good carpenter, Cash is" (4). Turning back mid-sentence to add texture to his simile—"yellow as gold, like soft gold"—Darl encumbers the immediacy of the present with a figurative and stylistic richness that it cannot comfortably accommodate, drawing attention to the strained, if not impossible temporal conditions of his narration. Jameson has recently argued that one of the primary achievements of the modern novel is its interrogation of what he calls the "regime of the *récit*" (35). The retrospective posture of narrative's enunciative moment, *récit* finds its grammatical home in the preterit tense—the tense of completed action that renders time and events immutable. Intrinsically incompatible with the temporality of the preterit, is "affect," a word Jameson uses to refer to that which eludes the reifying effects of realist narration, including, above all, the body in the present.⁷ Unruly, free, unconscious of itself, and not yet differentiated from all that surrounds it, the body in the present resists the confines of preterit narration that would ossify its impersonal corporeality into character, its inchoate sensations into namable emotions. Literature's modernity is predicated, according to Jameson's view, on claiming the presence of—and the present of—the body as a means of challenging, if not toppling, the regime of *récit*—or its "tyranny," as Rancière has relatedly put it (*passim*).

But if the tenderness of Darl's amended simile reveals anything, it is that the retrospective temporality of *récit* provided aesthetic labor what it needs most: time—time that Darl does not have, present as he is to the actions he narrates, but that he nevertheless wrests from some temporal reserve that the novel persistently requests of us to imaginatively allow. Though the preterit tense is the grammatical proxy for an ideology productive of precisely the bourgeois individualism that Faulkner and modernism have set out to critique, it nevertheless provides a period of delay in which the raw material of *histoire* can be delicately shaped—like pieces of wood into planks—into an arrangement that confirms their irrevocability. Indeed, remarking on the time required for aesthetic work would be unwarranted, were *As I Lay Dying*

not so fundamentally concerned with the effort of labor, with sweat (or its absence), with the time it takes to produce something beautiful for a thing that is passing away, be it a coffin for a mother's body or words for embodied time. Or, of course, *As I Lay Dying* itself, which has accrued its own mythology in terms of the time it took Faulkner to compose it. While readers are used to thinking of Darl as reflective of his creator, the way in which he labors over words is really more indicative of the Faulkner who toiled over the Great Books for years to finally have that labor come to fruition, according to his own account, in *The Sound and the Fury*, rather than the one who over the course of approximately eight lightning weeks and with minimal revisions produced *As I Lay Dying*.⁸

That effortlessness and automaticity of aesthetic labor—the way in which, as André Bleikasten has put it, the novel “appears to have imposed itself of its own accord” (151)—does not carry over into Darl's more cumbersome artistic work, which right from the opening scene draws attention to itself as work, albeit uncommodified, comparable to but also incompatible with embodied effort. Whereas in the lore of the production of *As I Lay Dying*, Faulkner emerges as a medium through which the novel materialized itself, inside its diegetic world, Darl's aesthetic contrivances bear the marks, as it were, of the adze blade. The opening scene draws attention to that work by cleaving a distance between language and action, exposing the spatial and temporal gap that prevails between narration and event, recognizing narration as a form of exertion. Weaving in and out of one another's way, Jewel and Darl walk the path from the field to their home, Jewel initially trailing behind his brother. But as they approach the old cottonhouse on the way to the barn and begin to hear Cash's adze hacking methodically at the planks of Addie's coffin, he outstrips Darl. Darl circumvents the dilapidated structure, taking the path that travels along its edge; Jewel walks straight through it via the two windows directly opposite one another in alignment with the path outside. Jewel emerges from the cottonhouse ahead of his brother, walking in front of Darl until he stops to drink water from the spring with a gourd. That Darl does not stop to drink suggests that Jewel was exerting more physical effort, tacitly racing with his brother who is not reciprocating the competition. Darl's choice to walk around the cottonhouse—to describe it with his walk the way a pen would describe a circle—is consistent with the fact that

it is he who narrates the scene, speaking around it, as it were, instead of yielding himself to it. Jewel, on the other hand, does not narrate the scene because he is busy barreling through it, moving the action forward with each energetic stride.⁹

Jewel's steps are no doubt more in touch with the grammatical fabric of the scene, than Darl's luxuriating narration. Delivered entirely in the present tense—"the cottonhouse is," "we reach," "I turn," "we go"—the scene asks for an elevated pace evocative of physical effort. And Darl's unhurried gait, as well as his equally unhurried imagery—"empty and shimmering dilapidation in the sunlight"; "pale eyes set into his wooden face" (4)—tugs at that pace, resisting not just the alacrity of his brother, but also the briskness of the grammatical tense itself. Nevertheless, his similes and metaphors parallel Jewel's effort in the work they are demanding of the present tense to perform. Darl may be walking at a more leisurely clip than his brother, but with phrases such as "with the rigid gravity of a cigar store Indian dressed in patched overalls and endued with life from the hips down," he is nonetheless muscling the present tense into slowing down so that it can accommodate his imagery. It is as if Darl narrates in the present tense only in spite of himself, overcompensating for its speed by saddling it with what Ezra Pound might call the "frills and festoons of language" (136). While Jewel silently retreats into action, stalking through the windows of the cottonhouse with a facial and corporeal deadpan evocative of Buster Keaton, Darl narrates with a volume of figurative language that burdens the scene's tense, resisting the verbs' celerity as well as the kinetic pull of the path beneath his feet.

The dilatory effect of Darl's language is especially pronounced when Faulkner provides more candid deictic evidence of Darl's presence to his scenes of aesthetic reverie. For instance, in the section where he contemplates the buzzards that have been attracted by the smell of Addie's corpse, Jewel reticently broods as Darl narrates: "High above the house, against the quick thick sky, they hang in narrowing circles. From here they are no more than specks, implacable, patient, portentous" (94). The voiceless consonance of "quick thick" in the first sentence already begins to obstruct the linguistic flow, but it is the paratactic accumulation of adjectives at the end of the second—"implacable, patient, portentous"—whose deceleration chafes most remarkably against the deictic word "here." "Here" indexically anchors Darl's body to the site

of his aesthetic contemplation, justifying the tense of the verbs “hang” and “are,” even as it generates a conflict between the fact of Darl’s present body and the temporal stretch of his language—validating the contention among critics that Faulkner systematically obscures the source of utterance in this novel. That indeterminacy derives precisely from Darl’s resistance to, if not denial of, his own presence to the fabula he is narrating, a fabula in and of which he is still, in spite of himself, a part. That is, the enunciative aporias that Darl’s manipulation of the present tense stitch into the text result from his effort to collapse fabula into *sjuzhet*, to refuse his own substance by folding the time of the lived into the time of the telling.

Darl’s difficulty with accepting the embodied terms of present tense narration indexes a more fundamental conflict with the aesthetic conditions of his possibility. Darl’s is a temporality of refusal, delay, and contemplation that reaches for the perspectival advantage of retrospective signification whose narrative posture is rooted in formal realism. His apparent attempts to position himself differently with respect to his own experience than simply being in it, must be understood within the context of realism’s negotiation of narrative time and the aesthetic orthodoxy of retrospection toward which his linguistic protractions aspire. Classical realist narration predicated its epistemic authority on radically distancing the temporalities of fabula and *sjuzhet* via the preterit tense, which it raised to the level of grammatical doctrine. The paradigmatic formal realism of Honoré de Balzac, for instance—a key influence on Faulkner’s literature and the strawman against whom Flaubert would forge his proto-modernist prose—adheres with little exception to the preterit. The opening line of his novel *Louis Lambert* (1832), for example, reads “Louis Lambert was born, in 1797, at Montoire, a small town in the Vendomois.”¹⁰ The orthographic distinction of the French *passé simple* (or *passé historique* as it is sometimes called) makes it even more noticeable—where “naquit” means “was born” not in the more recent and unstable *passé composé* “est né,” but in a distant and immutable past over which the narrator has absolute epistemic dominion. Realism’s prohibition of what Jameson calls the “formal taboo” of the present derives from its intolerance of uncertainty, the adherence, as Weinstein has argued in *Unknowing*, to a Cartesian epistemology founded on a belief in the knowability of the real, a totality that it assumes human reason is able to apprehend. The kind of present

tense that does emerge in Balzacian realism, far from an admission of uncertainty, most often serves the purpose of historical comparison. In *Lost Illusions* (1843), for example, the narrator will periodically break from the story of Lucien Chardon in order to articulate the difference between the era of the novel's fabula and that of "today." The present tense Balzac permits in such moments facilitates critique of post-revolutionary French society; it demonstrates the acuity and range of the narrator's ken, rather than its limits.¹¹

In *As I Lay Dying*, the present tense emblemizes the modern dissipation of faith in Cartesian knowledge. But more complexly than just pointing up the subjectivity and unreliability of the modernist narrator, the present tense does away with the distance between the time of the fabula and that of the narrative enunciation, effectively pulling the former into the latter. The denial of the preterit thus has the effect of compressing the three-dimensional narrative architecture of the classical realist novel into a flat verticality: the fabula, now collapsed into the narrative enunciation, pushes into, or along with, the passage of time, in the same direction and kinetic gesture; whereas in formal realism, the narrative emerges within the canopied space between the preterit narrative enunciation and the fabula to which it reaches back.

A spatial understanding of narrative is especially salient when one recalls that Benjamin sees the modern perceptual apparatus most potently manifest in architecture.¹² In his deliberation on the transformation of modes of aesthetic participation, Benjamin argues that architecture appeals to the body to experience it rather than the eyes to contemplate it; excessive attention to a work of architecture compromises its inherent appeal to embodied experience, its demand to be inhabited rather than thought. He sets the "casual noticing" of the modern masses against the acts of "attentive observation" that characterized the pre-modernist aesthetic order (268). The "tasks," he continues, "which face the [modern] human apparatus of perception . . . cannot be performed solely by optical means—that is, by way of contemplation. They are mastered gradually—taking their cue from tactile reception—through habit" (268). Benjamin's meditation on architecture of course sheds light on Jewel's summary sacrifice of contemplation for action when he charges through the dilapidated structure of the cotton house. While the automaticity of Jewel's movements itself suggests habituation—that he has walked through those windows on other

occasions as well, if not ritualized the act—Darl’s avoidance of the building suggests a refusal of the dialectic of tactility and attention that constitutes modern perception, and a choice, instead, to literally circumvent it. But the perceptual demands of architecture that Benjamin sees as representative of the modern discourse network adopts especial significance when one recalls that other piece of architecture looming over the novel, which Darl takes it upon himself not simply to avoid but to violently destroy. Darl’s burning of Gillespie’s barn is a rejection of an embodied mode of aesthetic participation, the immolation of an architectural structure whose absence leaves room for Darl to erect the formal edifice of preterit narration in its stead.

That is, Darl’s inability or unwillingness to come into contact with the world without exacting the time to transform it—his refusal to accept the narrative terms of embodied presence—reaches a fever pitch in what is in effect a pyrrhic transcendence of embodied experience through the arsonous destruction of an inhabitable space. There is a certain muted glee with which he narrates as the skeletal structure of the building gradually vanishes: “We watch through the dissolving proscenium of the doorway”; “Jewel has paused, looking up, and suddenly we watch the entire floor to the loft dissolve. It just turns to fire; a faint litter of sparks rains down” (220–21). The barn burning is taken to be a symptom of Darl’s madness and the last straw that sends him to Jackson; it is also the point at which he replaces one structure for another. Having destroyed an architectural site of tactile, habituated labor—represented by the milking stool Jewel splinters to use as a prod, but whose habitual purpose is to facilitate repetitious work whose grammatical proxy is the present—Darl erects a formal structure in its place. Very shortly after having burned the barn, Darl begins to narrate himself in the past tense and in the third person, forging a spatial architecture of realist novelistic form to take the place of the symbol of rote, habituated labor whose automaticities are the province of the modern discourse network. If one of Darl’s wishes has been to “just ravel out into time,” then retrospective narration affords him precisely that opportunity for self-extension: a raveling out into two consciousnesses—one living, one telling—that the present tense could not enable (208). “They put him on the train, laughing, down the long car laughing, the heads turning like the heads of owls when he passed. ‘What are you laughing at?’ I said. . . . They

pulled two seats together so Darl could sit by the window to laugh" (253). Mellard detects "residual realism" in *As I Lay Dying's* reliance on representational conventions such as the "particularization of character and background," the "use of naming," and "the precise evocation of a physical environment" (221). But Darl's vandalism and subsequent mental unhinging suggest that that realist residue generates, indeed is predicated on, far more alarm and damage than is represented in Mellard's more taxonomically neutral account. Darl's final section reads like a defunct realism, his descent into madness the necessary consequence of his pursuit of access to preterit self-narration in the context of a discourse network no longer permissive of such formal purchase on experience. And readers are left to wonder whether his laughter is as manic as it ostensibly appears, or if it is not a deranged and joyful assent to his imaginative denial of the existential present.

No doubt there are some characters, in addition to Jewel, for whom the present tense does not generate discomfort. For instance, the temporal instability of Cash's aphoristic list, the way that it hangs suspended and contingent outside of time and space, produces no crisis in him. To the contrary, Cash moves through the novel with remarkable evenness, barely reacting to the catastrophes that befall him, including his injured, rotting leg. The rote labor of his adze hacking, too, as Zachary Tavlín has suggested via Heidegger, indicates dexterity with unintentional, habituated action. Tull, as well, seems to comfortably navigate both present and past tense narration, slipping in and out of them with vertiginous regularity. Phrases like "Anse meets us at the door" and "the boy is not there," are swiftly followed by conversions to "Peabody told about how he come into the kitchen, hollering, swarming and clawing at Cora," without the least indication of internal or formal emergency (86). And yet Tull's rumination upon crossing the bridge toward Jefferson offers insight into the broader stakes of Darl's difficulty managing the present. In the vulnerability of Tull's following passage, Faulkner acknowledges that in formally emancipating the novel from the constraints of the realist preterit, he is also leaving his characters with only the solace, fragile and intermittent, of one another, subjecting his creations to a kind of primordial abandonment.

It was like when we was across, up out of the water again and the hard earth under us, that I was surprised. It was like we hadn't expected the bridge to end on the other bank, on something tame like the hard earth again that we had tromped on before this time and knowed well. Like it couldn't be me here, because I'd have had better sense than to done what I just done. And when I looked back and saw the other bank and saw my mule standing there where I used to be and knew that I'd have to get back there someway, I knew it couldn't be, because I just couldn't think of anything that could make me cross the bridge ever even once. Yet here I was, and the fellow that could make himself cross it twice couldn't be me, not even if Cora told him to.

It was that boy. I said "Here; you better take a holt of my hand" and he waited and held to me. I be durn if it wasn't like he come back and got me; like he was saying They wont nothing hurt you. Like he was saying about a fine place he knowed where Christmas come twice with Thanksgiving and lasts on through the winter and the spring and the summer, and if I just stayed with him I'd be all right too. (139)

An oft-noted feature of *As I Lay Dying* is Faulkner's felt absence from the text, the detachment of the novel's language from not just the characters, but also Faulkner himself. In Eric Sundquist's words, that detachment "astutely challenges" the notion of "a narrative consciousness formed by a supposed union between the author and his language, a union formalized and made conventional by the standard device of omniscient, or at least partly omniscient, narration, which the novel explicitly discards and disavows" (29). In keeping, however, with the paradoxes of modernist impersonality, the ostensible autonomy of *As I Lay Dying* from its maker is an effect of its exhaustive suffusion with his signature, the transfiguration of Faulkner into style. But in preoccupying itself with stylistic performance, it is as if the novel leaves the characters to make their own way through narrative time. *As I Lay Dying* may be a veritable storehouse of Faulkner's modernist techniques, a stylistic tour de force; but as such, it all the more powerfully underscores the thrownness (to borrow Tavlín's Heideggerian language) of these characters into a series of traumas and calamities over which there presides

no author, let alone omniscient narrator, to cradle their experiences within a narrative teleology. The quiet gratitude Tull feels toward Vardaman for providing him the comfort he did not even know he needed, captures the defenselessness of that solitude as he and the Bundrens pass over and through the "thick dark current" of the river, whose relentless undertow comes to represent novelistic time itself (141). In leaving the characters to essentially fend for themselves, Faulkner acknowledges that formal departure from the realist preterit involves a certain cruelty on the part of the modernist creator toward its characters whose status as discursive formations may be all the more apparent in modernism, but whose embodied reality is all the more pronounced and thus urgently vulnerable.

Yet, despite Faulkner's relinquishment of his characters' narrative trajectories for the sake of style, *As I Lay Dying* remains one of his most teleological novels. The novel's style certainly obfuscates the time and place of events; and typical of Faulkner, often the style's alienating effects can distract from the events themselves. Nevertheless, the novel has a clear beginning, middle, and end organized along the axis of a coherent chronology of occurrences. In short, compared to his more narratively distorted novels like *The Sound and the Fury* or *Absalom, Absalom!*, *As I Lay Dying* is a plotted novel. But if Faulkner's sacrifice of preterit omniscient narration for a transfiguration into style leaves the characters in a present that they must desperately try to manage, then what is often considered the bizarre, nigh-comical perseverance of the Bundrens, is a resolution not just to reach Jefferson, but also to try to make do with their formal situation and to arrive at the end of the novel itself. That is, in insisting on burying Addie in Jefferson, the Bundrens are also seeing to it that they reach the end of their own story. And the clumsiness of their trajectory—their near-fatal encounter with the flooding river, Cash's injury, the loss of their animals, etc.—is a casualty, *en abyme*, of what such characters in search of an author would have to endure to get there. And in keeping with the dark humor of the novel, once they do finally reach the end, they essentially botch it: Anse procures another wife, and they are, in effect, right back where they started—as if the novel never even happened.

Faulkner is just as interested in acknowledging the existential consequences of the departure from preterit narration for his characters as he is in exploring its emancipatory promise for the novel as a

genre—recognizing that what may very well be a source of tragedy and panic for one, might engender new formal horizons for the other. For in classical realism, the fate and formation of the bourgeois individual—even if it spells ruin (as in the case of Lucien Chardon)—is on a coherent path exhaustively known and understood by a narrator whose epistemic privileges are only nominally more limited than those of God. Though Faulkner may be using present tense narration in *As I Lay Dying* as a way to announce the novel's antirealism, he is also aware that that formal choice may come at the expense of his characters' ability to gain traction on novelistic time without, as it were, drowning in it.¹³

In keeping with Candace Waid's recent argument, I suggest that it is indeed Dewey Dell who articulates the alarm of that detachment from an authorial maker most lucidly as she narrates from the wagon on the way to ford the river. Organizing her thoughts around the distinction between living and unliving things, she thinks to herself, "The signboard comes in sight. It is looking out at the road now, because it can wait. New Hope. 3 mi. it will say. New Hope. 3. mi. New Hope. 3 mi. And then the road will begin, curving away into the trees, empty with waiting, saying New Hope three miles" (120). There is a peculiar displacement of agency in this passage, rendering sentient the inanimate sign and road: the sign "comes in sight," it "is looking out" because "it can wait"; the sign "will say," the road "will begin . . . empty with waiting." Reminiscent of Darl's nocturnal ruminations on "emptying himself for sleep"—and Vardaman's observation that "the air is empty for rain" (55)—the lexicon of emptiness, which assumes its opposite, fullness, creates a formal framework of before and after. Dewey Dell's language thus maps onto the inanimate world the metaphysics of being and not being—anteriority and posteriority—that distinguish Addie's mortality at the center of the novel. But in imagining what the sign will say (3 mi.) and, implicitly, what the road will be "filled" with (the Bundren wagon), Dewey Dell is also tracking the passage of time. Her anticipation of the evidence of their journey's progress is banal—but it gives way to a devastated existential rumination on mortality, as she discovers, as if for the first time, that to be a living body in the present is also to confront one's finitude.

For when in reference to the road she says "because it can wait," she tacitly acknowledges that there are things in the world that cannot. The inanimate sign can wait to be read, just as the road can wait to be

filled with the Bundren wagon. And from within this rumination on the privilege of inanimateness—that to be inanimate means to be able to prepare for being experienced, for experiencing—emerges Dewey Dell's most anguished passage in the novel, where she gives language to her mourning for her mother in a way that no other Bundren has been able to, not even Vardaman.

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.

Now it begins to say it. New Hope three miles. New Hope three miles. *That's what they mean by the womb of time: the agony and the despair of spreading bones, the hard girdle in which lie the outraged entrails of events.* (120–21)

When she says that she “heard” that her mother was dead, Dewey Dell is of course not referring to being absent from her mother's deathbed, since we know she was there. Rather, Dewey Dell refers to the velocity of Addie's death, her inability to apprehend it—to wait and thus prepare for it—as would the sign to say “3 mi.” to passersby or the road to be filled with animate travelers. She would not prolong Addie's life; rather, when she thinks, “I wish I had time to let her die. I wish I had time to wish I had,” Dewey Dell is discovering that the womb of time, constantly birthing the next instant, is by its very nature in a perpetual state of pushing her into the present, robbing her of the time for comprehension let alone retrospection. As if by logical deduction, she then contemplates the simple, though crushing metaphysical fact that inanimate objects, unlike living beings, do not experience time—are not subject to the intolerable cruelty of its unceasing births, like the “engendering gusts” of sparks from the burning barn (222)—because signs and roads in fact do not “wait” or “say” or “look” but simply exist in dumb insentience. Dewey Dell thus awakens, with ever more agony, to her own sentience and, by extension, her own mortality.¹⁴ She then turns to God—“I believe in God, God. God, I believe in God” (122).

Waid sees in these repetitive utterances Dewey Dell's emancipation from Faulkner's productive but exploitative aesthetic paradigm that, in Waid's view, tethers Dewey Dell's creative energies to her “dead mother”

and “artist brother.” Heretofore penetrated by the voices and preoccupations of Addie and Darl, Dewey Dell now cuts herself free of her aesthetic bond to mother and brother, summoning a “religious trinity” (in the three successive “Gods” following the first)—to take the place of the “aesthetic triumvirate” now rendered null (Waid 110). But this is of course not an authentic moment of divine contact. Rather, Dewey Dell’s repetitions exude panicked doubt in the existence of divinity, as the novel collapses her recognition of the absence of God into a recognition, too, that the preterit narration that would have afforded her the “time to let [Addie] die” and the “time to wish” that she had the time, is merely a fantasy of an afterlife—a position only fictively beyond or after the present. In her apostrophic appeals to a higher power that would provide retrospective assurance for godless beings in time—as if appealing to Faulkner himself—Dewey Dell identifies the present not as freedom but as panic, not as formal deliverance but as existential grief.

The continuities between Darl’s, Dewey Dell’s, and even Tull’s orientations toward the present in which they feel themselves caught already begin to disassemble the wall that criticism tends to erect between Darl and the rest of the characters. Darl’s tireless aestheticizations are often taken as among the many forms of “disaffiliation,” to borrow a suggestive term from Richard Godden, between him and the other Bundrens (if not the South), which manifests itself most palpably in his sequestration in the Jackson asylum (241). But while the affiliation between Darl and Dewey Dell may seem more predictable considering their telepathic connection to one another, a thread runs, too, between his crises and the ones of several other of the characters in the novel who are ostensibly so different from him. In going to Jackson, Darl is simply taking upon himself the punishment for an aesthetic instantiation of a mental habit that his Bundren brethren perform persistently and more intelligibly: blame. Indeed, the question my analysis raises so far is whether the present tense can bear the full weight of modernist antirealism—whether genre, or mode, is reducible to tense. But the novel’s preoccupation with the misallocation of blame is the epistemic consequence of Faulkner’s relinquishment of preterit narration. For bound up within the preterit’s intrinsically retrospective position, was also realism’s primary vehicle for the assignment of causality.

In the absence of the preterit, the characters are left to move themselves from one point of novelistic time to another, where the flooding

of the bridge symbolizes the evacuation of a narrative infrastructure engineered by an author. In addition to establishing the immutability of events, the preterit was in essence a bridging device, an apparatus for connecting events to one another in a causal chain. Rancière has recently claimed that from the modernist point of view, the structural integrity of the nineteenth-century realist novel depended on “a strong connection of causes and effects” manufactured by what Virginia Woolf called “some powerful and unscrupulous tyrant . . . to provide a plot” (197; Woolf 160, qtd. in Rancière 197). By virtue of its determination to break with the realist tradition, “modern fiction has no proper mode of linkage” (206). Modernism’s governing formal problem, according to his view, is how to bridge textual moments to each other without resorting to the familiar kinetics of plot. It would be hard to dispute that a modernist novel whose central action involves the inundation of a bridge is preoccupied with the problematization of realist “linkage” and thus causation. But it is harder to recognize *As I Lay Dying* in Rancière’s and Woolf’s descriptions of modernism as rescuing fiction from the “tyranny” of realist plot, since again and again in this novel, to the contrary, characters not only manage to push themselves through plotted time, but also forge bonds of causation where such bonds feel absent or inaccessible. The instances of blame assignment that pepper the novel suggest that rather than surrendering themselves to a textual chaos—what Woolf calls the “incessant shower of innumerable atoms” that “fall upon the mind”—the characters are reaching for realist forms of causal linkage (160–61; qtd. in Rancière 196).

Indeed, while Weinstein has briefly drawn attention to what he calls the “strateg[ies]” through which the characters of *As I Lay Dying* try to manage their grief, the “primitive ritual[s] of psychic displacement” they choreograph in order to manage the trauma of Addie’s death, the implications of those strategies, the full extent of the forms they take and their stakes for the vaster scheme of Faulkner’s modernism, have yet to be fully understood (*Becoming Faulkner* 63). The characters of *As I Lay Dying* try to provisionally, albeit unsuccessfully, resolve the tensions generated by the present by relying on diachronic formulations of culpability—narrative fabrications that bespeak the novel’s critical engagement with arguably one of realism’s most profound preoccupations: reasons.¹⁵ Deprived of the realist retrospection whose *raison d’être* is to forge a narrative system of explanation, the characters writhe in a

present they cannot understand, and thus depend on blame to manufacture etiological narratives that will mitigate their suffering.

The novel's most conspicuous and memorable instance of misallocated blame is when Vardaman holds Peabody responsible for Addie's death. "You kilt my maw!" he screams, as he hits the obese doctor with the stick he has snatched from the barn, "You kilt her!" (54–55). The affective resonance of Vardaman's "kilt," whose emphatic pastness is underscored by its phonetic misspelling, derives from the fact that Faulkner renders the madness of Vardaman's grief not by naming it but by using the present to show the child's inability to name it himself. "Then I begin to run," he narrates upon Addie's death, "I run toward the back and come to the edge of the porch and stop. Then I begin to cry. . . . I can hear the bed and her face and them and I can feel the floor" (53); and later, "I am not crying now. I am not anything. . . . I am not anything. I am quiet" (56). But out of the deluge of Vardaman's staccato present-tense declaratives eventually rushes forth a line of reasoning for Addie's death, as if he detects something soothing about designating its cause. "That came and did it," he narrates suddenly in past tense, "when she was all right but he came and did it. 'That fat on of a bitch'" (54). What Vardaman knows is that Addie was alive before Peabody arrived, and she was dead once he was there. He conjures a relation of causality from an otherwise paratactic correlation of events, taming the incomprehensibility of Addie's death by assigning it a readily locatable source. The conversion to past tense narration, far from an incidental grammatical gesture, suggests Vardaman's ache for a narrative armature that would help explain the sudden loss of his mother. Where Darl wrests art from the swiftness of experience, Vardaman allocates blame—the closest thing he has to the formal order afforded by *récit*—to render comprehensible the sheer contingency of death whose metaphysics he spends the whole novel trying to understand.

But Vardaman's misrecognition is not idiosyncratic; rather, it is representative of how blame works in *As I Lay Dying*. Anse's complaint that the road built near his home led to his incurring expenses under new laws in the modernizing South, for instance, is no less misplaced of a form of blame than Vardaman's. Nor, for that matter, is Cora's shrill insistence that she bore no sons because the Lord did not see fit for it to be so; or Dewey Dell's thought that Peabody could give her an abortion "if he just would," as if by some mental acrobatics she sees him as

responsible for her pregnancy (63). Or even the way Addie localizes the disenfranchisement she experiences as a poor woman in the Southern patriarchy, into a fierce hatred for her husband and the regret of one decision—"And so I took Anse" (170). All of these gestures are fundamentally analeptic, attempts to establish an anteriority capable of explaining the suffering or disenfranchisement of the present moment. In this way, the present tense of *As I Lay Dying* indeed may come to bear the weight of history, a history in and amongst which the characters find themselves and whose vertiginous transitions they are trying to navigate. When Anse says "Durn that road. . . . A-laying there, right up to my door, where every bad luck that comes and goes is bound to find it" (35), he is creating a palliative narrative that will mitigate his anxiety at the thought that his family, in Matthews' words, is becoming a "sociological corpse" in virtue of the economic transitions of the New South ("Machine Age" 93). In their rush to determine the sources of their hardship, the characters in essence try to embed themselves within a chain of realist causality, situating their experiences within a narrative continuity that the novel's constant recursions to the present tense otherwise sever from them. There is thus a deeply-rooted affinity between Darl's attempts to stretch time through aesthetic tactics and the novel's most materialist concerns. The pervasive image of Anse rubbing his knees while looking out onto the land is an obverse reflection of Darl's parallel struggle to reckon with the materiality of the present, Darl's recourse to art no less self-deceptive than Anse's blaming of the road for what is at bottom his terror of uncertainty for his future.

Throughout his career, Faulkner takes interest in the ways that cultural, social, and historical narratives are created—how reputations develop, how gossip travels, how fears take hold through the capitulation and recapitulation of personal, regional, and national stories. In his chapter on *Light in August* from *Vision's Immanence* (2004), Peter Lurie argues that to convey the cultural mechanisms of social and racial surveillance, Faulkner positions us "as looking *at* and, most often, looking *for* [Joe] Christmas in an implicitly violent way" (69). This hermeneutic tendency of Faulknerian apprehension—the narrativizing proclivity of his characters' judgement—is a recurring feature in Faulkner's oeuvre and is indeed often bent toward violence.¹⁶ Through those hermeneutic gestures, Faulkner also insists that modernism confront the fact that

despite the mandate to break with realist story, human communities—at least those that preoccupy Faulkner—thirst for and are constituted by narrative. Or more accurately, realist story came about as a formal answer to a cultural and social need whose potential violence Faulkner acknowledges, but whose inescapability he also confesses. This may be one of the reasons why, as opposed to the modernisms of James Joyce or Gertrude Stein, for instance, Faulkner “refuses to sacrifice story to technical virtuosity,” in Matthews’ words (“Faulkner to Film” 30). Or why Addie, the character most attuned to the flimsiness of language compared to the efficacy of action—who from the grave complains “how words go up in a thin line, quick and harmless, and how terribly doing goes along the earth”—still exerts the novel’s most powerful force of narrative causality with her request to be buried in Jefferson (173).¹⁷ Faulkner indeed remains in constant negotiation with realist story, no doubt seeing it as permanently bound up with the novel as a genre, as well as the cultural, regional, and national habits of mind that he interrogates throughout his career.

But modernism has its own injunction to make sense of nonsense—the imperative to shore modernity’s fragments against its ruin. By having the characters of *As I Lay Dying* attempt to regain either aesthetic or epistemic purchase on the otherwise inchoate or overwhelming onrush of the present, Faulkner contemplates the fundamental and problematic proximity of, on the one hand, modernism’s commitment to lending coherence and meaning to capitalist, post-Nietzschean modernity and, on the other, realism’s mandate to impose order where it, too, saw chaos. This proximity complicates the story that modernism tells about itself, how it understands its own relationship to the history of the novel, the narrative of newness to which it clings and from which it draws its authority. What emerges when looking at Darl from the vantage point of this problem, is not a figure of modernist aesthetic autonomy, but rather a hybrid, more embarrassed, literary entity. And perhaps what makes Faulkner’s modernism so distinctive is his willingness, even at his most ostensibly experimental moment, to confess that embarrassment—that even though modernism as a literary movement may be under pressure to withdraw realist forms of linkage, those joints will somehow still get crafted, however precariously.

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NOTES

1. For one of the most recent and incisive accounts of the aesthetic turn and its various political and institutional implications, see Michael Clune.

2. See essays collected in Paul Saint-Amour.

3. Levine, *passim*. For an exploration of how those affordances are explored in the nineteenth-century novel, see Wendy Xin.

4. For a thorough and illuminating discussion of the discrepancy between lived and recounted time, see Michael North, esp. chapters two and five.

5. Even in the case of Darl, however, Matthews shows how his seemingly most abstract existential ruminations are permeated by the “language of the market” (“Machine Age” 72).

6. For more on the concept of a “discourse network,” see Friedrich Kittler.

7. The capaciousness of the term “affect” in Jameson’s *Antinomies of Realism* arguably leaves him open to Eugenie Brinkema’s recent charge that theorizations of affect too often operate “defensively.” She argues that affect emerges in theory (her main focus is film theory) as a “negative ontology,” as that which eludes structure, meaning, and sign, and therefore tends not to receive the positive, formal analysis that it in fact warrants and that her book provides (29, 31).

8. In the introduction to *The Sound and the Fury*, Faulkner wrote that upon writing the novel, “I discovered then that I had gone through all that I had ever read, from Henry James through Henty to newspaper murders, without making any distinction or digesting any of it, as a moth or a goat might. After *The Sound and the Fury* and without heeding to open another book and in a series of delayed repercussions like summer thunder, I discovered the Flauberts and Dostoievskys and Conrads whose books I had read ten years ago.”

9. Though he does not address the question of present tense narration and thus the literary history to which Faulkner is responding, Zachary Tavlin has explored the problem of time in *As I Lay Dying* via Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger. See his “Ravel Out Into Time,” for a useful technical philosophical background to the questions of time and embodiment that I examine in this essay.

10. My translation. I have chosen to translate the sentence myself, given that all of the existing English translations I found omitted the “in 1797.” In omitting the date of Lambert’s birth, these translations understate the epistemic mastery of Balzac’s narrator.

11. An especially remarkable instance of this invocation of the present for the sake of historical and social critique arrives toward the end of the second book of *Lost Illusions*. For the sake of his social and political ambitions, Lucien, a journalist and aspiring politician and poet, has changed his political affiliation from liberalism to royalism in a way that betrays a provincial neophyte’s lack of social

shrewdness. By way of illuminating the stakes of Lucien's conversion, the narrator compares the era of the novel's fabula to that contemporary to the narrative's enunciation:

At the time the party spirit engendered much more serious hatred than it does today. Springs have been so over-stretched today that in the long run animosity has weakened. Criticism of today, after making a burnt-offering of a man's book, proffers a hand to him. . . . If he refuses, a writer passes for an unsociable man Today, when an author has received treacherous stabs in the back . . . , he hears his assassins wishing him good-day and putting forth claims to his esteem and even his friendship. . . . Formerly, as may perhaps be remembered, it needed courage for certain Royalist writers and some Liberal writers to meet in the same theatre. . . . Looks exchanged were like loaded pistols and the slightest spark would set off a quarrel. . . . And so Lucien, now an out-and-out Royalist and Romantic, after having begun as a rabid Liberal and Voltairian, found himself under the same weight of enmity as hung over the man most abhorred by the Liberals at that period. (441–2)

12. By invoking spatiality, I am not suggesting that we apply Joseph Frank's canonical term "spatial form"—which he reserved for modernism—to realism. Frank argues that the linearity of realism gives way to the spatial topography of works such as *The Waste Land* or *Ulysses*. I am making a point orthogonal to Frank's, that realist plot is generated within the space between retrospective omniscient narration and the events themselves—in essence, plot is an effect of the narrative enunciation craning back toward the fabula.

13. See James Phelan and also Susan Fleischman.

14. Waid observes that because of her pregnancy and the increasingly daunting inevitability of her having to keep the child, Dewey Dell is more terrorized by the confines of linear temporality, and thus mortality, than perhaps any other character in the novel. See Waid, 87–90.

15. Julian Murphet argues that pervading Faulkner's fiction is a romance aesthetic that he must nominally disavow but uses a tropology of new media to strategically mask. Murphet is sure to assert, via Jameson, that it is not realism that haunts Faulkner's novels (including *As I Lay Dying*) but the romance whose climactic energies realism itself felt it needed to exorcise or at least measure in order to remain committed to depicting everyday experience.

16. I have explored the violent dimension of the act of narrativization particularly in the context of Jason's section of *The Sound and the Fury* and Faulkner's engagement with the burgeoning narrative cinema.

17. For a reading of the efficacy of language in *As I Lay Dying*, particularly its relation to Wittgensteinian ordinary language philosophy, see Greg Chase.

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