

Solidity and Liquidity: Verbal Dynamics in Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*

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The reader of *As I Lay Dying* is inescapably confronted with Addie's soliloquy that appears in the midst of the novel. Among the fifty-nine parts of the book, Addie's should be taken as a crucial one and be accounted for in such a way that the entire novel can duly claim its *raison d'être*, for Addie's disbelief in words, on the face of it, seems to be so intense and explicit as to jeopardize the ontological necessity of the novel itself which, it scarcely need be said, is made up of nothing but words. Her argument, if it really discards all verbal experience, inevitably raises the question of how the book can plead for its own existence at all. It will make us feel bitterly ill at ease to think that the whole novel's words are meant merely to prove themselves ineffectual.

In the last few decades, a substantial amount of discussion has been done to shed light on Faulkner's attitude toward verbal expression,¹ and those who discuss the matter rarely fail to touch on Addie's remark. Where *As I Lay Dying* is concerned, the consensus has been that Addie believes exclusively in non-verbal experience, whereas Darl, more than anyone else, relies heavily on words. It is generally supposed that between the two lies the unbridgeable discrepancy. That is because, to quote a typical recapitulation by Olga Vickery, "the word and the act" are "polar opposites" if we listen to Addie.² Maybe we could presume that Faulkner feels greater empathy for word-oriented Darl and that the author's view on words never coincides with that of Addie. Nonetheless, Addie's presence in the novel, it must be admitted, is too powerful and central to be laid aside.

One approach that aims to reconcile the distance between Addie and Darl is attempted by Bruce Kavin, who tries to locate Addie's

chapter justifiably in time and space, seeking a clue in its appearance in the sequence of the text.

Her chapter appears over one hundred pages after her death, following (as if it were evoked by) the fulfillment of her “water” prophecy. One might even suspect that the river disaster is a manifestation of her power, an aspect of her “revenge.”³

Further, Kawin argues the position of Addie in the novel in view of her relation with Darl and other characters.

When Addie empties herself for death, it is possible that her “I” flows into the first-person viewpoints of all the novel’s characters and partially becomes them. This is not the same thing as saying that she imagines her revenge from their individual points of view while having an Agamemnon-like vision of the fall of her House. It is not that she literally narrates their chapters but that she participates in or symbolizes the underlying ground of Being that makes itself manifest in each chapter’s Saying and that must be “located” extra-textually. If Darl is language, Addie is what mothers language. In such a case, all of these minds would be linked by the overarching consciousness of a supernarrator.⁴

Leaving aside his phenomenologically loaded terms, his suggestion is highly stimulating in that it emphasizes in broader perspective — in the level of meta-consciousness — the positive continuity between Addie and Darl, who have so far been regarded mostly as incompatible with each other. Addie’s idea, when extracted out of context, may appear to deny all kinds of verbal formulation and so to antagonize Darl harshly, but there seems to be something Addie entrusts to Darl, some room for bridging the chasm between them. With Kawin’s standpoint in mind, I shall discuss in what follows some aspects of verbal possibility that are metafictionally envisaged by Faulkner within the organized context of the novel, taking Addie’s chapter as a starting point.

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Let us now take a closer look at Addie's view on words. In the first place, she declares that after having Cash, along with her realization that "living was terrible," she learned "that words are no good; that words don't ever fit even what they are trying to say at. When he was born I knew that motherhood was invented by someone who had to have a word for it because the ones that had the children didn't care whether there was a word for it or not."⁵ Similarly, she disparages words like "fear," "pride" and "love" as substitutes for actual experiences. Here we note one thing that should not be ignored: Addie's discussion is restricted to the case of a single word. We may get the impression that she is simplifying the problem for brevity's sake, making her argument clear and to the point, but to take her remark that way is to interpret it by extension. We should for the moment follow her discussion as it goes, without stretching the point.

Addie, in the next place, further develops her philosophy of words by meditating on her husband's name:

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. (p. 165; my italics)

Now we are introduced to what I believe is the central notion of the novel, namely, the notion of liquidity. This will naturally be conceived in contradistinction to the idea of solidity as Addie goes on to tell us that when she would think about her two sons' names until they would "die and *solidify* into a shape and then fade away" (my italics), she would say, "All right. It doesn't matter. It doesn't matter what they call them." The pursuit of this concept — solidity and liquidity — shall be another way of analyzing the often-discussed phase of stasis and

motion, that is, what André Bleikasten calls “a perpetual oscillation between movement and immobility, in their irresoluble contradiction.”⁶ The essence of a human being is, according to Addie, always liquid and of flowing quality as long as he lives on. In fact, anything that suggests life to Addie is liquid. Consciously or unconsciously, she is concerned with the idea of liquidity. The very first sentence of Addie’s chapter discloses her attachment to the quiet spring “with water bubbling up and away” (p. 161). Also, it is immediately noticeable that she is obsessed with blood. Of course blood for Addie (and for Faulkner behind her) involves a great many problems, but from a standpoint of the physics of the novel, what matters here is its flowing liquidity: she knew that “only through the blows of the switch could my blood and [her schoolchildren’s], blood flow as one stream” (p. 164). And we can see that the flow of blood is associated in her geographical imagination with a gushing current of water when she talks about “the terrible blood, the red bitter flood boiling through the land” (p. 166) or “the wild blood boiling along the earth” (p. 167). But the fact remains that any word or name has—or rather, *is*—a definite shape. Hence the dissociation between a solid sign and its liquid referent. It is no wonder that “words dont ever fit even what they are trying to say at” when “what they are trying to say at” is elusively liquid. Words are dead and impotent for their solidity. What becomes necessary to answer Addie’s reprobation, then, is to show how to overcome the solid quality of words.

One possibility may be the strategy of quantity. Even though each single word is a result of solidification, many of them in succession may produce something fluid and dilute the solidity with which every word came into being. Thus the problem of solidity and liquidity can never be irrelevant to the question of how many words are to be woven together. Here we should remind ourselves that Faulkner began his career as a poet.

I think that every novelist is a failed poet. I think he tries to write poetry first, then finds he can’t. Then he tries the short story, which

is the most demanding form after poetry. And failing at that, only then does he take up novel-writing. . . . I'm a failed poet.⁷

The gift of a poet, then, consists in his ability to capture the intense moment of truth in minimized words; poetry requires the art of condensation, which presents a static tableau arrested in eternity. Among the characters in *As I Lay Dying* the most loquacious one is Darl, who, nevertheless, is regarded largely as endowed with poetic sensitivity. He is a kind of man who, when a young boy, used to go to the bucket at night to drink water, looking into "the still surface of the water" that mirrored "a star or two" (p. 11). The scene may be one of the most impressive descriptions in the novel. Darl the poet would be drawn to a frozen, eternal picture. It deserves special emphasis, moreover, that even this early scene foreshadows Addie's discussion we have seen before and incarnates the image of a "vessel" containing liquid. But Darl, unlike Addie, is particular about the container:

When I was a boy I first learned how much better water tastes when it has set a while in a cedar bucket. Warmish-cool, with a faint taste like the hot July wind in cedar trees smells. It has to set at least six hours, and be drunk from a gourd. Water should never be drunk from metal. (p. 10)

There is little doubt about Darl's love for a solid vessel/word. Being dexterous in poetically economic expression, he does not necessarily long for the mere affluence of words. It is true to some degree that all people have a desire for the most concise vehicle; one example may be Samson's irritation at his inability to remember MacCallum's first name (pp. 106, 107, 113) — he cannot help adhering to the briefest word that stands for the substance of a human being. As for Darl, he cannot, or would not, outgrow his poetic imagination completely. However, he is the one who speaks most and is indeed a "failed poet" within whom are immanent simultaneously the desire to freeze life, so to speak, and the desire to release it. Perhaps it is these irreconcilable vectors that

break him down. The whole book presents, in a way, the perpetually transitional phase from poetry via the short story to novel-writing. It may be interesting to recall Faulkner's remark in this connection: "17–26 is the best age for writing poetry. Writing poetry is like a sky rocket—all the fire condensed in one rocket."⁸ Darl is now about 28 years old, already overstepping what Faulkner appoints to be the upper bound of a qualified poet. We may say that he is directed from poetical solidity toward novelistic liquidity. And it should be remembered that Darl, as well as Addie, is preoccupied with the idea of water.

The dynamics of solidity and liquidity is also observable when we pay attention to Cash. First of all, it is evident that his words flow more and more as the novel proceeds. In his first chapter he just itemizes the points on building Addie's coffin; his second and third chapters are also about the coffin and words are scarce; but a substantial and meaningful speech emerges in his fourth and fifth (final) chapters. His change from reticence to volubility marks the novel's potential direction from rigidity to mobility. Cash is at first an adamant carpenter working on the coffin, which is none other than a solid "vessel" for his mother. (Its shape is solidly visualized with a drawing at one point of the book.) Even if he gets "wet to the skin," he keeps on working as though "rain was an illusion of the mind" (p. 73). After he has broken his legs in the river, however, "[h]is face appears sunken a little . . . as though the wetting had slacked the firmness which had held the skin full" (p. 149). All the same, he says to Darl as the latter mixes the cement for Cash's leg: "You dont want too much water, or it wont work right" (p. 197). And then he is met with, as it were, the curse of solidity; the hardened cement hurts his leg and he has to get some water poured on it to ease the pain.

Since liquidity becomes an exclusively important concept in the novel, it would not be fruitless to examine the rendition of the water-image. In fact, water is a dominant motif which runs through the entire novel, as we shall see hereafter in more detail. Incidentally, Kiyoyuki Ono explores in general perspective the figurative concept of "fluidity" through his inquiry into Faulkner's stylistic features.⁹ But for the

present, I wish to examine the liquidity as the subject of the novel. It seems to me that the concept of liquidity dominates the novel especially on a thematic level as far as this particular book is concerned.

As we read the early part of the book, one of the things we notice is that the topic of rain recurs persistently. To cite some examples: Anse says, "It's fixing up to rain" (p. 18); Tull says, "It's fixing to rain" (pp. 28, 31, 32, 33); Vardaman says, "it is going to rain and the air is empty for the rain" (pp. 53–54); Dewy Dell says, "I'm going to milk before it sets in to rain" (p. 58). Thus the expectation of rain heightens and when it does start raining, Tull's chapter (pp. 65–70) mentions rain more than ten times, and so does the following Darl's chapter (pp. 71–76) which is famous for its philosophical discussion on the meaning of being.

Now the story is prepared for its climactic scene — after the rain comes a flood. The river-crossing is undoubtedly by far the most important episode in the novel. Bleikasten is right in saying that "[w]ater, the element of metamorphosis *par excellence*, springs to life."¹⁰ Sometimes water may be associated with death in psychoanalytic symbology, but what must not be forgotten about water here is that it is moving ceaselessly as though with a life of its own. As Tull correctly observes, water "kind of live[s]" (p. 131) and challenges the Bundren family. Admittedly, the mystic power of the river is fully rendered by Darl's narration. And the point to be made, I believe, is his personification of the river. He appears to hear the human voice in the current of water.

Before us the thick dark current runs. It talks up to us in a murmur become ceaseless and myriad, the yellow surface dimpled monstrously into fading swirls travelling along the surface for an instant, silent, impermanent and *profoundly significant*, as though just beneath the surface something huge and alive waked for a moment of lazy alertness out of and into light slumber again. (p. 134; my italics)

The phrase "profoundly significant" seems to echo Addie's concept of Anse's name as a vessel containing liquid: "a significant shape profoundly

without life.” Only, the river is *with* life in that it is always in motion. Another scene to be recalled here is the one in which Darl and Vardaman hear Addie in the coffin talk “in little trickling bursts of secret and murmurous bubbling” (p. 202). The flow of water, then, is paralleled (or almost identified) especially in Darl’s imagination with the human act of speech.

Therefore, in the novel’s self-conscious structure, crossing the river can be connotative of experiencing the flux of language; language is not language until one puts himself in the midst of it through the process of talking/writing or listening/reading. There can be found an indication that a happy succession of words, solid and lifeless as they may seem, can be activized and move us in return in their liquidity when language makes itself felt in the truest sense: the river seemingly runs “without sense of motion” (p. 138), but “[w]hat had once been a flat surface” becomes “a succession of troughs and hillocks lifting and falling about us, shoving at us, teasing at us with light lazy touches in the vain instants of solidity underfoot” (p. 140; italics omitted). In this way the river serves as a metaphor for human language. It may not be without reason that the name of Yoknapatawpha is derived from a Chickasaw word meaning “water flowing slow through the flatland.”¹¹ And it is precisely in this context that Vardaman’s refrain “My mother is a fish” bears a thematic significance; whether Vardaman knows it or not, the refrain at least reminds us of Addie’s attachment to water.

The novel seems constantly to be aspiring to the condition of water. Later on in the story we witness another important incident, that is, Darl’s setting fire to the barn. Apparently fire is the opposite notion of water, but Darl’s perception makes it possible to transform fire into water. The imagery of rain is consistent throughout the scene told by Darl: “a faint litter of sparks rains down” (p. 210); “The hallway looks like a searchlight turned into rain” (p. 211); “the sparks rain on [the coffin] in scattering bursts” (p. 212). Fire is ever-changeful and, if anything, liquid in the sense that it has no solid shape.

From what we have seen thus far we might surmise that Addie’s

tenacity for liquidity is materialized in the novel. In view of the problem of verbal dynamics, it means that Addie renounces words as separate and solid entities, to be sure, but she does not necessarily deny the possibility that they may, when combined together, transform themselves into phrases, sentences, and then protean discourse, gaining new shades in each specific context and conveying something that can only be rendered in the kinetic fluidity of language. Addie does not concern herself with the act of naming, which denotes *pinning down*; what she wants to do is to let the motion talk itself.

One should not confuse words with language when dealing with the matter. In many of Faulkner's novels can be found the explicit mistrust of words, and yet he is not rash enough to manifest his renunciation of language even through the mouth of unimportant characters. And we may say that Darl, though the link with his mother seems to be denied him, does answer Addie's expectation through his search for the untold might and mystery of liquidity. That is my own explanation of Kawin's remark which I have quoted earlier in this essay: "If Darl is language, Addie is what mothers language." According to Kawin, however, what is needed in such a case is "the overarching consciousness of a super-narrator." The quest for liquidity is not sufficient in itself from Addie's point of view. Darl cannot enjoy the proper love of his mother because there is something missing in his attitude. In order to probe into what Addie requires still more, we must return to the discussion of Addie's chapter once again.

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More often than not, Addie is taken for a nihilist probably on account of her negative philosophy of life. If one thinks of Addie at all, he cannot avoid considering her view on life which she professes to have learned from her father: "the reason for living [is] to get ready to stay dead a long time" (p. 161). Here important notice should be given to the adverbial phrase "a long time." Maybe it is remarked casually just to emphasize the shortness of life compared with eternal death. An

ordinary person, however, would not care how long he will stay dead after he dies unless he has a special belief, for example, in reincarnation. Although Floyd Watkins inevitably observes that “[w]hat Addie means in this mysterious clause remains enigmatic” and that the author “does not . . . give a basis for choice of a single meaning,”¹² to this extent it seems clear: Addie is keenly conscious of the passing of time. To put it another way, she yearns for something that overcomes temporal distance. That is why she tries desperately to affect her schoolchildren by physical, direct contact so that they may be conscious of her presence surely for the rest of their lives: “Now you are aware of me! Now I am something in your secret and selfish life, who have marked your blood with my own *for ever and ever*” (p. 162; my italics). In contrast with such kinds of deeds, words, Addie seems to complain, are unreliably transient. She would think “how words go straight up in a thin line, *quick* and harmless, and how terribly doing goes along the earth, clinging to it, so that *after a while* the two lines are too far apart for the same person to straddle from one to the other” (p. 165; my italics). Addie’s attack is undoubtedly on the temporality of words. She would also think “how the high dead words *in time* seemd to lose even the significance of their dead sound” (p. 167; my italics). If a series of words at their best can gain liquidity, that liquidity lasts just for a moment and leaves nothing that may recapture the flow. To gain fluid motion is important, but no less important is to make it felt beyond time, Addie seems to think. Accordingly, a man like Darl who “just thinks by himself too much” (p. 68), however rich in his inner verbal experience, is inadmissible because he is unable to make himself known to anyone around him, much less to those who live in days to come. In other words, he really has rare sensitivity for liquidity through language, but his language is for himself and not for communication. For the same reason, Whitfield’s self-satisfying confession deserves condemnation: he claims that “when I framed the words of my confession it was to Anse I spoke them, even though he was not there” (p. 171), but it is obvious that “even though he was not there” is an impermissible concession. Unlike Darl or Whitfield, Addie concerns herself with setting others in motion even post-

humously. This concern of hers culminates in extracting from her husband a "promise," the process of whose realization is the very substance of the novel.

The only problem about Addie may be that when she complains of words, what she has in mind is only *spoken* words. She talks negatively about "the cries of the geese" (p. 166) or "the forlorn echo of the dead word" (p. 167), despising the *sound* because of its short duration. Sound, once uttered, cannot be repeated except when it is recorded by a machine like phonographs. Indeed, the novel allows a "graphophone" to play an important role toward the end of the story. In front of "Mrs Bundren's" house the family hear the music from a machine and Cash tells us more than once his great admiration for music. This episode, apparently unimportant in itself, nevertheless provides a crucial concept in relation to the way this very novel exists. The music machine is "natural as a music-band" (p. 225), and yet it "shuts up like a hand-grip, with a handle and all, so a fellow can carry it with him wherever he wants" (p. 248). To put the problem in the context of our discussion, it can be said that the machine reproduces sound without spoiling its liquid flow in any space or time. This is exactly what *As I Lay Dying* is trying to do; the machine is one of the ideal forms the book longs for. As for Addie, she is of course an uneducated country woman and is not farsighted enough to think of the efficacy of *written* words, but what consequently emerges as a possible means of reproducing liquidity is the act of writing. Though she does not further her discussion, her attack on the temporality of words logically elevates the written over the spoken. At least, she does approve of "the voiceless speech" (p. 167), or "the dark voicelessness in which the words are the deeds" (p. 166), and there remains some room for an interpretation that the voiceless *text* may reveal something that flows and repeats itself. Addie's direct deeds in themselves may exert some influence presumably on the next generation, but with Faulkner as a recorder and organizer, Darl's attempt to catch the flow of language is expected to affect the far-off posterity too. When it comes to the acquisition of reproducible liquidity, then, Faulkner the author figures largely.

The whole story should, in fact, be read with the presence of the writer in mind. In the case of a *tour de force* like *As I Lay Dying*, it may be true in a way, as Faulkner proclaims, that “the writer knows probably every single word right to the end before he puts the first one down.”¹³ However, we should not underestimate the work, for what makes it most attractive and moving, I believe, is the very forcibility with which the writer makes the story go on toward a destined goal even at the cost of verisimilitude. In spite of each character’s plausible motivation to continue the journey, the fact that Addie’s wish successfully sets the family in motion cannot be fully understood unless we take into account Faulkner’s own wishful, or wistful, manipulation of the work. There is always the implied author behind (or, what Kawin calls “the mind of the novel”) as a prime mover.

Readers today, well acquainted with the so-called speech-act theory that has been systemized in the 1960’s, have no difficulty in accepting the idea that “[t]he unit of linguistic communication is not, as has generally been supposed, the symbol, word or sentence, but rather the production or issuance of the symbol or word or sentence in the performance of the speech act.”¹⁴ What generates fluid motion in *As I Lay Dying* is not so much the way the characters move as the way the writer forces them to move. The novel is a *tour de force* in its original sense of the phrase—a feat of dynamic strength.

It is no wonder that in such a story appears a highly self-referential argument. The conversation between Cash and Darl about the reason why Jewel goes out in the night is a particular case in point. Cash supposes that Jewel must be seeing a married woman rather than a young girl, and Darl says that it would be safer. And then Cash says: “It aint always the safe things in this world that a fellow . . .” (p. 125). To which Darl replies: “You mean, the safe things are not always the best things?” But we cannot deny the impression that the development of this conversation is quite forceful. Here they almost allow Faulkner to voice his own argument. Darl’s following passage would instantly remind a Faulkner’s reader of the remark the writer often made when he extolled Thomas Wolfe in contrast with Hemingway.

When something is new and hard and bright, there ought to be something a little better for it than just being safe, since the safe things are just the things that folks have been doing so long they have worn the edges off and there's nothing to the doing of them that leaves a man to say, That was not done before and it cannot be done again. (p. 125)

It would be appropriate here to conclude with the suggestion that *As I Lay Dying*, for all its subtleties and contradictions, reveals itself as a story about writing/reading a story. In the course of this essay, we have seen that the whole novel's rationale clearly endorses Faulkner's creed as an artist:

Life is motion and motion is concerned with what makes man move — which are ambition, power, pleasure. . . . The aim of every artist is to arrest motion, which is life, by artificial means and hold it fixed so that 100 years later when a stranger looks at it, it moves again since it is life. Since man is mortal, the only immortality possible for him is to leave something behind him that is immortal since it will always move.¹⁵

Notes

1. John T. Matthews's survey of critical essays on this matter, though colored more or less in favor of his own discussion, is useful. See *The Play of Faulkner's Language* (Ithaca and London: Cornell U.P., 1982), pp. 36–45.
2. Olga W. Vickery, *The Novels of William Faulkner* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana U.P., 1959), p. 58.
3. Bruce F. Kavin, *The Mind of the Novel: Reflexive Fiction and the Ineffable* (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1982), p. 263.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 268.
5. William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying* (New York: Vintage Books, 1964), p. 163. Page references to the novel, hereafter cited parenthetically in the text, are to this edition.
6. André Bleikasten, *Faulkner's As I Lay Dying* (London: Indiana U.P., 1973), pp. 101–102.
7. James B. Meriwether and Michael Millgate (eds.), *Lion in the Garden: Interviews with William Faulkner, 1926–1962* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1968), p. 217.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 56.
9. See Kiyoyuki Ono, "Life is Motion: An Aspect of William Faulkner's Style" in Thomas L. McHaney (ed.), *Faulkner Studies in Japan* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1985), pp. 28–44.
10. Bleikasten, p. 105.
11. Meriwether and Millgate, p. 134.
12. Floyd C. Watkins, *The Flesh and the Word* (Nashville: Vanderbilt U.P., 1971), p. 192.
13. Meriwether and Millgate, p. 244.
14. John R. Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1970), p. 16.
15. Meriwether and Millgate, p. 253.