Finitude, Death, and Play in Faulkner's

As I Lay Dying

Kelly S. Walsh

I can remember how when I was young I believed death to be a phenomenon of the body; now I know it to be merely a function of the mind—and that of the minds of the ones who suffer the bereavement.

—William Faulkner, As I Lay Dying

Death, we might say, is the ultimate consecration of our human finitude. Precisely because, as Françoise Dastur has written, “the caesura between death and life, between the sensible and intelligible, seems impossible to bridge” (19), the desire to know death, and traverse this frontier while still living, remains irrepressible. And as what Heidegger calls the individual’s “ownmost non-relational possibility” (294), death is simultaneously that which we will all go through and that which none of us will ever (consciously) experience. In William Faulkner’s fiction, there is the lucid awareness that art will never adequately bridge the “caesura,” illuminating the other side of that uncanny horizon, but also the self-conscious determination to attempt the venture nevertheless. The ineluctable result of the confrontation between the (aesthetic) imagination and the absolute finitude of death is near-exhaustion, and the sublime sense that infinity pervades life. That is, Faulkner discloses the Nietzschean sensibility that there are potentially “infinite interpretations,” that “too many ungodly possibilities of interpretation are included in the unknown” (Nietzsche 336). In perhaps his most stunning and comprehensive failure to lift the veil from death, the self-proclaimed tour de force, As I Lay Dying, Faulkner employs a “cubistic” strategy to place a multitude of individual and social responses to death on the same textual tableau or plane (219). Providing access to the subjective realities of fifteen different characters, the novel’s form does not create a “realer” synthetic reality; instead, it reveals their irreconcilability and the potentially infinite play inhered in seeking out truth and the limits of finitude. Indeed, the multiple viewpoints narrating the Bundren family’s grotesque odyssey to bury Addie in Jefferson render death just as strange and remote as ever—and closure just as elusive. Death intensifies the experience of life,

1) Several critics have picked up Darl’s description of Addie’s coffin as being “like a cubistic bug”: “The front, conical façade with the square orifice of doorway broken only by the square squat shape of the coffin on the sawhorses like a cubistic bug, comes into relief” (219). See, for instance: Ted Atkinson, “‘It aint on a balance’: As I Lay Dying and the Cultural Politics of the Great Depression”; Watson G. Branch, “Darl Bundren’s ‘Cubistic’ Vision”; Ilse Dusoir Lind, “The Effect of Painting on Faulkner’s Poetic Form”; and John T. Matthew, “As I Lay Dying in the Machine Age.”

2) Diana York Blaine, for instance, has argued that despite the ambivalence the Bundren children feel towards their late mother, they remain, due to the presence of her corpse, incapable of decoupling themselves from her and thus of attaining closure: “the Bundren children’s obsession with their mother continues even as her increasingly repulsive corpse rots more each day. Despite this repulsiveness, they appear unable to separate themselves from her either physically or psychically” (419). Gail L. Mortimer has also emphasized the continued presence of Addie’s corpse as the reason that the Bundren family is unable to come to terms with her death: “In a sense the pseudo-presence of Addie, her increasingly offensive corpse, interferes with her family’s ability to accept the fact of absence which is death” (58). While the corpse functions as a literal sign of the Bundren’s inconclusive mourning, I do not believe that we are justified in saying that with Addie’s burial the
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