

A BAKHTINIAN READING OF WILLIAM FAULKNER'S *AS I LAY DYING*

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«*The aim of all life is death*»

Sigmund Freud, «Beyond the Pleasure Principle», 1920.

«Death is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell»

Walter Benjamin, «The Storyteller», 1936

In a 1956 interview, William Faulkner described his novel *As I Lay Dying* (1930) as a «*tour de force*» which he wrote in six weeks: «I simply imagined a group of people and subjected them to the simple universal catastrophes which are flood and fire with a simple natural motive to give direction to their progress.»¹ The story line is certainly simple, but not so the mode of its telling. When Addie Brunden dies, her family takes her body to be buried in Jefferson, following her wish. However, the narrative technique is highly complex: a multiplicity of voices, fifteen in total, express their reactions to death and the journey in fifty nine fragmented monologues, building an intricate image of Addie, her family and the community.

The result is an authentic polyphony in Mikhail Bakhtin's sense. Bakhtin's formulations on the theory of the novel seem particularly relevant to the narrative of *As I Lay Dying*. Faulkner's novel constitutes an elusive text which has provoked the most diverging interpretations among critics. It is the aim of the present essay to apply

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1. Interview with Jean Stein Vanden Heuvel (New York, 1956) in *Lion in the Garden. Interviews with William Faulkner 1926-1962*, ed. by James B. Meriwether & Michael Millgate (Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 1968), p. 244.

Bakhtin's fundamental concepts of polyphony and heteroglossia, the stylistic self-consciousness of a language and the chronotope, to the analysis of this novel in order to throw new light onto its most problematic aspects.

Mikhail Bakhtin (1885-1975) is gradually emerging as a key figure in twentieth-century thought. His complicated, obscure, and somehow unsystematic work and, especially, the difficulties he experienced in publishing it in the darkest years of recent Russian history, have considerably delayed the diffusion of his ideas in the anglophone world. However, Bakhtin's contribution to our understanding of language and the theory of the novel is substantial and, as I contend here, extremely pertinent to William Faulkner's narrative.

Firstly, I will outline a brief introduction to Bakhtin's major concepts and later undertake the analysis of *As I Lay Dying*.² A central notion for Bakhtin is that of «dialogue», understood as a special sort of interaction. Bakhtin envisaged all of life as an ongoing dialogue which takes place at every moment of daily existence. Life by its very nature is dialogic. And so is discourse:

No living word relates to its object in a *singular way*: between the word and its object, between the word and the speaking subject, there exists an elastic environment of other, alien words about the same object, the same theme... The word, directed towards its object, enters a dialogically agitated and tension-filled environment of alien words, value judgements and accents,... and all of this may crucially shape discourse.³

Language is thus internally dialogized. In any language or culture, there is a conflict between centripetal and centrifugal forces. Centripetal forces aim at centralising and unifying meaning. In discourse, they are put to use by any dominant social group to impose its own monologic, unitary perceptions of truth. However, always working against that centralising process, there are centrifugal forces which stratify and fragment ideological thought into multiple views of the world. According to Bakhtin, language is never a unitary system of norms. At any given moment of its evolution, language is stratified into socio-ideological languages. Literary language itself is only one of these heteroglot languages - and in its turn is also stratified into languages:

Language is heteroglot from top to bottom: it represents the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past, between

2. I will mainly refer to Bakhtin's essays in *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. by Michael Holquist & trans. by Caryl Emerson & M. Holquist (Austin: University Texas Press, 1981). For a critical discussion of Bakhtin's work, see Gary Saul Morson & Caryl Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin. Creation of a Prosaics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990).

3. M.M. Bakhtin, «Discourse in the Novel» (1934-35), *The Dialogic Imagination*, p. 276.

differing epochs of the past, between different socio-ideological groups in the present, between tendencies, schools, circles and so forth, all given a bodily form.⁴

Whereas poetic genres exercise a centripetal, and therefore homogenising and hierarchicising, influence, the novel was historically shaped by the current of decentralising, centrifugal forces. Polyphony and heteroglossia enter the novel and organize themselves within it into a structured artistic system. Bakhtin discusses several forms for incorporating and organizing heteroglossia in the novel, mainly hybridisation, character zones and incorporated genres.

For Bakhtin, Dostoevsky was the creator of the polyphonic novel: «A plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices is in fact the chief characteristic of Dostoevsky's novels... a plurality of consciousnesses, with equal rights and each with its own world.»⁵ The essence of polyphony lies precisely in the fact that the voices remain independent and, as such, are combined in a unity of a higher order than homophony, as we can appreciate in *As I Lay Dying*.

The real action of novels is a complex play of values and tones, as discourses and their speakers orient themselves to each other. The most important place where this complexity is developed is in the voice of the author. Authorial telling enacts the hybridisations of discourse. The dialogues that constitute novelness are to be found not primarily in the compositionally expressed dialogues among the characters, but in the hybridised, double-voiced, dialogized heteroglossia of the author's own voice:

A dialogue is played out between the author and its characters - not a dramatic dialogue broken up into statement-and-response, but that type of novelistic dialogue that realizes itself within the boundaries of constructions that externally resemble monologues.⁶

In *As I Lay Dying*, multiple dialogical relationships are established, between the author and each character, between each character and its own consciousness, between characters themselves, and between characters and readers. What on a first consideration appear to be monologues, contain within them dialogic tensions. The authorial figure has been removed from control. The author's voice is also dialogized, as shown in the characters' discourse. Many critics have condemned the lack of verisimilitud that they appreciate in certain, characters' speeches, such as Vardaman's in the bar, where the

4. Bakhtin, «Discourse in the Novel», p. 291.

5. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. & trans. by Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis & London: Univ. Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 6.

6. Bakhtin, «Discourse in the Novel», p. 320.

speaker has been allowed a command of language that goes beyond his educational background and possibilities of articulation:

It is dark. I can hear wood, silence: I know them. But not living sounds, not even him. It is as though the dark were resolving him out of this integrity, into an unrelated scattering of components –snuffings and stampings; smells of cooling flesh and ammoniac hair; an illusion of a co-ordinated whole of splotched hide and strong bones within which, detached and secret and familiar, *anis* different from my *is*. I see him dissolve –legs, a rolling eye, a gaudy splotching like cold flames– and float upon the dark in fading solution; all one yet neither; all neither yet none (51).⁷

Vardaman's thoughts are obviously not appropriate to the mind of an uneducated child. There is a gap between the rethoric and the author. Eric Sundquist sees in this gap a challenge to a narrative consciousness formed by a supposed union between the author and his language, which is made conventional by the standard device of omniscient narration, which the novel explicitly discards.⁸ In these lines, we hear Vardaman's voice, but only as it is interwoven and permeated by the author's accents. We have therefore an example of Bakhtinian double-voiced discourse: the author takes someone else's direct discourse and infuses it with his authorial intentions and consciousness while still retaining the original speaker's intention; in the one utterance, two consciousness coexist. This hybridisation elucidates Faulkner's technique not as a fault or mere convention but as a powerful device to express narrative consciousness. Moreover, Faulkner is not pursuing mimetism. Dorothy Hale points out that, for Bakhtin as for Faulkner, realism lies not in the illusion of unmediated representation but in the picturing of social voices within language: Bakhtin's work «participates in and helps clarify the social formalism that Faulkner employs.»⁹

Characters enter into dialogue with other characters in what Bakhtin designates as «character zones»: «a zone of his own, his own sphere of influence on the authorial context surrounding him, a sphere that extends beyond the boundaries of the direct discourse allotted to him. The area occupied by an important character's voice must in any event be broader than his direct and "actual» words".¹⁰ Faulkner succeeds in creating

7. William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying* (London: Vintage, 1996). All further references are to this edition and page numbers will be cited parenthetically in the text.

8. Eric J. Sundquist, «Death, Grief, Analogous Form: *As I Lay Dying*», in *Philosophical Approaches to Literature. New Essays on Nineteenth- and Twentieth-century Texts*, ed. by William E. Cain (Lewisburg: Bucknell Univ Press, 1984), pp. 165-182 (p. 166).

9. Dorothy J. Hale, «*As I Lay Dying's* Heterogeneous Discourse», *Novel*, 23 (1) (Fall 1989), 5-23 (p. 21).

10. Bakhtin, «Discourse in the Novel», p. 320.

profoundly idiosyncratic zones surrounding characters. Character zones are well adapted to portraying the dynamics of psychological life, since they make it possible to show from within how a character thinks and feels.

The complex pattern of alternation of narratives between insiders and outsiders conforms to a design which presents the differences between experienced, shared, or observed suffering. Possible modes of reaction to death and grief are thus established. Each of the Bundrens comes to terms with Addie's disappearance in their own particular way. The outside narrators such as Tull, Cora, or Peabody introduce a range of social responses to the Bundrens's behaviour, from solidarity of disapproval and rejection, much in the fashion of a Greek chorus.

The need to cooperate during the journey disguises the isolation of each of the Bundrens. Due to their common task, taking Addie's coffin to Jefferson, the diffused family comes together. But such cohesion is only momentary, and soon disintegration takes over. The lack of communication underscores the divisions within the family. Each of the Bundren children travels alone, each locked in his/her own consciousness and unable to communicate with the others. Through their different points of view, we get portraits of each character, their connections and their search for identity.

At the outset of the novel, Cash appears as quite simple-minded, a man of hardly any words. Practical and efficient, he uses his carpenter's skills to build a coffin for his mother. The careful and detailed process of constructing the box absorbs him completely and represents a way of expressing his love to his mother, not with words but with an act. Throughout the journey, however, he seems to become more articulate. He is the only one who understands Darl's attempts to destroy the coffin and who feels sympathy for him. At the end of the book, Cash is able to recognise the complex morality of human beings and express sensible judgements with words:

But I ain't so sho that are a man has the right to say what is crazy and what ain't. It's like there was a fellow in every man that's done a-past the sanitary or the insanity, that watches the sane and the insane doings of that man with the same horror and the same astonishment. (226)

Darl is the most complex and ambiguous character. He is regarded by other characters in contradictory ways, either as an insane or as an extremely sensible person. Darl is by far the most articulate, able to describe pure perception in a highly poetical style. He is granted nineteen sections and functions as the guide, the main focalizer of the action and, in that sense, he is very close to the traditional third-person omniscient narrator. His powers of clairvoyance turn him into a witness of his family's doings.

In his discussion of the question of the third person, Bakhtin alludes to the problem of understanding the world of the internal man, that is, of individual experience. The position of the author describing the character's subjective experience becomes problematic. Traditional figures such as the clown, the fool and the rogue, who can spy

and eavesdrop, provided a way of exploring the nature of people's inner life.¹¹ Darl would fit into this category, particularly that of the fool, with its sane/insane connotations. Faulkner invests him with prescient powers. He knows the secrets of his family: that Dewey Dell is pregnant or that Anse is not Jewel's father. Furthermore, he describes in detail two of the most important scenes in the novel, Addie's death moment and the finishing of her coffin, without being physically present.

Jewel is a man of action and, consequently, he is only granted one monologue, in which he displays his strong connection with his mother and his claim for exclusive possession. Throughout the novel, he is repeatedly described, particularly by Darl, with adjectives related to wood: «wooden face» (2), «Jewel's eyes look like pale wood» (14), perhaps to signify his difficulties in articulating emotions. Dewey Dell's discourse is dominated by her worry about her unwanted pregnancy and her efforts to terminate it, which overshadows her grief for her mother's death. In her sense of aloneness and her meditations on the individual's place in the world, she seems to follow her mother's experience. Vardaman, the young child, renders in his discourse his terrible attempts to understand death. In his childish innocence, he is very close to Darl's derangement. Anse, the father, is self-centred, egoistical, static. His discourse stands for the emptiness of words, what Addie most despised.

Addie is the centre of the novel, the source of tension. Her children are defined in terms of her love for them and in the way they fit her theory about words and acts. Even in death, she dominates the actions and thoughts of her kin, and the whole journey is permeated with her presence. As will be discussed later, her only narration, located chronologically after her death, constitutes a statement on the meaning of language and life.

Formal dialogism in characters' discourse has a thematic correspondence in the tense relationships established amongst the Bundren children, especially between Darl and Jewel. Character zones interact. As we move towards the end of the novel, Vardaman's discourse becomes more and more similar to Darl's. The character's speech is also internally dialogised. When characters talk to each other in the novel, dialogues are represented through use of dialect, but in their internal thoughts a more complex and poetical language is employed. The use of italics is highly relevant. Tull's second narration filters other voices by means of italics, resulting in a mixture of actual dialogue, personal thoughts, and past and present:

On the third day they got back and they loaded her into the wagon and started and it already too late. You'll have to go all the way round by Samson's bridge. It'll take you a day to get there. Then you'll be forty miles from Jefferson. Take my team, Anse. We'll wait for ourn. She'll want it so. (84-85)

11. Bakhtin, «Forms of Time and the Chronotope in the Novel» (1937-38), *The Dialogic Imagination*, pp. 158-166.

Dialogised discourse is carried to its extremes in Darl's last section. His personality has completely split up and, in a schizophrenic way, he refers to himself in the third person, maintaining a dialogue: «Darl had a little spy-glass he got from France at the war. In it had a woman and a pig with two backs and no face. I know what that is. "Is that why you are laughing, Darl?"» (241)

Bakhtin describes another basic form for incorporating heteroglossia in the novel «incorporated genres.»¹² The novel permits the incorporation of various genres, both artistic and extra-artistic, which stratify the linguistic unit of the novel and further intensify its speech diversity in fresh ways. In *As I Lay Dying*, we hear the dialect of poor white farmers, metaphoric and philosophical digressions, a numbered list of reasons to build a coffin on the bevel, talks by town shopkeepers, etc. It juxtaposes literary genres, stylistic registers and tones of voice in such a way that defies any generic classification. *As I Lay Dying* presents affinities with the epic genre: the Bundrens face terrible ordeals during a journey of almost Homeric dimensions. Jewel in particular evokes the heroes of legends who had to overcome all sorts of obstacles. But Faulkner's novel also presents dramatic characteristics that partake of both tragedy and comedy. The story of the Bundrens comprises death, violence, hatred and madness, essential elements of tragedies. At the same time, there is a vein of humour (quite a black humour) that makes tragic situations appear as comic (for instance, Cash's broken leg being fixed with cement). This mixture of the grotesque with the pathetic renders it difficult to label the novel within a single category.

As I Lay Dying is thus a highly heteroglossic text. It also draws attention to a concept central to Bakhtin's theory, the question of representing the image of a language. We have seen that characters are defined in relation to their position to language. This is especially noticeable in Addie's monologue, which focuses on her aversion for words as opposed to acts. Her narration represents the struggle between private and public language and challenges the representational power of social language. Addie's problem with language representing experience was also encountered by Bakhtin.

For Bakhtin, languages are ways of conceptualising the world in words. A language is a complex of beliefs. Each language of heteroglossia has arisen from a vast array of social and psychological experience. Languages interact with other languages and other belief complexes. To realise and develop the potential of a language, the «outsideness» of another language is required. A language that has entered into dialogue with another language becomes self-conscious. The language begins not just to speak, but to hear how it sounds; it not only represents the world, but imagines itself as the object of representation. Words turn into double-voiced words:

The novel is the expression of a Galilean perception of language, one that denies the absolutism of a single and unitary language—... that has been made conscious

12. See Bakhtin, «Discourse in the Novel», pp. 320-323.

of the vast plenitude of national and, more to the point, social languages— all of which are equally capable of being «languages of truth»... What is involved here is a very important, in fact a radical revolution in the destinies of human discourse: the fundamental liberation of cultural— semantic and emotional intentions from the hegemony of a single and unitary language, and consequently the simultaneous loss of a feeling for language as myth, that is, as an absolute form of thought.¹³

The language becomes simply one of many possible languages, no longer indisputable in its own domain. Different languages understand the world differently. The novel cannot work with that kind of absolute authoritative language that does not condescend to dialogue. Similarly, Addie rebels against monological forces which seek to impose fixed meanings. Such forces are mainly represented by Cora, Whitfield and Anse. It is significant that Addie's narration is preceded by Cora's, which is full of profound-sounding religious pronouncements and heavy moral clichés —«high dead words» (164)— and followed by Whitfield's, which exemplifies the hypocritical use of words. On his way to the Bundrens, Whitfield resolves to admit his affair with Addie for fear that she may confess. When he realises that she has not betrayed him, he takes refuge in his words and does not act: «He will accept the will for the deed, Who knew that when I framed the words of my confession it was to Anse I spoke them, even though he was not there.» (168) The emptiness of language, the gap between signifier and signified is embodied in Whitfield's sermon at Addie's funeral, as reflected by Tull: «His voice is bigger than him. It's like they are not the same. It's like he is one, and his voice is one, swimming on two horses side by side across the ford and coming into the house, the mud-splashed one and the one that never even got wet, triumphant and sad.» (83)

Surrounded by these monological discourses, Addie cannot establish a dialogue. Enclosed in her aloneness, she feels that language prevents any real communication and therefore distrusts words: «Words are not good... words don't ever fit even what they are trying to say at.» (160)¹⁴ For Addie, there is an inescapable unbalance between experience and its articulation, since words are invented by people who do not experience feelings, such as Anse: «He had a word, too. Love, he called it. But I had been used to words for a long time. I knew that word was like the others: just a shape to fill a lack.» (160) People who feel deeply do not need words. Within each person, there is an individuality that is incommunicable. In her search for self-definition, Addie desperately yearns for some kind of communication, in order to establish connections and dialogical relationships, but finds only emptiness:

13. Bakhtin, «Discourse in the Novel», pp. 366-7.

14. It is worth to note that Faulkner himself had a deep concern about words and their expressive power, which is particularly noticeable in his early novels such as *Soldiers' Pay* (1926) or *Mosquitoes* (1927).

Anse. Why Anse. Why are you Anse. I would think about his name until after a while I could see the word as a shape, a vessel, and I would watch him liquefy and flow into it like cold molasses flowing out of the darkness into the vessel, until the jar stood full and motionless: a significant shape profoundly without life like an empty door frame; and then I would find that I had forgotten the name of the jar. (161)

The increasing alienation from her husband leads her to consider him as dead. As a revenge, Addie uses words as weapons: she asks Anse to promise to take her back to be buried in Jefferson. Ironically, words force Anse, the most static character in the story, to undertake action and set the family in motion. In face of the disastrous journey, neighbours try to dissuade him. But Anse intends to keep loyal to his promise, to his words. At the end of the novel, though, we find out that he had an ulterior motive for finishing the journey, more in line with his selfishness: getting new teeth and a new wife.

Addie reaches the conclusion that any experience (motherhood, love, fear) can be either an intensely felt reality or a conventional form of speech and behaviour. Consequently, acts are preferable to words and she retreats into silence: «I would lie by him in the dark, hearing the dark land talking of God's love and his beauty and His sin; hearing the dark voicelessness in which the words are the deeds, and the other words that are not deeds, that are just the gaps in peoples' lacks' (162-3). Furthermore, she decides to act, and her adulterous relationship with Withfield implies a challenge to words and monological forces. She deliberately chooses a priest, the instrument of God who created sin: «I would think of the sin as garments which we would remove in order to shape and coerce the terrible blood to the forlorn echo of the dead word high in the air [...] because people to whom sin is just a matter forlorn echo of the dead word high in the air [...] because people to whom sin is just a matter of words, to them salvation is just words too' (163/165). Two conceptions of sin are then presented: as a word, leading to social damnation; and as an act, leading to salvation. Actually, Addie expects to be «saved» by the acts of her son Jewel, the fruit of sin. Charles Palliser sees in Addie's infidelity a defiant action to thwart Providence, a way of asserting her free will as opposed to predetermination.¹⁵ An obsessive awareness of monologic forces of predestination pervades the novel. Cora always sees «the hand of God» in the setbacks that the Bundrens suffer. While Anse passively accepts destiny, Addie rages against it as a kind of living death and claims her right to free will.

The self-consciousness of language claimed by Bakhtin is patent in the typography and the imagery used by Faulkner in *As I Lay Dying*. On the surface of the novel, external signs call attention to the image of language: frequent changes into and from

15. Charles Palliser, «Predestination and Freedom in *As I Lay Dying*», *American Literature*, 58 (4) (Dec 1986), pp., 557-573 (561).

italic type, capitalisations, lack of punctuation (e.g. Dewey Dell's description of her nightmare, p. 108), and repetition («Yes yes yes yes yes...» p. 242). The idea of the text as an object is stressed by techniques of defamiliarisation, such as the drawing of the coffin's shape (p. 80), the use of white spaces as visualisations of silence or emptiness («The shape of my body where I used to be a virgin is in the shape of a and I couldn't think of *Anse*, couldn't remember *Anse*» (161)), or even abrupt cessation of narrative («I told them that if they wanted I to tote and ride on a balance, they would have to—» (153)). Language transcends the conventional limitations of mimesis.¹⁶

Through a complex network of images, the text evidences the social and ontological implications of language. A variety of metaphors occur repeatedly throughout the novel. Addie is identified with images from the animal world. We also come upon a number of framing devices referring to receptacles, shapes, and modes of transmission (roads, rivers, meaningful gazes), all of which function as metaphorical commentaries on language. Addie's death does not imply her absence; on the contrary, her presence pervades and dominates the journey. Her transition from life to death is represented through various metamorphoses. Vardaman, unable to comprehend the concept of death, identifies his mother with a fish. Equalising the process by which the fish he catches ceases to be alive with his mother's death, he tries to keep her alive by mutating her spirit into an animal. For Vardaman, his mother is clearly still alive. He drives holes in her coffin so that she can breathe, and, encouraged by Darl, he puts his ear close to the coffin and listens to her voice, even affirming that she is looking at him through the wood. Jewel also finds a way of dealing with Addie's existence by considering his horse as a surrogate mother. Cryptic-styled statements such as «My mother is a fish» (76), or «Jewel's mother is a horse» (86), raise the question of identity and of the distinction between appearance and reality.

But Addie is also a body, moreover, a body disintegrating inside a coffin and producing a smell that attracts buzzards and outrages the community. There is an obsessive imagery involving receptacles, things that contain other things, shapes that get filled: bodies, vessels, vases, jars, boxes. The image of the coffin acquires a special relevance. In Patrick O'Donnell's words, «The vessel of the coffin contains the concealed Addie, who is the lifeblood of the Bundren family and its motivating force, even in death.»¹⁷ It has a grotesque magnetism as a force that creates family cohesion but also as a source of mystery and horror for the neighbours. The coffin contains life and death. Significantly, the members of the family never refer to the coffin as «it», but as «her»

16. For a discussion of *As I Lay Dying* in relation to visual arts, see John Tucker, «William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*: Working Out the Cubistic Bugs». *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 26 (4) (Winter 1984), pp. 388-404.

17. Patrick O'Donnell, «The Spectral Road: Metaphors of Transference in Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*», *Papers on Language and Literature*, 20 (1) (Winter 1984), pp. 60-79 (72).

and keep talking about Addie in the present tense. Actually, the coffin suffers various assaults by water and fire, and is even drilled by an auger. It functions as a metaphor of metaphors, suggesting that there is no stable meaning, that significance is subject to the erosion of time. The shape of the body, the coffin, the fish, or the jar, they all relate to the shape of words and stand for the idea of metaphors as significant shapes embodying meaning.

Boundaries between life and death, animals and human beings, animate and inanimate, appear thus as something fluid. Means of transmission acquire metaphoric meanings too. The central image of the road, together with those of paths, river, rope or gazes, epitomise the concern with connection and completion. There are, however, two concentric circles of meaning, but somehow in *As I Lay Dying*, that movement is deferred, producing an impression of motionlessness. Peabody states «That's the one trouble with this country: everything, weather, all, hangs on too long. Like our rivers, our land: opaque, slow, violent.» (40) In a novel where eye imagery is essential, since characters rely on a system of communication based on stares, eyes are also static, wooden: «he lifts the other foot and squats there, staring straight ahead, motionless, lean, wooden-backed, as though carved squatting out of the lean wood.» (218)

According to Olga Vickery, the structure of *As I Lay Dying* is based upon a progression which is centrifugal as well as linear: «Centrifugally, each section establishes the relationships between Addie and the character whose thoughts and observations are being recorded. Linearly, each section contributes to the sequence of actions and events which constitutes the plot.»¹⁸ This pattern produces a stasis-motion effect, which can be seen more clearly in the organisation of space-time. Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope can prove of help in such analysis. In his essay «Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel», Bakhtin further explores his concern with the nature of events and actions, with the variety of ways in which the relation of people to their world may be understood. All contexts of experience are shaped by the kind of time and space that operate within them:

We will give the name *chronotope* (literally, «time space») to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature. This term [space-time] is employed in mathematics, and was introduced as part of Einstein's Theory of Relativity... it expresses the inseparability of space and time... Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible: likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history.¹⁹

18. Olga W. Vickery, *The Novels of William Faulkner* (Louisiana: Louisiana State Univ Press, 1959), p. 35.

19. Bakhtin, «Forms of Time and Chronotope...», p. 84.

For Bakhtin, the chronotope defines genre and generic distinctions. Amongst the numerous chronotopic motifs, the «chronotope of the road» enjoys an immense importance in literature. In the chronotope of the road, the unity of time and space markers is exhibited with exceptional precision and clarity. Time fuses together with space and flows in it. At the heart of this chronotope is folklore and the metaphor of the path of life: «In folklore a road is almost never merely a road, but always suggests the whole, or a portion of, “a path of life”.»²⁰ In *As I Lay Dying*, it could be argued that the road serves as a metaphor of «the path of death», since it visualises the transition from life to death. The road to Jefferson seems to have a soul of its own. Anse blames the road for bringing all sorts of misfortunes to his family, from Cash's accident in falling from a roof, to Darl's insanity or Addie's death. The road implies movement, all that which Anse hates; movement and predestination, God's will which Anse has to accept: «the Lord put roads for travelling; why He laid them down flat on the earth. When He aims for something to be always a-moving, He makes it long ways, like a road or a horse or a wagon, but when He aims for something to stay put, He makes it up-and-down ways, like a tree or a man.» (30)

It is interesting to note the geometry present in *As I Lay Dying*, which relates to the imagery of shapes already described. The novel opens with the image of a path, straight first and then curved, circling the cotton-house. The whole book is dominated by an endless road, a line leading to a cemetery. But this road is not always straight. It is interrupted by a flooded river, which forces the party to take a roundabout way. The road becomes a kind of wheel, a circular design that turns into itself, embodying an illusion of progress, but endlessly repeating itself. On the wagon, Darl reflects:

We go on, with a motion so soporific, so dreamlike as to be uninferant of progress, as though time and not space were decreasing between us and it. [...] It wheels up like a motionless hand lifted above the profound desolation of the ocean; beyond it the red road lies like a spoke of which Addie Bundren is the rim. (96)

Time slows down and becomes space. All these images suggest paradox and repetition and point towards a circular structure of the novel: at the end of the journey in Jefferson, a new Mrs. Bundren replaces Addie and the whole action will be endlessly repeated. The mixture of motion and stillness implies a failure of completion, of signification. Darl rebels against this failure to mean, to come to a conclusion, and desperately tries to put an end to the journey, and implicitly to time, by burning the coffin.

20. Bakhtin, «Forms of Time and Chronotope...», p. 120.

The flooded river threatens the straightness of the road and endangers the success of the journey and, therefore, the accomplishment of meaning. It is described as animated: «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.» (128) In the river, the road has become «floorless», «shaped vaguely high in the air», «soaked free of earth and floated upward, to leave in its spectral tracing a monument to a still more profound desolation.» (130) The extraordinary scene that depicts the crossing of the river exemplifies the connection of time and space and its dislocation in the novel:

we had reached the place where the motion of the wasted world accelerates just before the final precipice... It is as though the space between us were time: an irrevocable quality. It is as though time, no longer running straight before us in a diminishing line, now runs parallel between us like a looping string, the distance being the doubling accretion of the thread and not the interval between. (133-34)

The treatment of time is highly significant in Faulkner's narrative. There is a natural time, based on the land and the progressional seasons which is cyclical. It is symbolised by the river and characterised by its immediacy, its continuous process in which all time exists in any moment of it. The man-made road represents a linear, mechanical time, the attempt of clocks and calendars at assimilating natural time. Individuals face the problem of reconciling the cyclical and the linear modes of time. The paradox that although man exists in time, he also contains time within himself, is particularly noticeable in Darl's wish, «It would be nice if you could just ravel out into time.» (196) Past and future are both implicit in the present. Individuals cannot evade time without having to accept death. There is an obsessive concern to understand the transition from present to past, from life to death, with ontological implications:

I don't know what I am. I don't know if I am or not. Jewel knows he is, because he does not know that he does not know whether he is or not. [...] Yet the wagon *is*, because when the wagon *is was*, Addie Bundren will not be. And Jewel *is*, so Addie Bundren must be. (73-74)

Even the title, by playing with the colloquial use of «lay» as an intransitive verb, blurs the distinction between past and present. In face of death, characters reflect upon the problem of bodily integrity, how can a body that is still present be thought as *was*. Since they, Addie's children, depend on her self and are defined in relation to her, how can they understand their own identity if she has disappeared? Peabody understands death as «a function of the mind and that of the minds of the ones who suffer the bereavement.» (38) Death signifies the disintegration of the communal self and, therefore, grief can be interpreted as a refusal to let go the connections. What dies in death are the connections between one mind and others.

Bakhtin's concept of chronotope raises a number of questions which apply to *As I Lay Dying*. What is the relation of human action to its context? Does this context actively shape events? In *As I Lay Dying*, the spatio-temporal context, the road, does actually shape events. Actions depend on where and when they occur, in such a way that characters are fully aware of their movement (or lack of it) in time and space. At the same time, particular sets of social and historical factors play a role in shaping personal identity. In *As I Lay Dying*, there is a clear concept of the personal or private as opposed to the public. Anse's main aim during the journey is to keep his family's privacy; he insists in using their own team and making their own coffin, because Addie «was ever a particular woman.» (84) Nevertheless, their journey in space and time implies a public enterprise: the community helps but also judges and condemns the Bundren's actions. The public intrusion culminates with Darl's capture and reclusion into an asylum, an event ironically performed as a betrayal from inside the family.

The notion of chronotope helps to clarify the apparent anachronisms of *As I Lay Dying*. In the interconnectedness of time and space, there is the possibility for the order of incidents to be different, and thus for events to be reversible or repeatable. Many critics have condemned what they consider as inconsistent anachronisms of the novel, such as Addie's monologue. R.W. Franklin attributes these anachronisms to a faulty narrative management due to the haste with which Faulkner wrote the book.²¹ This critical position can only be maintained if the flow of the present is regarded as irreversibly sequential: events cannot be alluded to until they happen and they cannot be lived again. Such position destroys one of the most powerful features of *As I Lay Dying*, its treatment of time. If we understand, as Bakhtin does, narrative as shaped by a specific way of conceptualising the possibilities of action, anachronism is out of the question. As Faulkner himself stated:

The fact that I have moved my characters around in time successfully, at least in my own estimation, proves to me my own theory that time is a fluid condition which has no existence except in the momentary avatars of individual people. There is no such thing as *was*—only *is*. If *was* existed there would be no grief or sorrow.²²

What Faulkner is working with is a violation of temporal and spatial boundaries as the only means of representing death.

21. R.W. Franklin, «Narrative Management in *As I Lay Dying*», *Modern Fiction Studies*, 13 (1) (Spring 1967), pp. 57-65 (65). In an attempt to account for the apparent anachronisms, another critic, David M. Monaghan, has gone as far as to suggest that Addie is the novel's single narrator, that the whole action is a product of her conscious stream. See his article «The Single Narrator of *As I Lay Dying*», *Modern Fiction Studies*, 18 (2) (Summer 1972), pp. 213-220.

22. Meriwether & Millgate (eds.), *The Lion in the Garden*, p. 255.

We can then conclude that *As I Lay Dying* presents essential features advocated by Bakhtin in his theoretical formulations on the novel. It is a polyphonic and heteroglossic text, which stresses the stylistic self-consciousness of language and which is built around the chronotope of the road. It also evokes a carnivalesque feeling and, in that sense, fits into the rich and old novelistic tradition of serio-comic genres whose roots Bakhtin found in the folk rituals of the carnival in the Middle Ages.²³ In its grotesque humour, its blending of voices and styles, its emphasis on incongruity and exaggeration, and its recourse to irony and parody, *As I Lay Dying* partakes of this tradition. The medieval tinges of the scene at the chemist's, Darl's final laughter or the parody of happy endings enacted by Anse's marriage to a duck-shaped woman with pop-eyes, suggest a carnival sense of the world that celebrates inverting top and bottom in any given structure.

The progressive dialogism of the text implies an erosion of boundaries in an attempt to escape fixedness. We enter a liminal territory, a road of buzzards where all boundaries of existence are crossed or blurred, where opposing categories become interchangeable: life/death, sanity/madness, motion/stasis, words/deeds, past/present. The text tends towards disembodiment, disintegration, standing for the process of detachment that grief involves. As more and more buzzards circle around the novel making the end seem inevitable, death has to be confronted. As Addie lies dying, so does the book. Her death is not complete until the book ends. Significantly, in a master stroke, Faulkner deletes the actual burial of Addie. What is important is the journey, the process of dying. The narrative seeks illumination in its end, in its own death. In his fascinating discussion of Freud's «Beyond the Pleasure Principle», Peter Brooks states: «The model proposes that we live in order to die, hence that the intentionality of plot lies in its orientation toward the end even while the end must be achieved only through detour.»²⁴ This detour constitutes precisely the plot of *As I Lay Dying*, a novel that struggles against the power of time to provide us with a deep insight into the meaning of life and death, since, as Addie's father used to say, «The reason for living is getting ready to stay dead.»

23. For a discussion of the concept of carnival in Bakhtin, see the chapter «Laughter and the Carnavalesque» in *Mikhail Bakhtin. Creation of a Poetics*, ed. by G.S. Morson & C. Emerson (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), pp. 433-470.

24. Peter Brooks, «Freud's Masterplot» in *Reading for the Plot* (Cambridge, Mass. & London: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 108.

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