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Faulkner's Coffin

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ABSTRACT
This article examines William Faulkner's use of the coffin form in his depression-era family epic, *As I Lay Dying*. I ask whether we can envision what Faulkner is doing with the aesthetic shape of the coffin—a form which he even typographically reproduces within the text itself—as a kind of strange realism. In order to make this argument, I recruit Frederic Jameson's recent discussion in *The Antinomies of Realism*, where he argues that the realist text is not a straightforward mimetic project, but rather involves a dialectical push-and-pull between a specific force and its exact opposite. Faulkner's lists perform a kind of metaphysical carpentry that asks us to consider the coffin not just as a textual trope or a symbol, but as a form that is itself constitutive of the way this story makes meaning.

KEYWORDS
Realism, Faulkner, Jameson, Modernism, The Great Depression, Narrative, Literary Objects

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Written on the cusp of America's Great Depression, William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* is populated with characters who live in a place that is irrevocably physical. Here, the heat of the summer sun and the dryness of the Southern landscape confront us with a tangible, earthly immediacy. Set in the Deep South (Mississippi to be exact, in Faulkner's fictional Yoknapatawpha County), the text follows the Bundrens, a struggling farming family headed by the bullish and inconsiderate patriarch, Anse Bundren. This is a man who is, in the words of his late wife Addie, "a significant shape profoundly without life like an empty door frame" (Faulkner 173). Addie Bundren serves as the narrative counterbalance to Anse: she is the heart of the novel, and her death in first chapter propels the family to trek across the state, rotting corpse and all, in a bid to fulfill her dying wish to be buried in Jefferson. Faulkner creates a narrative world that is consistently threatening to careen out of control; maintaining the balance between Anse's destructive selfishness and Addie's role as the familial connective tissue proves difficult for even the most careful of characters. In what follows, I focus on Faulkner's carpenter, Cash Bundren: the dutiful son who is obsessed with building his mother the perfect coffin "on a balance" and who tries so hard to please his father (165). In many ways, Cash is the novel's consistent casualty; whenever things tilt dangerously in one direction another, it is very often at his expense.

I argue that Faulkner stages two simultaneous scenes of carpentry, paralleling Cash's constant building with an adjacent narrative construction of his own. Through the use of a rotating list of character-focused narration, whereby each chapter is told from a different person's point of view, Faulkner performs a kind of textual carpentry, and constructs a perspectivally six-sided textual object.[1] Much like Addie's coffin, this hexagonal narrative structure is meticulously crafted as we progress through each chapter, and yet it is also always in the process of being remade, and built again. My interest in the materiality of the coffin is both an attempt to take seriously Faulkner's attention to a particular kind of object and an engagement with literary theory's recent interest in the philosophical status of material things in the world.

No longer just the purview of Marxism or book history, literary scholarship's relationship to the material is rapidly shifting, with approaches such as Speculative Realism and Object-Oriented Ontology breaking new ground. From the highly influential special issue of *Critical Inquiry* entitled "Things" in 2001, to Timothy Morton's *Hyperobjects*, Graham Harman's *Guerilla Metaphysics*, and Levi Bryant's *The Democracy of Objects*, thinkers in many corners of the academy are now recognizing the importance of confronting what Bill Brown calls "cultural debris" (227). We are thus beginning to understand, as Allan Hepburn suggests, that "despite Kant's intimation that objects are inert except when they arouse reactions in a perceiver, objects initiate action and propel narrative; … they generate stories" (10).

In calling these parallel coffins "objects," I am also attending to the text's obsession with an ekphrastic mode of storytelling that is inextricably dependent upon the constant invocation of an aesthetic object. In doing so, Faulkner's modernist text participates in the epic tradition of descriptively recruiting a textual object in order to help construct a narrative world. Ekphrasis, or "the verbal representation of a visual representation," has a long literary history, and Faulkner's use of this technique is akin to Homer's narrative invocation of The Shield of Achilles in the *Iliad*, as I discuss in more detail below (Mitchell 152). Like Homer, Faulkner uses the traditionally descriptive form of the list in order to achieve a kind of metaphysical carpentry: the in-text creation of a textual object that simultaneously instantiates and upholds the narrative world itself.

In creating a type of rotating narrative list—what Wai Chi Dimock calls "decentralized narration"—Faulkner thus engages in a storytelling process that is constantly under construction. The Bundrens' story is made and then remade chapter-by-chapter; reconstructed through each subsequent character's narrative perspective. The novel opens with three chapters that move through Addie's three sons—from Darl to Cash to Vardaman—to the fourth being told from the perspective of the family's wealthy neighbour Vernon Tull. Addie herself is given her own chapter after her death that tellingly appears at the very center of the novel. Many critics see in

her chapter an implicitly feminist attempt to undermine the narrative's patriarchal organization of power, as Addie is here quite literally speaking "from an impossible position."[2] Despite this moment, however, Addie's voice soon gets narratively over-written, as do all the voices in this story. *As I Lay Dying* is thus constantly in the process of being simultaneously built and destroyed, and each progressive movement is always met with a competing narrative force of equal measure.

To theoretically contextualize this claim, I turn to Frederic Jameson's recent study *The Antinomies of Realism*. As Jameson argues, the realist literary text is enacted through a dialectical process of competing antinomies. These oppositional forces, he argues, remain in tension instead of resolving into a Hegelian synthesis. He explains:

> Realism [is] a historical and even evolutionary process in which the negative and the positive are inextricably combined, and whose emergence and development at one and the same time constitute its own inevitable undoing, its own decay and dissolution. The stronger it gets, the weaker it gets; winner loses; its success is its failure. And this is meant, not in the spirit of the life cycle . . . , or of evolution or of entropy or historical rises and falls: it is to be grasped as a paradox and an anomaly, and the thinking of it as a contradiction or an aporia. (7)

Given the critical tendency to generically dichotomize modernism and realism, it might seem counterintuitive to discuss Faulkner in relation to even an "antinomial" realist tradition. Jameson himself complicates this divide, however, when he writes that "the opposition between realism and modernism already implies a historical narrative which . . . is very difficult to reduce to a structural or stylistic one . . . and is also difficult to control" (2-3). This intuition is partly why he discusses modernists such as Faulkner in *Antinomies* and does not limit himself to more traditional nineteenth-century realist writers such as Tolstoy, Zola, or Eliot.

If we read Faulkner through Jameson, then, we can identify multiple examples throughout *As I Lay Dying* of two oppositional, antinomial forces that are acting at the very same time. When Addie dies, she is placed in her casket reversed and clothed in her wedding dress, creating a strange scene where expected cultural markers are uncomfortably replaced by their opposites. The Bundrens' entire journey is meant to be one long funeral procession for her, but when she is finally buried in the ground, we are surprised to learn of her immediate resurrection through Anse's replacement wife, as we "meet Mrs. Bundren" again (Faulkner 261). When Cash breaks his leg trying to save the coffin from falling into a creek, Anse pours concrete over it in a hasty and ill-conceived plan to create a makeshift cast. That cast, an object meant to slowly heal a break by immobilizing the limb, adheres to Cash's skin and slowly starts to decompose his leg, making matters much worse (224). With his novel that was born out of the death of American economic structures, Faulkner creates a textual object that successively inters its struggling inhabitants.

By calling Faulkner's narrative coffin/coffin narrative "realist," my intent is not to decide whether *As I Lay Dying* should be placed within the literary realist canon. Rather, I am interested in staging an interaction with Jameson's intriguing new formulation of realism in order to think of this novel as a realist modernist object. Jameson gives us a version of realism that is itself deeply conflicted and somewhat unrecognizable. His is a *strange* realism,[3] freed from its adhesion to strict generic categories and a mimetic investment in the "real;" a realism that functions not as a stable aesthetic category but as a "hybrid concept, in which an epistemological claim (for knowledge or truth) masquerades as an aesthetic ideal, with fatal consequences for both of these incommensurable dimensions" (Jameson 6). Because this realism is more productively elastic than most of its theoretical forbearers, it can begin to tell us more about the kinds of aesthetic intricacies we see operating in texts like Faulkner's. I therefore borrow Jameson's use of the antinomial structure not to better understand the generic category of realism per se, but to

theoretically expand the possibilities for understanding *As I Lay Dying*'s idiosyncratic mode of storytelling.

Faulkner's narratological use of a rotating list constructs a textual object that is always in flux: always changing shape even as it is being built up, never quite succeeding in becoming the thing it is meant to be. This process is mirrored in Addie's coffin, which threatens to break or tip over, has holes bored in its top, and is constantly leaking smell, water, and even sound. From the opening sound of Cash's adze rhythmically hitting the wood out of which he is carving the coffin, to Dewey Dell's increasing level of desperation as she repeatedly attempts and fails to get an abortion, this text is constituted through very real, very physical experiences which these characters are asked to endure. Faulkner constructs his text out of what Jameson somewhat mysteriously calls "the heterogeneous materials that somehow end up coalescing into what we call the novel" (7).

Faulkner's rotating narrative is also worth considering within the larger history of the list itself as an aesthetic category, a topic about which scholars have recently become very interested. As Umberto Eco explains in *The Infinity of Lists*, lists are often discussed in relation to the history of literary representation and story telling. Homer's epics, then, provide a fairly solid historical place to start. Eco thus begins his book of lists with an identification of Homer's description of Achilles' shield in the *Iliad* as one of the first and greatest lists in the history of Western art:

> The shield has so many scenes that, unless we consider infinitesimally minute goldsmithery, it is difficult to imagine the object in all its wealth of detail. . . . The shield could have more scenes than it could materially contain . . . . Aesthetics tells us that a form can be infinitely interpreted, new aspects and new relationships can be found every time. . . . Nevertheless, a figurative work of art . . . possesses a 'referential' function: a narrative told in words or images about the real or the imagined world. This is the narrative function of Achilles' shield. (11-12)

There are two main points I wish to underscore here. One is the irrevocable narrativity of the shield itself; despite the fact that we are encountering a great list that would seem to suspend the narrative world of the *Iliad,* we learn much about Homer's story from this textual object through its representation of the passing of time. The second point I would like to emphasize is the shield's apparent "referential function," a designation which works to place this most unreal fictional object in the realm of realism, or at least has it performing some important kind of narrative mimesis. While the shield is not easily reproducible in the "real" world, its form is inextricably tied to a "realist" representation of the intricacies which make up Homer's world.

Jameson also invokes Achilles' shield, but does so in order to provide an example of narrative's antinomy. Using Homer's literary object to explain a-narrativity, Jameson argues that the shield perfectly represents the thing that resists realism's inextricable attachment to temporality and plot. Instead of moving away from the theoretical field of aesthetics, he accounts for his argument aesthetically, suggesting that realism is a result of an ongoing and "irrevocable antagonism between . . . twinned forces" (11). According to Jameson, these antinomies in question are narrative; or the French "récit" for "the tale," which he prefers because of its association with the event of story-telling as such; and a-narrativity: what he will eventually call, somewhat reluctantly, "affect" (11).

This affective mechanism operating within realism is structurally and synecdochically related to what Jameson sees as the innate a-temporality of literary lists. When we encounter a list in literary representations such as Homer's shield, we encounter a form of what Jameson calls "scenic elaboration" (11). These representations work to momentarily halt the telling of the story but maintain their place within the narrative because they expand or elaborate the story's existing structure. This is, we will note, quite apart from what Eco argues above. "The most inveterate alternative to narrative as such," Jameson writes,

> reminds us that storytelling is a temporal art, and always seems to single out a painterly moment in which the onward drive of narrative is checked if not suspended altogether. The Shield of Achilles!: this is the most famous instance of that suspension of narrative. Will the ancient rhetorical trope of ekphrasis be sufficient to fold this descriptive impulse back into narrative homogeneity? (8)

According to Eco, it might just well. While Homer's description of the shield is, of course, one of the earliest examples of ekphrasis—it is primarily a literary representation of a static, physical piece of art—it simultaneously functions as a crucial piece of the *Iliad*'s narrative structure.

The shield recounts not just the particulars of Homer's world but also includes events and circumstances that have happened in the past or are happening in the present. The same characters are re-encountered, their circumstances changed, and their situations shifted. So as much as the shield represents a moment of a-narrativity (the larger narrative of the story is, for a moment, put on hold), it simultaneously functions as a representational constituent of that same narrative world. While it may hold the linear plot temporarily hostage, it is a piece of narrative scaffolding that both includes its own type of storytelling and upholds the rest of Homer's constructed environment.

We can also draw a historical parallel between the fictional shield and another ekphrastic textual object: the historical "coffin texts" of the Middle Kingdom period in Egypt. Also called "mortuary texts" or "funerary texts," these coffins served a dual function: to bury the dead and maintain cultural history and practices by writing them down (Nyord 2). Many of these coffins were covered in hieroglyphs that depicted carefully chosen spells that were used for various cultural functions. In this way, the coffins both reflected and constituted the social world out of which they were born, and their decipherment remains a popular subject of study for Egyptologists today. Regularly decorated with spells meant to help the person who had died reach the afterworld with ease, these coffin texts wrote the process of death and dying while

playing a central role in the physical performance of burial rituals. I would thus like to position Faulkner's coffin as a modernist "coffin text;" as a physical object that both reveals the underlying narrative structure of the text and upon which is written the novel's central thematic concerns with death, creation, and perspectival balance.

So central is this object to *As I Lay Dying* that Faulkner typographically inserts an image of its physical shape and interrupts the text of Vernon Tull's chapter (88). It is almost as if the entire narrative is written on the coffin's form. From the earliest moments of the novel, we are introduced to this object through ekphrasis, but there is a very important difference between Homer and Faulkner. We first encounter Achilles' shield in its finished form, but when we first glimpse the coffin, it is still in the process of being created. We enter the text from the perspective of Darl, the Bundren who no one quite understands; who suffers from mental illness and exits the book laughing quizzically and being taken away by doctors. Already here, as Faulkner starts to build the first side of his hexagonal family narrative, we are gathering information somewhat indirectly and from a multitude of sources. As Darl passes by his brother Cash, he hears the sound of the adze. We understand that something is being built, but we don't yet know exactly what it is:

> I . . . mount the path, beginning to hear Cash's saw. When I reach the top he has quit sawing. 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. . . . Addie Bundren could not want a better one, a better box to lie in. It will give her confidence and comfort. I go on to the house, followed by the
>
> Chuck.   Chuck.   Chuck.
>
> of the adze. (5)

We hear the coffin come into the narrative through the sound of Cash's saw; Darl's description emphasizes the process of building, but also the aesthetic nature of the thing that is being built. The boards with which Cash is working are "yellow as gold, like soft gold," and there is an attention here not just to Cash's ability, but also his carefulness and devotion to a particular type of craftsmanship (4). Later in the text, Darl describes Cash beveling the edge of the coffin "with the tedious and minute care of a jeweler" (79). Cash is a builder/artist, creating the prized object around which this narrative will spin: the thing that will maintain its jeweled shimmer even after it falls into a muddy creek, its planks "still yellow, like gold seen through water" (157).

Jewel's version of this same scene is somewhat different. His description of Cash's carpentry is tinged with annoyance and a desperate frustration over the inevitability of his mother's impending death:

> Because I said If you wouldn't keep on sawing and nailing at it until a man cant sleep even and her hands laying on the quilt like two of them roots dug up and tried to wash and you couldn't get them clean. . . . I said if you'd just let her alone. . . . That goddamn adze going One lick less. One lick less. One lick less until everybody that passes in the road will have to stop and see it and say what a fine carpenter he is. (15)

Here, instead of the more productive and slower "Chuck. Chuck." of the adze that we experience through Darl's perspective, Jewel's ominous and lyrical "One lick less" is somehow much more narratively inflected. It is as though the adze is counting out the days, the hours, or breaths that Addie Bundren has left. Each stroke seems to bring everyone closer to the tragedy they know is about to befall them (which is also the reality of being left alone with Anse at the helm). Cash's carpentry is no longer generative in Jewel's chapter; it contributes to the slow decline of the only thing holding him to the earth. That Jewel is also Addie's "illegitimate"[4] son—the one who she "always whipped [and] petted more" than the rest—might account for this shift in tone and perspective from one son to the other (18).

In the above passage, Jewel likens his mother's body to tree or plant that has been uprooted and can never quite be washed clean. Later in the text, Addie echoes this moment when she admits that at times "I would hate my father for having ever *planted* me" (170, emphasis added). If Addie is here thinking of herself as a tree, then this is one example of many throughout the text where a character is figured as somehow composed of wood. Darl sees Cash "staring straight ahead" while working on the coffin, "his pale eyes like wood set into his wooden face," and later notes that Jewel's eyes also "look like pale wood in his high-blooded face" (4, 17). Though it is most often Darl making these observations, this pattern cuts across narrative voices, as Tull describes Anse as "spindling," his eyes "like pieces of burnt-out cinder fixed in his face, looking out over the land" (32). Dewey Dell, drowning in her own desperation and longing to turn the wagon and head for New Hope, describes Jewel sitting on his horse "like they were both made out of wood, looking straight ahead" (122). Later, after Cash is badly injured in the creek accident, Darl describes an unsympathetic Anse looming "tall above us as we squat; he looks like a figure carved clumsily from tough wood by a drunken caricaturist" (163). Darl thinks about Armstid: "He had that wooden look on his face again; that bold, surly, high-colored rigid look like his face and eyes were two colors of wood, the wrong one pale and the wrong one dark" (181). Near the end of the text, just as the group narrowly avoids a violent run-in with some locals, Darl sees Anse "squatting, staring straight ahead, motionless, lean, wooden-backed, as though carved squatting out of lean wood" (231).

Is it because so many of Faulkner's characters are wooden that the fire Darl sets in Gillespie's barn is so affectively heavy with a potential for catastrophe? Faulkner takes such care in crafting this scene, and the narrative moves slowly even as the flames quickly engulf the building, threatening every life (and dead body) within it. There is an almost surreal quality to this scene, as Addie's coffin resting on two sawhorses turns into a "cubistic bug," the hallway "looks like a searchlight turned to rain," Jewel morphs into "that figure cut from tin" and, in his

struggle with Gillespie, becomes "one of two figures in a Greek frieze, isolated out of all reality by the red glare" (219, 221). The chapter ends with a striking image, as "Mack leaps forward into a thin smell of scorching meat and slaps at the widening crimson-edged holes that bloom like flowers in his undershirt" (222). A fire that blooms into flowers as it destroys: this is one example among many of Faulkner using something like Jamesonian antinomies to continually shape and reshape his text. Like Cash's constant sawing, there is a simultaneous push-and-pull of opposing forces that moves this book along, like Addie's father's pronouncement that "the reason for living was to get ready to stay dead a long time" (169). Darl describes the sounds of Cash's incessant carpentry as "ceasing without departing," "a thin thread of fire running along the edge of the saw, lost and recovered at the top and bottom of each stroke in unbroken elongation:" "one lick," but then always, also, "less" (76).

Famously, Faulkner claimed to have written this novel in a short six weeks while working night shifts in a coal plant. In a 1931 interview with Marshall J. Smith, Faulkner describes how he composed the novel while listening to the constant sound of the dynamo in the plant. It is useful to contextualize this novel that begins with the sound of the rhythmic movements of Cash's carpentry as having been written to the beat of a similarly relentless sound. How fitting, too, that a depression-era novel was composed against the backdrop of the proletariat sounds of an industrial coal plant. In many ways Faulkner is akin to Cash; an artist-builder or literary carpenter, carefully fashioning and refashioning the story of these fragile wooden characters, always risking a catastrophic descent into fire, laboring to build his own narrative coffin (we are always here moving towards a burial) through their many-angled eyes. Crafting his own Shield of Achilles through multiple voices, Faulkner presents a story so perspectivally layered that it, like the shield's contents, somehow exceeds the page upon which it is written.

Benjamin Widiss picks up on this notion of Faulknerian excess in his article "Fit and Surfeit in *As I Lay Dying*." Through a detailed close reading of the text supported by a focus on

linguistic "surfeit" and lexical play, Widiss argues that Faulkner stages a dialectic between a type of textual realism and a much more multiple and narratively unpredictable epistemological landscape. He writes:

> *As I Lay Dying*'s particular accomplishment lies in this dialectic it constructs by way of its surfeit, the dynamic engagement it fosters between two understandings of textual surface: the referential, identificatory experience we share with the characters, and the cross-referential, linguistic experience we share with the author. . . . Faulkner does not simply hold the aesthetic in opposition to a more constrained sense of the mimetic; rather, each informs and ultimately re-forms the other, making the novel not merely a step forward in the long trajectory from mimetic realism into modernist and postmodernist aesthetics of textual play, but also a highly self-conscience, productively oscillatory performance of and commentary on that transition. (103-4)

Widiss and I agree on the twinned planes that seem to be operating in Faulkner's novel: there is a phenomenological reality that the characters experience—a physical, mimetic world where mothers die and little boys are heartbroken—and there is another world in which the author and reader are engaging in a conversational, and at times philosophical exchange about that first world. This second place, according to Widiss, is where words have room to mean different things and carry multiple referential capabilities. Widiss' clever play on Faulkner's fondness for the words "see" and "saw," for example, allows him to make an aesthetically supported argument that the narrative is constantly oscillating, or "seesawing," between different points of view. "The thematic of seesawing," he suggests, "describes . . . a larger logic of offsetting, whereby the fate or value of one object or individual stands in inverse relation to that of another" (108). Widiss sees the novel as a whole residing within the process of constant exchange between events and the multiple meanings their narrative description occasions. What he identifies as an aesthetic flicker between realism and postmodernism, however, I would define

instead as strangely realist, since it is out of precisely this kind of oppositional structure, as Jameson reminds us, that realism itself is so often composed.

As is well-documented, Faulkner lifted his title directly from another of Homer's texts, *The Odyssey*, when Agamemnon, Achilles' rival, describes his own death: "As I lay dying the woman with the dog's eyes would not let my eyes close as I descended into Hades" (qtd. in Dimock). The image of one's eyes being held open while dying is certainly unsettling, especially if one is descending into hell. There are points throughout Faulkner's text when Addie's eyes, which can see and look even beyond her death, are dwelled upon more than once. Early on, Jewel sees Cash sawing away and thinks "she can see him saying See. See what a good one I am making for you" (14). Vardaman, the youngest of the Bundrens, is the most concerned with this question. Unable to fully incorporate the reality of his mother's death, he bores holes in the top of the coffin to prevent her view from being completely obscured. He is often extremely anxious about how Addie is experiencing her dead body's journey, and wonders what she is feeling, hearing, and seeing throughout. He says to Darl:

> "She's turned over," I say. "She's looking at me through the wood."
>
> "Yes," Darl says.
>
> "How can she see through the wood, Darl?"
>
> "Come," Darl says. "We must let her be quiet. Come."
>
> "She cant see out there, because the holes are in the top," I say. "How can she see, Darl?"
>
> "Let's go see about Cash," Darl says. (215)

When Vardaman lovingly bores the holes into the top of the coffin (and, inadvertently, right into Addie's face), he is also undertaking his own act of carpentry, effectively impinging upon Cash's previously singular role as the text's builder and creator.

The obsessive perfectionist, however, says and does very little about this. This is somewhat unexpected, not only because of Cash's great investment in and control over the coffin's completion, but also because, as we learn later, he has a significant emotional attachment to his tools. Vardaman is found "asleep on the floor like a felled steer, and the top of the box bored clean full of holes and Cash's new auger broke off in the last one" (73). Certainly the holes would upset the balance of his creation, but Cash neither chastises his brother for the trespass, nor does he appear to be upset by the damage. Eventually, though, he does get to work meticulously repairing the coffin, and a new act of creation results. He approaches this new project with all the careful attention to detail to which we have become accustomed. Vernon Tull observes: "Cash is filling up the holes he bored in the top of it. He is trimming out plugs for them, one at a time, the wood wet and hard to work. . . . I have seen him spend a hour trimming out a wedge like it was glass he was working, when he could have reached around and picked up a dozen sticks and drove them into the joint and made it do" (87). In a sense, Vardaman and Cash are now co-creators of Addie's coffin, and this is very similar to the way in which the larger narrative moves: Faulkner crafts a scene only to shift and change its shape by recreating that same moment through the eyes of a different character. It is this process of constant creation and revision that marks this text's peculiar narrative form. The rotating list of character perspectives creates a textual object that is always in transition, and never quite complete.

It is directly following this incident with the auger that we encounter the most explicit list in the text: a chapter told from Cash's perspective that is made up entirely of a numbered catalog. Composed of thirteen neatly ordered items, this chapter moves from what at first appears as a fairly straightforward and mathematical account of his carpentry work to more overtly philosophical and enigmatic musings. I quote it in full below:

> I made it on a bevel.

1. There is more surface for the nails to grip.

2. There is twice the gripping-surface to each

seam.

3. The water will have to seep into it on a slant. Water moves easiest up and down or straight across.

4. In a house people are upright two thirds of the time. So the seams and joints are made up-and-down. Because the stress is up and down.

5. In a bed where people lie down all the time, the joints and seams are made sideways, because the stress is sideways.

6. Except.

7. A body is not square like a crosstie.

8. Animal magnetism

9. The animal magnetism of a dead body makes the stress come slanting, so the seams and joints of a coffin are made on the bevel.

10. You can see by an old grave that the earth sinks down in the bevel.

11. While in a natural hole it sinks by the center, the stress being up-and-down.

12. So I made it on the bevel.

13. It makes a neater job. (82-3)

Eco would likely call this a poetic list in the guise of a practical list, as its logical progression of numbers somehow belies the epistemological inaccessibility of its contents. The sixth item on Cash's list functions as joint or a hinge:[5] it turns the list around on itself, and the "except" effectively undermines everything that has preceded it. In some ways, this list functions similarly to Jorge Luis Borges' "Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge," which Eco spends some time dissecting, and an analysis of which Foucault famously opens *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences*.

Because Borges' list paradoxically itemizes itself by including animals that are "included in this classification" as one of its constituents, it effectively creates an endless referential loop, or tautology. The list is, in other words, composed of the things of which the list is composed. Eco identifies this as the moment at which the list evolves into what he calls a "non-normal set," because a normal set, in mathematical or taxonomic terms, will never include itself (*Infinity* 396). As Eco explains, however, Borges' list ultimately complicates this definition:

> Let us establish that a set is normal when it does not include itself. The set of all cats is not a cat, but a concept. . . . The concept of a cat . . . brings together all the . . . real cats that exist or that never existed or will exist. But there are also sets (called non-normal) that are elements of themselves. For example the set of all concepts is a concept and the set of all infinite sets is an infinite set. A note on the set of all normal sets: If it were a normal set, . . . we would have an incomplete set, because it does not classify itself. If it were a non-normal set, . . . we would have an illogical set, because among all the normal sets we would have classified a non-normal set as well resulting in a paradox. All Borges did was play with this paradox. (396)

This passage has much to say about Faulkner's use of listing in Cash's chapter. The "except" almost acts as an antinomy of Borges' "those that are included," as it performs the exact opposite referential movement: the sixth item here threatens the ontological stability of items one through five, thereby opening Cash's list up to an increasing level of abstraction. We might, therefore, classify Faulkner's list as a type of non-normal set, simply because it includes itself as an item but does so through a moment of negation. Instead of adding an item to the list, which a normal set would surely do, number six essentially performs a subtraction and amounts to a de-itemization of everything that has come before it.

In this moment both Cash's and Faulkner's woodworking converge, resulting in a kind of metaphysical carpentry that registers at the narrative *and* metanarrative level. While the list is

referentially anchored in Cash's careful explanation of his construction, it is also semantically establishing and then refashioning itself mid-way through, simultaneously affecting both the aesthetic form of the novel and the physical coffin itself. Despite the list's mysterious turn towards something called "animal magnetism," (about which critics have had no shortage of differing opinions in their attempt to decipher), Cash ends on a note that stresses the importance of aesthetics. Even though there is obviously great concern here for the longevity of the coffin—its ability to keep water out and his mother's body in—in the end, he suggests that he made the coffin on a bevel simply because "it makes a neater job." Cash, the text's artist/builder, wants to create not just a functional object, but a beautiful one as well.

It makes sense, then, that Faulkner would mark this character by creating a list that toggles between practicality and poeticism, never fully settling in either court. As Eco reminds us, the line between practical and poetic lists if often ambiguous at best, and can at times only be determined by the intent we assign to its author. "A restaurant menu," he writes,

> is a practical list. But in a book on culinary matters, a list of the diverse menus of the most renowned restaurants would already acquire a poetic value. . . . The possibility of reading a practical list as a poetic one or vice-versa also occurs in literature. See the gigantic portrayal of the Convention made by Hugo in *Ninety-Three*. He wanted to represent the titanic dimensions (in an ideal and moral sense) of the Revolution through the physical proportions of its assembly. It is conceivable that what takes up page after page may serve the function of a practical list, yet no one can fail to see the effect of incompleteness it creates, as if it were the representation, through the abridged example of those few hundreds of names, of the immense tide that was sweeping over France in that fateful year. (374)

It is this same connection between the sweeping aesthetics of Hugo's text and his revolutionary subject matter that I want to draw between Faulkner's experimentation with listing and Cash's

carefully constructed coffin. It is as if the shifting narrative perspectives each slowly build their own side of the story; Cash here inaugurates a complicated layering that both justifies his obsessive building and gestures towards other, less easily decipherable motivations.

Because of his act of co-creation with the auger, Vardaman has in some ways become Cash's newly appointed apprentice. He follows this mysterious chapter with a phrase that could be read as an attempt to continue Cash's list because of its similarly aphoristic tone, yet it is not numbered and contains only a single phrase. In what is surely one of literature's strangest moments, Vardaman makes a puzzling statement that leaves the reader with few interpretative cues: "My mother is a fish" (84). It is as if he takes hold of the narrative power which Faulkner has bequeathed to him and halts the numbered linearity of Cash's discourse by hauling us back to an earlier textual moment: to the fish he killed and refused to clean. Addie's death undoes Vardaman in some important way, and he repeatedly clings to the image of the fish in a frantic attempt to make sense of her passing. When he realizes she has died, he thinks "I can feel where the fish was in the dust. It is cut up into pieces of not-fish now, not-blood on my hands and overalls. Then it wasn't so. It hadn't happened then. And now she is getting so far ahead I cannot catch her" (53). It is unclear, however, whether his alignment with Addie and the fish offers him any real solace, and Vardaman has, with one sentence, moved us away from Cash's attempt at ordered reasoning into an uncertain realm marked by emotional turmoil.

In his article "A Good Carpenter: Cash Bundren's Quest for Balance and Authority," Jason S. Todd argues that Cash, whom many critics relegate to the text's margins, is a centrally important character in the novel. Cash's obsession with balance, Todd suggests, is rooted in a desire to recalibrate the family dynamic and restore the patriarchal authority of his father, which Addie has so effectively undermined. "Throughout the first twenty chapters," Todd notes,

> every character at least mentions the symphony of sounds made by Cash as he builds the coffin. . . . Cash's perfectionism with his carpentry work seems to overwhelm the

> views many of the characters have of him, forcing them to see him only as 'a good carpenter,' as do many critics and readers of the novel. . . . I believe the coffin actually represents Cash's opposition to his mother and his loyalty to his father. . . . The perfectionism Cash applies to his construction of the coffin shows his desire to bury his mother permanently rather than respectfully. Cash wants to right the wrongs of his mother because she has taken away Anse's authority. (52, 55)

While this is an intriguing possibility—that the perfect coffin represents a potential end to Addie's disruption of the familial balance Cash so desperately wants righted—I remain partially unconvinced by Todd's claim. My hesitation is twofold: first, the claim does not account for Cash's clear commitment to aesthetic perfection I discussed above. If his only concern is to ensure that Addie's coffin is functional, why does Cash care about whether it is "neat" as well? What is the potential relationship here between his desire to bury her well and his desire to bury her neatly? Additionally, it seems entirely likely that Cash is so focused on attaining his father's approval because of Anse's continually abusive and neglectful behavior. Placing the blame with Addie for upsetting what was already a painfully unbalanced family to begin with seems to skirt the Bundrens' main problem: a harmful patriarchal family order that plays out against the terrible and inescapable backdrop of abject poverty.

I have throughout this essay attempted to use Jameson's notion of a realism that erupts from an irresolvable dialectic to describe how I see Faulkner's lists performing a peculiar type of narrative construction. In doing so, I have described a process that is something like what philosopher Graham Harman calls a "carpentry of things," which "speaks of . . . not the physical but the *metaphysical* way in which objects are joined or pieced together, as well as their internal composition of their individual parts" (2). In *Guerilla Metaphysics*, Harman, who is writing from the perspective of an Object-Oriented Ontologist, argues that the continental philosophy of recent decades has fetishized the primacy of language and writing at the expense of an encounter

with "the lascivious warmth of the sun and air and the mystery of strange flashes at midnight" (2). Just as these kinds of posthumanist, new materialist trends in philosophy are reconsidering humanity's relationship to the world in the wake of things like climate change and species extinction, literary criticism is similarly rethinking art's relationship to the external world through its categories of mimesis, realism, and ekphrasis. Harman challenges us to "adjust our postures to the resonance of bird calls and acoustic guitars; . . . enjoy bread or raspberries, and respond to the demands of orphans" (2). As Widiss reminds us, *As I Lay Dying* is a book populated with motherless characters, an aspect which is textually "mirrored by the[ir] discontinuous 'orphaned' monologues" (100). In my attempt to attend to this text's narrative and aesthetic particularities, then, I hope I have succeeded in hearing their demands a little more clearly.

Notes

[1] There are more sides, of course, if you count the non-Bundren characters, such as Cora Tull or Samson. For the purposes of my discussion, however, I'll be focusing on the family unit itself, since it is primarily the dynamic between the Bundrens in which Faukner's narrative is so deeply invested.
[2] I am indebted here to Peter Coviello for this insight.
[3] This "strange realism" shares an affinity with Object-Oriented Ontology's interest in a "weird" or "speculative" realism, categories developed by thinkers such as Graham Harman and Levi Bryant that refer to a representation of the world that retains an important sense of mystery or epistemological inaccessibility. These thinkers favour writers such as H.P. Lovecraft for thisreason.
[4] I use this word in quotation marks in an attempt to resist its pejorative cultural function.
[5] I am grateful to Catherine Schwartz for the idea of the textual "hinge" I employ here.

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