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Darryl Hattenhauer

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The Geometric Design of As I Lay Dying

by DARRYL HATTENHAUER

WILLIAM FAULKNER SAID that his novels “had to have a design” (Meriwether 255) and that his design for *As I Lay Dying* was “deliberate” (Gwynn 207). He also called this novel a “tour de force” (Stein 72). As Laura Mathews argues, Faulkner called it a tour de force “to mean that technique took command of his dream of this family, shaping it as a story” (232). Watson G. Branch has shown how cubism shaped Faulkner’s design of Darl, and more recently Panthea Reid Broughton has suggested that the entire novel was formed according to geometric and cubist principles: “Repeating geometric designs—lines and circles, verticals and horizontals—Faulkner actually facets, like a cubist painting, the design of this book” (93). Broughton does not develop in detail her assertion that *As I Lay Dying* is cubist, for the burden of her article is to establish some general cubist traits in Faulkner’s oeuvre. Her analysis is concerned to show that Faulkner’s novels are spatial in the sense used by Joseph Frank in “Spatial Form in Modern Literature.” It remains to reveal how the geometric spatial abstractions in *As I Lay Dying* inform the setting and the plot, and then to show how the spatiality of setting and plot in turn shape the characters, and finally to ground the theme in the spatiality of the characters.

In *As I Lay Dying*, the circle is associated with death. Darl states that when Addie dies, each of her eyes looks like the circular socket of a candle holder: “Her eyes are like two candles when you watch them gutter down into the sockets of iron candle-sticks” (7). And when Vardaman watches Addie die, his head, eyes, and mouth appear circular. Darl describes Vardaman’s “round head and his eyes round and his mouth beginning to open” (43). Similarly, Tull describes Vardaman after Addie’s death as standing “around behind the door” with “his eyes round” (62). Also, Vardaman responds to his mother’s death by blaming Peabody, whose name suggests his rotund shape. Later Vardaman tries to save Addie by boring round holes in her coffin. And repeatedly Darl and Vardaman meditate on the orbits of the buzzards as they circle above the coffin. In addition, the dying Addie is, as Arthur Kinney states, “the imagistic center of the novel” (162). Eric Sundquist adds that for the members of her family, Addie is “the center that no longer holds” (31).

The disintegration of death that is figured in circle imagery also appears in the plot’s circular shape. Anse brings home a new wife to resume the wretched existence that finds Vardaman traumatized, Dewey Dell pregnant, Jewel without

a horse, and Addie's body, Cash's leg, and Darl's mind all rotting. The continuation of cyclical death in life is further suggested by the cyclical imagery of the children's aspirations. Dewey Dell wants an abortion that will restore her menstrual cycle. Vardaman wants a toy train that goes in circles around the tracks. And Cash wants a gramophone that goes in circles around the tracks. But all they get is to have Darl taken away on the railroad tracks.

The most important spatial arrangement in *As I Lay Dying* is the interplay of verticals and horizontals. The most common image of verticality transformed into horizontality is the tree. Addie's coffin and the wagon that carries it are both images of trees turned into horizontal planks. The immediate cause of the wagon and coffin being swept off the ford is a log—vertical timber that has been put into horizontal motion. Before hitting the wagon, the log stands straight up in the river, and then it crashes down, as a tree does when felled. And the cottonhouse is analogous to the coffin.¹ It is made of logs, and Darl notices the spaces between the logs just as he remarks on the spaces between the coffin planks before Cash fits them together. Similarly the verticality of the mountain atop which the Bundrens live is likened to a tree. Dr. Peabody remarks that the path up the hill “looks like a crooked limb blown against the bluff” (38).

Water imagery also suggests the interchangeability of vertical and horizontal. Rain, of course, drops vertically. Anse envisions the rain between himself and his sons who are gone with the wagon as “a-shutting down behind them like a wall” (31). But Faulkner also depicts water as horizontal. The clouds move horizontally; as they approach, the rain they bring appears to Anse as if it is walking along his road towards him “like a durn man” (33). After the rain falls, it moves horizontally and forms the river, which becomes the barrier to the Bundrens' journey. (The water also evaporates, resuming its vertical motion to form the horizontal clouds; vertical and horizontal motion are thereby combined in the hydrologic cycle.)

The character most uniformly vertical is Anse. He places his home atop a mountain and tries to be static. According to Peabody, Anse hasn't been to town in twelve years (38). Darl tells us that Anse will not work up a sweat, and in Tull's eyes Anse just “stands there, like he don't aim to move again nor nothing else” (28). Anse's verticality is most evident in his contention that horizontal things like the road have brought trouble to his door. He says that Addie was “well and hale as ere a woman ever were, except for that road” (33). Anse declares that only horizontal things such as snakes, fish, horses, and wagons were meant for moving, while vertical things such as trees, corn, and people should stay put (31–32).

By contrast to Anse, Addie is a horizontal character. She has struggled against the kind of containment Anse wants for himself. She becomes distant from

1. The building and statue in the middle of Oxford's town square are, of course, the model Faulkner used in *The Sound and the Fury*. Benjy is accustomed to being driven counterclockwise around the center of the town square, and when for the first time he is driven around it clockwise, the departure from the norm makes him wail with anxiety. The center of Oxford's town square might also have inspired the cottonhouse in the opening scene of *As I Lay Dying*. Like the building in the center of the square, the cottonhouse is rectangular, and, like the road around the town square, the path of the cottonhouse is not rectangular but rather octagonal, the corners of the rectangle having been worn down.

everyone but Jewel. Appropriately, in opposing verticality she associates words with airy abstractions and the heavenly aspirations of Cora and Whitfield, the latter of whom she literally brings down to earth when they have sexual relations by the spring. For Addie, Whitfield's rhapsodizing about the transcendent is merely "high dead words" (161). She says, "Words go straight up in a thin line . . . and . . . doing goes along the earth . . . so that after a while the two lines are too far apart for the same person to straddle from one to the other" (160). Her horizontality is so strong that Peabody feels that she pushes him away with the power of her eyes. "It's like she was shoving at me with them . . . like the stream from a hose touches you . . ." (39-41).

Whereas Anse and Whitfield strive for the vertical and Addie for the horizontal, Jewel strives for both but can't unify them, cannot straddle the two. He is forceful in his horizontal motions. He saves the coffin from the fire. He guides the coffin over the ford with a rope. He goes off to work nights so he can buy a horse. And he hoists the coffin into the wagon almost single-handedly. But he also has his vertical aspect. In the first scene, he walks up the hill so unwaveringly that he walks through the cottonhouse instead of around it. More dramatically, his often remarked oedipal fantasy concentrates on isolating himself vertically with Addie (as his father has done): "It would just be me and her on a high hill and me rolling the rocks down the hill at their faces, picking them up and throwing them down the hill faces and teeth and all by God . . ." (14). Faulkner uses images of wood (which is associated with verticality changing into horizontality) to suggest Jewel's failure to integrate the vertical and horizontal. In addition to calling Jewel "wooden-faced" (96) and "wooden-backed" (84), Darl pictures Jewel's face and eyes as mismatched: "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" (168). Jewel's divided character emerges in his sadomasochism. Addie, who has made her impression on her students by beating them, has favored Jewel by giving him more physical punishment and pleasure than she has given her other children. Darl says, "Ma always whipped and petted him more" (16). Jewel's sadomasochism merges with his bestiality. Darl sees Jewel "caressing, cursing the horse with obscene ferocity" (11) and "cursing the horse in a whisper of obscene caress" (169). In addition, Jewel calls the horse "you sweet son of a bitch" (12).

Spatial arrangements are implicit when Darl uses art in his descriptions. For example, he describes the coffin on sawhorses as "a cubistic bug" (201) and depicts the image of bright woodchips on the tenebrous earth as if it is an example of Dark Impressionism: "smears of soft pale paint on a black canvas" (67). More importantly, he most often uses pictorial descriptions to represent people. He describes Cash's hair as "plastered in a smooth smear across his forehead as though done with a paint brush" (142), and he depicts Addie's face as "framed by a window" and forming "a composite picture" (43-44). He compares Vardaman's blanching face to "a piece of paper pasted on a failing wall" (45). And he compares Addie's face to "a casting of fading bronze upon the pillow" (47). The casting suggests a three-dimensional medium, and yet the pillow

suggests a framed background to which the casting is attached. Darl thereby flattens the casting into a two-dimensional object like the “figure cut from tin” (204) that he uses to depict Jewel. Similarly, he describes Anse and Gillespie as “two figures in a Greek frieze” (204). In all of these faces, Darl cubistically reduces three-dimensional objects almost to two dimensions. The only person who appears three-dimensional to Darl is Anse. Twice he describes him as “carved” by a “caricaturist” (69, 149). Yet even here the tendency toward reduction to two-dimensionality is implicit, for a carving can be a woodcut that results in a two-dimensional print. Like a cubist painter, Darl perceives and represents paradoxically. He minimizes three-dimensionality in his representations by flattening them and calling attention to the picture plane, yet at the same time he calls attention to three-dimensionality by depicting different aspects of it from different spatial and temporal viewpoints. (Faulkner, too, uses cubist representation, often rendering the same scene from the differing spatial and temporal viewpoints of his narrators, thereby thematizing his technique; as the cubists painted about painting, Faulkner wrote about writing.)

Darl not only transforms three-dimensional space into two-dimensional space (just as Faulkner uses wood as a figure of verticality changing into horizontality), but Darl also meditates on the fluidity of spatial categories. The vertical rain mixes with the horizontal land, creating runoff that is “neither water nor earth,” and “neither of earth nor sky” (45). He inverts up and down by seeing the stars in water: “I could see maybe a star or two in the bucket, and maybe in the dipper a star or two” (9). Darl could be looking at the dipper in the bucket, or the dipper in the sky that the water reflects. Even the syntax of his sentence features a balance, with the two prepositional phrases reversed like mirror images. Darl also inverts here/near with there/far. In the novel’s opening sentence, he views himself from above, and later uses the third person to discuss himself. He sees into the minds of others, such as Dewey Dell, and even into scenes despite his absence—his mother’s death, for example. And to perceive the coffin and sawhorses as a cubistic bug, he must merge three objects into one, and then view them from all sides. Accordingly, he can invert self and other. He makes Tull feel as if Tull has exchanged places with Darl—as if the two see each other out of the other’s eyes. Tull says, “It’s like he had got into the inside of you, somehow. Like somehow you was looking at yourself and your doings outen his eyes” (111).

Darl’s sense of space indicates his confused identity; he is unable to distinguish between inner and outer. As Dewey Dell notes, “The land runs out of Darl’s eyes” (106). She says his eyes are “full of the land dug out of his skull and the holes filled with distance beyond the land” (23). For Darl, to stare into space is to try to locate himself. Anse contends that Darl was sane when Darl’s sense of the land was restricted to the area of the home. But Darl, who evidently learned something about art when he went off to World War One, has gone outside of himself and found himself—found himself in not-self, found his “here” in the “out there.” But his tenuous psychic structure became unbalanced when the spatial arrangements outside him changed. Anse says,

He was alright at first, with his eyes full of the land, because the land laid up-and-down ways then; it wasn't till that ere road come and switched the land around longways and his eyes still full of the land, that they begin to threaten me out of him, trying to short-hand me with the law. (32)

(Anse's statement also indicates that early in the story he is already thinking about the possibility of institutionalizing Darl, that Anse regards the possibility of Darl's institutionalization as the loss not of a son but of a hired hand, and that Anse will have monetary gain in mind when he decides to have Darl committed so as to avoid being liable for the incinerated barn.)

Darl meditates not just on spatiality but also on the relationship between space and time. He equates the oldness of the land with the loss of time; he equates the oldness of the land with the lack of change that brings meaningless cyclical repetitions of going up and down the hills: "Life was created in the valleys. It blew up onto the hills on the old terrors, the old lusts, the old despairs. That's why you must walk up the hills so you can ride down" (209). He would agree with Peabody that "everything, weather, all, hangs on too long. Like our rivers, our land: opaque, slow, violent; shaping and creating the life of man in its implacable and brooding image" (41). Darl experiences the lack of time caused by the lack of change as an excess of time; no-time feels like all-time. For him there is a fusion of new and old, now and then (just as there is, as we saw, a fusion of inside and outside, here and there). Or as Vardaman might put it, *was is*. Faulkner later explained, "There is no such thing as *was*—only *is*. If *was* existed, there would be no grief or sorrow" (Stein 82). For Darl there is no distinction between past and present (just as there is, as we saw, no distinction between inner and outer). The journey seems endless to Darl, as he tries to renew himself by filling his empty interior with an exterior that he finds likewise empty: he regards his surroundings as "wearily recapitulant" (9). For Darl, then, space and time are continuous.

Darl depicts the eternity of timelessness, the unchanging lack of change, the eternal repetition, by breaking up spatial arrangements. He imagines the eternal cycle of death signified by the circling buzzard: "With no inference of motion, progress or retrograde," (209) "the buzzard is as still as if he were nailed to [the sky]" (108). He also compares the family's seemingly endless (because cyclically changeless) journey to that of the cyclically stationary buzzard: "We go on, with a motion so soporific, so dreamlike as to be uninferent of progress, as though time and not space were decreasing between us and it" (9). If time is decreasing, then (paradoxically) there is more changelessness, more timelessness, more cycles. Imagining the road as a wheel's spoke and Addie as the rim, he suggests that the journey will never end, for the rim of a wheel can never reach the hub—the still point of the turning world. The spoke (road) keeps the rim (Addie) forever away from the hub (destination). Darl uses the spatial figure of a coil of string to signify the temporal concept of eternity. Time and the road are not like a ribbon of highway that one travels along to an end. Rather the string is a circle between the traveler and goal, and the traveler goes around the circle: "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” (132). Or earlier, in a simpler image of an eternal journey with no progress, he states that “the road vanishes beneath the wagon as though it were a ribbon and the front axle were a spool” (35). It is not only as if ribbons are gathered in and coils traced repeatedly, but also as if Darl replaces the road by spinning himself out—as if his tale is yarn spun off the axle: “If you could just ravel out into time. That would be nice. It would be nice if you could just ravel out into time” (193). Again his figures for his interior wearily recapitulate his figures for the exterior. Since he has no ego boundaries, no self separate from his surroundings—his inside is the outside—he ravel out into sameness and wishes his journey were a voyage to self-discovery, but he sees the same nothing: “How do our lives ravel out into the no-wind, no-sound, the weary gestures wearily recapitulant: echoes of old compulsions . . .” (9).

On the surface, Cash seems to be a character of action who unifies and balances, who straddles the vertical and horizontal, because he bevels the sides of the coffin and also makes it balance. Exemplifying this interpretation, Irving Howe asserts that of all the novel’s characters, only “Cash is able to reach towards the harmonious relation between words and actions” (181). Likewise, Olga W. Vickery argues that “through the perfection of his work . . . Cash [is] the one character in the novel who achieves his full humanity in which reason and intuition, words and action merge into a single though complex response” (58). Similarly, Kinney finds that “of all of Addie’s children . . . Cash is the best adjusted” (174).

But adjusted to what? Cash’s sense of balance has no objective standard. His sense of balance is relativistic; it is defined by whatever arbitrary definition of balance preexists:

Sometimes I think it aint none of us pure crazy and aint none of us pure sane until the *balance* [italics added] of us talks him that-a-way. It’s like it aint so much what a fellow does, but it’s the way the majority of folks is looking at him when he does it. (216)

Because the balance of the unbalanced Bundrens looks at Darl as insane, Cash goes along with them. Cash does not impose order; rather, he recapitulates the absurdity of a norm. He is ineffective at formulating structures, at transforming the given. Wood (the interchangeability of vertical and horizontal) defeats Cash. He has broken his leg while building a barn, and he breaks it again when the log knocks him off the ford. In addition, the (horizontal) coffin becomes unbalanced when Addie is placed in it upside down, and then the coffin is perforated (vertically) when Vardaman bores holes in it.

If Cash cannot even serve as a character of balance in Yoknapatawpha, he is even less able to serve as an exemplar in any global or universal sense. What is in balance in Yoknapatawpha is not in balance elsewhere on the globe. If Cash could suspend his carpenter’s level in perfect balance above the earth and then move it half way around the globe, his level would be upside down. His carpenter’s level balanced in Yoknapatawpha would be perpendicular to the globe if moved a fourth of the way around it. Cash’s balance bubble is relative

not to the surface of the earth but to its gravitational center, and the center, as we saw, is the heart of no-space and no-time. His level would be as useless in the center of the earth as a compass would be at magnetic north. But even the gravitational center of earth is no universal guide. The other heavenly bodies do not revolve around the earth. Thus the theme is not that Cash (and perhaps through him the others) will prevail by finding the balance.

No, the theme is not only that Darl has found the conventionality, the fictionality, the artificiality behind their ways of orienting themselves—behind their ways of representing or mapping experience—but more importantly that he knows there is no universal stability, no metaphysical reference point—or in current parlance, no transcendental signified. Just as a cubist painting features multiple viewpoints, so this novel's use of painting features multiple viewpoints, so this novel's use of multiple narrative points of view affirms Darl's spatially problematic vision. When ostensibly trapped in his cage, Darl laughs because he doesn't perceive himself as a being that can be contained in any sort of box, for he exists in the distance. When he looks at his caged body from outside the cage, it is only in his family's eyes that he is "behind" the interstices; only in their eyes is he contained in, rather than seeing all sides of, the cube.

If Darl, as many have said, is Faulkner's authorial representative—if Faulkner has projected himself into Darl and he and Darl exist in each other—then Darl has, in a sense, written this text, this rectangular box of rectangular pages, each page a canvas of (vertically) stacked horizontal lines, each line a string of two-dimensional type developing the psychology of these often two-dimensional characters in a linear plot made circular—in time made spatial. Like Darl and the cubists, Faulkner not only thematizes spatiality, but also relativizes point of view (including the viewer's/reader's perspective) by representing multiple points of view not just by having several conflicting narrators, but by having Darl see what is normally obscured—by having Darl see all sides of the cube. Writing about writing, focusing on design, thematizing form, Faulkner has created a text that minimizes the gaps between the setting, the plot, Darl, and Faulkner, for the geometric technique aligns them even as it reveals that (like Cash's level) they are, beyond the confines of Yoknapatawpha, displaced.

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