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Does Anse Bundren Love His Wife?  
Gifts, Promises, and Obligations in *As I  
Lay Dying*

Sean McCann  
Wesleyan University, smccann@wesleyan.edu

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Sean McCann  
English Department  
Wesleyan University  
Middletown, CT 06459  
[smccann@wesleyan.edu](mailto:smccann@wesleyan.edu)  
(860) 685-3596

In the fifth of his monologues, Darl Bundren narrates the scene of his mother's death. Although he is not present to witness the event, Darl describes Addie Bundren's last encounters with her sons Cash and Vardaman and the grief that strikes Vardaman and Addie's daughter Dewey Dell when they see that their mother has died. He notes the departure from the room of everyone but Addie's husband Anse. Then, in the penultimate passage of the chapter, Darl describes Anse's response to his wife's death:

Pa stands over the bed, dangle-armed, humped, motionless. He raises his hand to his head, scouring his hair, listening to the saw. He comes nearer and rubs his hand, palm and back, on his thigh and lays it on her face and then on the hump of the quilt where her hands are. He touches the quilt as he saw Dewey Dell do, trying to smoothe it up to the chin, but disarranging it instead. He tries to smoothe it again, clumsily, his hand awkward as a claw, smoothing at the wrinkles which he made and which continue to emerge

beneath his hand with perverse ubiquity, so that at last he desists, his hand falling to his side and stroking itself again, palm and back, on his thigh. The sound of the saw snores steadily into the room. Pa breathes with a quiet, rasping sound, mouthing the snuff against his gums. “God’s will be done,” he says. “Now I can get them teeth” (51-52).

How should we understand this passage? The lines that end the scene are among the most frequently quoted in Faulkner’s novel. Yet, perhaps because those words are so memorable, the equally striking actions that Anse takes before he finally speaks are almost never noted. What could be the meaning of those actions? Given what we know about the selfishness Anse displays throughout As I Lay Dying, we might want to see his gestures here as somehow theatrical or insincere. Yet, Faulkner takes care to specify that Anse is alone. He has no reason to believe he is being observed, and nothing he says or does elsewhere suggests that he wishes to pretend to emotions that he does not genuinely feel. It is hard to understand the moment when he touches the hands and face of Addie’s corpse, in other words, except as the actions of a man who loved his wife.

And, indeed, although the possibility is rarely noted, there is nothing in Faulkner’s novel inconsistent with the thought that Anse loved Addie and much about the novel that becomes clearer and perhaps more resonant if we assume that he did. Addie herself repeatedly draws attention to the possibility, even as she dismisses its value: “Anse or love; love or Anse . . . . Anse, love, what you will” (172). In keeping with Addie’s dismissal, moreover the very description of Anse’s gestures at his wife’s bedside seems to both acknowledge and at the same time to undercut the sorrow and tenderness they

appear to express. Like so much else he does, Anse's effort to smooth the blanket covering his wife's body turns out to be ineffectual. Still more striking, however, is Darl's account of his father's physical appearance: humped, motionless, with a hand like an awkward claw. When seen in the light of Addie's own simile for the youthful Anse ("he looked already like a tall bird") that description makes Anse resemble one of the most prominent emblems of Faulkner's novel—a vulture (170). If he seems to have loved his wife, he also looks in this scene as if he is ready to feed on her.

The idea that loving someone and feeding on them may not be so much opposite as complementary actions is not as exceptional as it may seem at first glance. After all, Faulkner's novel shows us in many ways that to love someone may involve harming them or accepting harm from them. Addie recalls the eyes of the courting Anse "driving . . . at me like two hounds in a strange yard" (171), but that is only one moment when Faulkner may tie together desire and antagonism, love and need, care and harm. While it is evident for example that Vardaman, Dewey Dell, Cash, and Jewel all loved their mother and mourn her death, all of them, too, will be complicit in a journey that subjects her corpse to a degradation that offends other members of their community. Only Darl, who cares least for Addie and who does not even regard her as his mother, resists that abuse.

It is possible, in other words, not only that Anse both loved and mistreated his wife. He may in this way be not anomalous but in some manner typical of the world Faulkner depicts--one possibly extreme version of a more general phenomenon in As I Lay Dying: the person who simultaneously cares about, makes use of, and even harms the people he loves. Indeed, if Anse is in fact a buzzard, he's not in that way distinctive in Faulkner's

world. Vernon Tull is also described as an “old turkey-buzzard” (28). Samson confuses the Bundren family in general with the buzzards that follow them (118). And Faulkner himself remarked in later years that, if he were reincarnated, he’d prefer to return as a buzzard. “Nothing hates him or envies him or wants him or needs him. He is never bothered or in danger, and he can eat anything” (Stein 38).

The students with whom I’ve discussed As I Lay Dying have usually been reluctant to see Anse Bundren in such a sympathetic light, and they’ve been highly doubtful of the thought that he actually might have loved his wife. Like most of Faulkner’s critics, they’re typically struck by the words that Anse speaks on his wife’s death and underwhelmed by the actions that precede them. They usually take those words, moreover, to confirm a fact they see as implicit in other parts of the book—that Anse is a parasitic monster and meant to be despised. As I remind my students, however, As I Lay Dying is a novel whose central technique emphasizes how often even the most confident judgments are partial or mistaken. In that light, I suggest, we should perhaps be reluctant to take our impression of Anse, and the assumptions it reflects, for granted.

Indeed, Darl’s description of his father may be part of a more general pattern implicit in the complex structure of Faulkner’s novel, in which we are presented not merely with varying perceptions of people and events, but perhaps with conflicting ways of interpreting the motives for their actions. To the extent that As I Lay Dying turns on the family structure of the Bundren family—and thus ultimately on the relationship between Addie and Anse Bundren—it may be that Faulkner presents us not merely with an account of the characters’ conflicting desires or positions, but with rival versions of what it means to love and to be obligated to another person. On the one hand, in his depiction

of Anse, Faulkner hints at the possibility that caring for others and making use of them may not be contradictory, but fully consistent attitudes. On the other hand, and far more prominently, he encourages us to dismiss this understanding and to view love and exploitation as radically opposed ways of relating to others. From this perspective, the lifelong battle between Addie and Anse involves not only a personal conflict or a spiritual difference, or even a struggle over gender or power or language. Underlying these sources of conflict may also lie a more fundamental battle between alternative visions of what it means to be bound to another person.

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In order to clarify this issue, I suggest to my students that we can perhaps understand the conflict between the attitudes of Anse and Addie by seeing it in the context of what the legal scholar William Ian Miller refers to as “the ideology of the free gift”—a set of ethical attitudes toward giving and obligation that Miller suggests are especially prominent in modern, commercial societies (50). Drawing from Marcel Mauss’s seminal study The Gift (1924) and from the anthropological literature that built on Mauss’s insights, Miller points out that in traditional societies, gifts are understood to be embedded in systems of social exchange that tie actors to strong norms of duty and communal belonging. “In theory,” Mauss explained, gifts “are voluntary, in reality they are given and reciprocated obligatorily” (3). But, as Miller and others note, the implications of that point can be extended and clarified in a manner toward which Mauss himself pointed without fully elaborating. Mauss’s discovery of the social obligations

cemented by the circulation of gifts applies in particular to pre-modern societies that lack disembedded markets. In such societies, every act of donation creates potent moral expectations that, in some appropriate fashion, it will be returned. As Mary Douglas explains in her summary of Mauss's work, "the whole idea of the free gift is based on a misunderstanding . . . A gift that does nothing to enhance solidarity is a contradiction" (vii).

But, as subsequent anthropological thinkers drawing on Mauss have pointed out, however implausible it may in some ways seem, the *idea* of the free gift became increasingly important to the ethical assumptions of modern societies—where, rather than being bound together in one, richly contextualized cycle of exchange, social life is disarticulated and the market, civil society, and the state tend to become increasingly independent realms of activity. In such developed societies, Miller points out, a different understanding of the gift arises. In this modern concept, giving is seen not as typical of economic and social action, but rather as exceptional and in this way as *ideally* free--prompted by no compulsion or obligation and incurring no duty to reciprocate. As the anthropologist Jonathan Parry explains, "The ideology of a disinterested gift emerges in parallel with an ideology of a purely interested exchange. . . . Those who make free and unconstrained contracts in the market also make free and unconstrained gifts outside it. But those gifts are defined as what market relations are not—altruistic, moral, and loaded with emotion (458, 466). If, for pre-modern societies a free gift seems a contradiction in terms, then, in modern, commercial societies *ideologically* the reverse is more nearly the case. A gift not given in a spirit of utter freedom, without a sense of duty or the hope of compensation attached, does not count as a true gift at all.

As I point out to my students, these two, inconsistent ways of understanding the gift map quite directly onto the rival visions of love that are suggested in As I Lay Dying. For the modern understanding of romantic love as passion, and the related view of companionate marriage as a freely chosen agreement among autonomous individuals, each epitomize the logic of the free gift. Love and marriage in this modern view are understood to be ideally free, benevolent, unconstrained by customary obligations, and untainted by interest and ambition. More traditional views of marriage, and about the duties of husband and wives, and the demands of familial expectation, on the other hand more nearly reflect the attitudes about reciprocity and obligation that Mauss believed were expressed in their pure form by tribal societies.

To make these ideas more concrete, I point out to my students that Faulkner, who was Mauss's contemporary, was like him one member of a generation of modernist intellectuals who were deeply concerned with the way that industrial development had remade society and who often looked to anthropological or quasi-anthropological ideas about primitive cultures in order to clarify the distinctive features of modern life. Mauss's own interest in pre-modern systems of gift exchange, I note, was not merely a product of anthropological curiosity, but part of a strong "moral" critique of the individualist biases of "liberal society" (65, 66). "Fortunately, everything is still not wholly categorized in terms of buying and selling," Mauss commented in praise of the "archaic" ideas about giving and obligation he saw underlying the commercial ethos of modern society. "We possess more than a tradesman morality" (65).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For a fuller explanation, and for a review of the anthropological and theoretical literature on the subject, see Laidlaw.

Faulkner's attitudes toward the poor white hill farmers he returned to throughout his career, I suggest to my students, can perhaps be seen in a comparable light. In novels like The Hamlet and Absalom, Absalom!, Faulkner treated those farmers explicitly in a manner that had become commonplace in American popular culture over the previous several decades—as cultural primitives whose lives were almost entirely alien to the predominant commercial (and interracial) engines of modern American development. Faulkner described the poor white farmers of Northern Mississippi's hill country as descendents of the figures William Goodell Frost influentially labeled “our contemporary ancestors” (qtd at Shapiro, xvi). And somewhat like Mauss, he cast their archaic practices as alternatives to the centers of the nation's wealth and power. They “came from . . . the Tennessee mountains by stages,” The Hamlet informs us of the people of Frenchman's Bend, and “brought no slaves and no Phyfe and no Chippendale highboys” (5).

Somewhat as Mauss had done, then, Faulkner could draw on the cultural resonance of poor hill farmers to highlight by contrast the morally and socially corrosive potential of capitalist development. Throughout his career, I point out to my students, Faulkner's fiction registers deep concern about the way urbanization and industrial development had transformed the agricultural south virtually overnight. I draw their attention, for example, to the repeated, off-hand references to the sale of lumber in As I Lay Dying and point out that such references are part of a minor, but consistent motif in Faulkner's fiction—one that crops up more dramatically in Light in August and Go Down, Moses—through which Faulkner responded to the rapid deforestation of Mississippi that occurred during the first several decades of the twentieth century, as the state became a new

frontier in a nationally booming timber industry. When Darl tells us that he and Jewel delay the family's trip to Jefferson by hauling one final load of lumber or when we learn that, to pay off his mortgage, Vernon Tull has chopped down the white oaks marking the ford the Bundrens are to cross, Faulkner points directly to the way the growth of industry and the expansion of national commodity markets were quite literally changing the landscape of northern Mississippi during the teens and twenties. .

But Faulkner also resembles Mauss, I tell my students, in that his treatment of industrial modernization places unusual emphasis on the complexity of uneven development. As a number of critics have recently emphasized, As I Lay Dying takes us on a journey across highly resonant locations in Faulkner's social geography.<sup>2</sup> Traveling with the Bundrens to Jefferson, we move from the hill country of sharecroppers and subsistence farmers to the wealthier towns closer to the delta; from a mono-racial community of poor white farmers to the interracial and hierarchical society that is the legacy of Mississippi's plantocracy. That journey all but literally allegorizes the broader social transformation that also concerned Mauss, taking us from a remote hinterland of the capitalist economy, where the rules of kinship and custom still bind a local community, to an urbanizing commercial society characterized by mobility and anonymity.

Faulkner was but one of a cohort of literary intellectuals during the interwar era fascinated with such a journey. But like Mauss he took an unusually complex view of the process. I draw my students' attention to the distinctiveness of his perspective by noting how much Faulkner resembled and how drastically he differed from his contemporaries among the Agrarians, for example, who viewed hill farmers like the Bundrens as the

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<sup>2</sup> See especially, Atkinson 176-94, Matthews, Railey 87-96, and Willis.

representatives of an imperiled southern yeomanry and imagined them holding desperately to pockets of rural autonomy in a last ditch effort to defend a rich “agrarian culture” from the “industrial warfare” of the north (Lytle 229). Likewise, I draw their attention to Faulkner’s differences with the liberal reformers and political radicals who during the thirties increasingly shaped the national view of southern poverty and who sought through projects of state-led development or political mobilization to bring the region’s poor farmers out of confining poverty and isolation. To fully understand As I Lay Dying, I suggest to my students, it helps to consider that Faulkner accepts neither of these strong views of Southern history.

Even as he describes the hill farms and the urbanizing towns of Yoknapatawpha county as two, nearly distinct communities, for example, Faulkner shows us in the Bundrens and their neighbors a remote farming economy that has already been permeated by the reach of global commodity markets and that is increasingly subject to the growing power of state and federal governments. Not only do the Bundrens cut timber for sale; like their neighbors they are entirely dependent for their livelihood on the sale of cotton—a cash crop whose price fell precipitously throughout the twenties. Though like most readers, my students rarely catch such details on their first view of the novel, I point out to them that it is thus no small matter that, in order to complete the journey to Jefferson, Anse will take out a mortgage on his cultivator and seeder; or that he implicitly avoids mortgaging his farm only by trading away Jewel’s horse; or that, even with that bargain, the family incurs enormous financial as well as more evident personal costs.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Darl remarks that the cultivator and seeder are worth \$40, or approximately \$420 in 2007 dollars and perhaps as much as 10% of a small cotton farmer’s net income in Mississippi circa 1920. Mule prices at the time were various depending on region, quality, and breed, but the team of mules the Bundrens lost may have been worth two or three thousand 2007 dollars, and could have been worth anywhere between a third

The Bundrens, who are small owners in an agricultural sector increasingly dominated by sharecropping, would have labored under the constant threat that they would lose possession of their land. Their trip to Jefferson must bring them perilously near to the danger of peonage.

Thus, where the Agrarians imagined the upland south to be the last preserve of a vibrant and autonomous culture, Faulkner more plausibly depicts a community that is already integrated into the nation's commercial and political institutions and that is on a downward slope toward terrible poverty. Not just Addie's death, which comes tellingly at twilight, or the vividly rendered decay of her corpse, but Anse's own apparent sickness and falling wealth, the "shimmering dilapidation" of his cotton house, the futile despair of his neighbors, the washed out bridge at Tull's, which has been crumbling for twenty-five years—all these details speak of a community in a state of rapid economic and cultural decline (4).

But, if Faulkner did not share the Agrarian's romantic view of the southern yeomanry, neither importantly does As I Lay Dying imagine the Bundrens being fatefully drawn into the political and economic direction of the nation's industrial economy. Following Ted Atkinson's illuminating discussion of the novel (176-80), I point out to my students, for example, how usefully Faulkner's text compares to the epic journey that would soon be depicted in Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath--where a similarly situated family of poor white farmers is shown leaving behind their home, their folkways, their deepest convictions, even their family ties in order to join a new, national compact. What

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to a half of a small cotton farmer's net income. The mules with which Anse replaces them, having been bought at perhaps half that value, are evidently much older and weaker and will presumably be less effective draught animals, in all likelihood therefore intensifying the Bundrens' apparent decline in fortunes.

is most striking about the Bundrens in this context, my students quickly observe, is the striking circularity of their journey and the way, following the expulsion of Darl, they appear to return to the patterns by which they have previously lived. Despite their small-scale assimilation of consumer commodities like graphophones, false teeth, and bananas, in short, the Bundrens do not as Susan Willis suggests, make “a dramatic leap into a world defined by very different economic and social relations” than those they have known in the past (588). They end up rather in a place remarkably similar to where they began.

By contrast to the nostalgia of the Agrarians or the progressivism of liberal thinkers like Steinbeck, in short, Faulkner does not imagine his small farmers poised on the brink of a radically disruptive transition between alternative social orders. Like Mauss, he stresses instead a complex overlay of the elements of tradition and modernity. His world combines dirt farms and developing cities, cedar buckets and graphophones, mule carts and automobiles, horse swapping and the sale of industrially manufactured commodities. In such a context, it might be that Faulkner views his hill farmers in something like the manner that Mauss understands the “archaic” cultural forms that he sees surviving beneath the soulless dominance of “liberal society”—as residual elements of a declining cultural order so dwarfed by the economic and symbolic power of a newly urbanized society that, although not entirely lost, it remains all but unrecognizable.

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What such a description might usefully highlight, I suggest to my students, is the resistance Anse Bundren presents to ready interpretation. As Dorothy Hale points out, Anse is distinctive in Faulkner's narrative design because the novel gives us no ready means of knowing him psychologically. One consequence, in a novel dominated by interior monologue, is that the ways we might know Anse sociologically, by his history and his actions, tend to be disregarded. It is as though Faulkner solicited our reflexive dismissal of Anse while also planting subtle reminders of the way he might resist our judgments and reveal our prejudices.<sup>4</sup> Although we are told very little about his past, for example, we are shown enough to see in Anse's damaged body and his declining fortunes a history of hard toil and misfortune. If we have been reading attentively, we know that his feet are badly misshapen from childhood labor, that he was once crushed beneath a load of falling lumber, that he has experienced serious illness and may have suffered a near fatal encounter with heat stroke. We know, too, that he was once industrious and "forehanded" enough to maintain "a good house and a good farm" on his own, and to aspire to a marriage up the social scale, but that he has since come to see himself "a luckless man" (171, 18). In the farm crisis that devastated the South throughout the twenties, I point out to my students, such a history might well look less unaccountable than representative. A farmer might be quite reasonably reluctant to produce crops that could end up earning less than it cost to raise them, and that might well be destroyed by bad weather or pestilence before they ever reached market. He might also understandably resent the urban, commercial enterprises that continued to grow throughout the era. "Them that runs the stores in the towns" don't sweat, Anse points out (110).

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<sup>4</sup> For two especially valuable exceptions to the pattern, see the rare contributions by Leyda and Rippetoe.

The predominant experience of Faulkner's readers is, of course, that of people who live in towns and who know stores well, and so, perhaps not surprisingly, the critical reception of As I Lay Dying has been marked by a tendency to dismiss such complaints as gratuitous self-justification and to overlook the extent to which they may reflect perfectly understandable grievances or desires. Anse's yearning for new teeth, which as he plausibly explains to Jewel are necessary if he is to "eat God's appointed food," are typically dismissed as shallowly cosmetic (191). His children's desires for even the small pleasures of consumer life that more privileged readers take for granted (bananas, recorded music, manufactured toys) often occasion censorious judgments about their capitulation to "the logic of capitalism" (Atkinson 191). Still more striking are those writers who see only culpable signs of "bourgeois, liberal belief" in Cash's objections to the destruction of Gillespie's barn or in the bitter irony that the Bundrens' neighbors express at the likely loss of their crops (Railey 90).

And what is true of Anse's history, and of the losses of his neighbors, is still more the case with the actions Anse takes in the course of Faulkner's narrative. Every reader of As I Lay Dying notes, for instance, that Anse makes use of the trip to Jefferson to get himself a new set of teeth and a new wife. But much less attention is paid to the fact that, were he truly an accomplished villain, Anse might well have set out after those goals without honoring Addie's demand. If he were a Snopes or a character out of Erskine Caldwell, nothing would be less surprising than seeing him forget his promise. Were he merely hapless meanwhile, it is unlikely that he could have completed his journey by putting together an effective, if costly bargain with a Snopes or that he could have faced down Jewel to complete it. That he hops on to Jewel's wild spotted horse and rides off

without trouble to make the deal should itself be a sign that he is not the easily ridiculed figure he often seems.

As I Lay Dying is salted with details of this sort suggesting a richer and more complex portrait of Anse Bundren and his world than is common in the critical literature on the novel. But those details are only rarely considered—in part because they are not flagged for our attention, in part because the questions they raise do not appear clearly when framed by the assumptions that Miller refers to as the ideology of the free gift. Because, for example, in burning Gillespie's barn, Darl tries to end the grotesque mistreatment of his mother's body, and because he pays a high price for that act, it is easy to overlook the fact that Cash has a point: Gillespie and his family are made to suffer an enormous (and, most likely, uninsured) loss solely because they met the customary obligations of hospitality. Against Darl's self-sacrifice, Cash's objection to that waste looks to many readers basely prudent and conventional. Similarly, because Anse is known to have interests in traveling to Jefferson, his fulfillment of his debt to his wife immediately seems doubtful, as does the still more subtle suggestion that he loved Addie. In effect, Darl's arson looks like a free gift, and the hidden costs for it borne by others appear in that light unimportant. By contrast, Anse's promise seems illegitimate because it lacks the ostensible selflessness of the gift and thus looks instead like a contract. The high costs he and his children bear to fulfill it come to seem in this light absurd because they appear neither wholly disinterested nor rationally tailored to meet any plausible interest. We have, in short, a ready ideological framework for understanding Darl's self-sacrifice, as we do, say, for interpreting Addie's grandeur or Whitfield's hypocrisy. Anse's motivations seem opaque by contrast.

If Faulkner's readers do tend to view the events of As I Lay Dying in this fashion, that may be because Faulkner gives us, in Addie Bundren's monologue, a fiercely eloquent defense of something near to the spiritual core of the ideology of the free gift. Addie is herself, of course, not an opaque character. In one of the novel's more subtle, structural features, her depiction neatly reverses the representation of Anse: she is at once the character most strongly committed to privacy and at the same time the person whose thoughts and feelings are most fully transparent to the reader. The readers who recognize the harsh self-interest that Addie views as characterizing her world are thereby encouraged to view their own intimacy with the character as a kind of alternative, disinterested relationship—again, a gift rather than a contract. More than any other speaker, Addie is thus able to offer us, not only an account of her impressions and observations, but a coherent life narrative and a fully elaborated philosophical vision. Even as she disappears from the action of its narrative present, her voice fittingly ends up exercising great influence over how we evaluate what we are told by other narrators.<sup>5</sup> Though she is no longer a schoolteacher, she remains the novel's most effective pedagogue.

As with the depiction of Anse, however, the very power of the psychological portrait that Addie's narrative creates threatens to obscure what we also know about her sociologically--that she is not a countrywoman by birth, but has come to the Bundren farm from Jefferson and remains determined to return there. That feature of her character may help to explain just why it is that she, more than any other character, speaks for the

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<sup>5</sup> By comparison, as Dorrit Cohn points out, the novel's next most eloquent narrator Darl "tells us what he sees, hears, says, and does in the episodes of the funeral journey, but never what he thinks or feels." The effect is to make it seem "as though the reflective and affective components of the mind had been bracketed" (205, 206).

assumptions of “liberal society” as Mauss describes them. Addie is, of course, an intense individualist who aspires to a nearly deific vision of self-authorization. “I would be I,” she vows (174), and she is appropriately contemptuous of the merely customary beliefs and practices that bind other characters. But in addition, running all through her convictions about language, her thoughts about marriage and childbirth, even perhaps her ideas about life and death, we can see the allure of the ideology of the free gift. For, wholly in keeping with the premises of possessive individualism, Addie appears to assume that a fundamental distinction must be drawn between relations of interest and convention, on the one hand, and purely free and original donations that escape the bonds of reciprocity, on the other.

The logic of that thinking can be seen throughout Addie’s monologue. In her meditations on language, for instance, she at once objects to the fact that in conventional speech people “use one another by words” and, at the same time, envisions an alternative “voiceless speech” (172). Because it is a product of “the dark land talking of God’s love,” the latter language manages to surpass the intentions and desires of any individual person (175, 174). In her thoughts about sex and marriage, Addie similarly contrasts the conventional duties she “owed to . . . Anse,” on the one hand, to the antinomian passion she experiences with Whitfield, on the other. As in her closely related vision of voiceless speech, that adulterous passion transcends not just social convention, but the differences among individual persons--not only “the clothes we both wore in the world’s face” but also the “circumspection necessary because he was he and I was I” (174). With both language and sex, that is, Addie presumes that ordinary life is characterized by conventional systems that enable bargaining among self-interested individuals, each

person being characterized by “his and her secret and selfish thought” (170). At the same time, she imagines an alternative that replaces that pure selfishness with pure selflessness.

But the logic that runs through Addie’s ideas about language and her beliefs about sex may be most evident in her attitudes toward her children. Anse, we know, expects those children to labor for him. But in this way, he represents merely an unappealing version of the traditional assumptions of patriarchal authority. Addie, on the other hand, thinks about her children almost explicitly in the individualist fashion enabled by the assumptions of market society--as either commodities or free gifts. On the one hand, her children can be accounted for on a virtual balance sheet, as contractual obligations negotiated between competing, self-interested agents. “I gave Anse Dewey Dell to negative Jewel. Then I gave him Vardaman to replace the child I had robbed him of. And now he has three children that are his and not mine” (176). On the other hand, they can be imagined as occasions for a perfect intimacy that utterly transcends both the traditional family and the despicable haggling of the market. “My children were of me alone . . . of me and all that lived; of none and of all” (175).

Not surprisingly, then, in her only dialogue with her most beloved child, Addie almost directly articulates something near to a pure expression of the idea of the pure gift. When she discovers that Jewel has nearly killed himself laboring to earn Quick’s horse, she sobs and says, “Jewel . . . I’ll give—I’ll give—give---“ (135). Her sentence is, of course, incomplete, strangely non-transitive and as a result highly abstract. In effect, it offers not to give some particular thing, but simply giving itself. To the same degree, of course, it is impotent. Jewel’s face merely grows “cold and a little sick looking” at the appearance of her offer (135). In these respects, however, Addie’s statement can be

taken for a perfect expression of the free gift's "paradoxical and self-negating character." As an exchange that aspires somehow *not* to "create obligations or personal connections," the free gift in its ideal state not only must be intended in a spirit of pure altruism; it cannot even be acknowledged as a gift by the giver or the receiver, for even its recognition would imply the psychic rewards and the implicit obligations that would mean in effect the gift was no longer free at all (Laidlaw 618). In order for Addie's gift to be genuinely free, in short, it must not actually give anything. (Addie herself points to this logic when, while discussing her marriage, she emphasizes that she "did not even ask" Anse "for what he could have given me: not-Anse" (174).) But by this reasoning, of course, even her offer to give herself to Jewel can't help but compromise itself. As Jewel's reaction suggests, he takes even her most abstract expression to be making tacit demands on him, and since he is nearly as committed to radical individualism as his mother is, he appears to find her gift intolerable.

The same logic may be apparent even in Addie's thoughts about life and death. What we know about those thoughts, after all, is that, like her ideas about language and sex and children, they, too, involve the desire to overcome the routine transitivity of conventional social life. "The reason for living is getting ready to stay dead," Addie reports of the belief that finally becomes concrete for her after the failure of her affair with Whitfield (175). At first glance, the phrasing of that reason looks strikingly bleak. But, it is worth noting that the sentiment Addie expresses in this sentence resembles an unorthodox expression of the very Christian desire for otherworldly "salvation" to which she refers in the last lines of her monologue (174, 176). What she appears to seek in death, in short, is

an eternal reward to replace the squalid self-interest, the impermanence, and the inescapable consequences of living in this world.

Here, too, that is, Addie articulates the logic of the free gift. In his account of the ideology underlying that idea of the gift, and of the social institutions that nurture it, Jonathan Parry makes an observation that is particularly relevant in this context. The idea of the free gift flourishes, Parry notes, in “highly differentiated societies with an advanced division of labor.” But the vision of transcendence that the free gift embodies was also nurtured in particular by the rise of “ethicized salvation religions” (467). The spiritual practices of tribal societies, Parry notes, place no particular value on the afterlife, and correspondingly they provide no special emphasis on the kind of non-reciprocal giving that could be imagined to escape the transitivity of ordinary social exchange. By contrast, the “world religions” that emerged in what Karl Jaspers called “the axial age”-- Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, and Christianity--emphasize an “other-worldly orientation” and “the notion of salvation” from the “profane world of suffering” (467, 468). All such religions, Parry points out, also lay great stress on the virtue of charity, alms, and unrewarded giving. “The unreciprocated gift becomes” in such systems of belief a means of “liberation from bondage” to the sinful world (468).

The most prominent voice of ethicized salvation religion in As I Lay Dying is, of course, Cora Tull, who views the “reward” she expects to receive in the afterlife almost explicitly as compensation (23). But in a number of respects Cora is a telling companion figure to Addie. They are each former school teachers who, brought to the country from the city, have kept their husbands “at work for thirty odd years,” and, although in differing ways, they each adopt strong spiritual convictions that enable them to make

confident moral judgments about the failings of their families and neighbors (33). The fact that Cora presents us with a compromised vision of her own beliefs (in which, in effect, she turns the free gift of salvation into earned compensation) should not obscure the extent to which Addie, as the final words of her monologue suggest, is yet more radically committed to an analogous vision of otherworldly salvation--one that, being more than “just words,” would aptly surpass her prime example of the conventional bargains of this world (176).<sup>6</sup>

The appeal of that transcendent vision, however, is evident not only in Addie’s sentiments, but in the speech and action of Darl, the one child who does most to help her realize her desire “to stay dead.” Despite, or perhaps in keeping with, the fact that he expresses little personal feeling for his mother, Darl resembles Addie in a number of ways, I point out to my students. In particular, the deracination Darl experienced during the War appears to have made him, like his mother, a marginal figure to the rural community in which he once lived. “This world is not his world; this life his life,” Cash remarks (261), and the ambiguity of his phrasing allows the sentence to refer to the milieu of the Bundren farm in particular, even as it also casts Darl as a Christ figure who is ultimately foreign to the whole temporal realm of exploitation and sin. In keeping with that characterization perhaps, Darl has few evident emotional or personal connections to the other members of his family. In particular, he shows none of the intense grief or need for Addie that leads Dewey Dell, for example, to say, “I wish I had time to let her die”

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<sup>6</sup> The extent to which the ideology of the free gift provides the terms on which we intuitively distinguish between Cora and Addie can be seen in Olga Vickery’s influential reading of the novel. In Vickery’s account, Cora exemplifies everything Addie resists, and what most characterizes Cora is the fact her gifts are not free: “Her help . . . is offered in the name of duty not love, and it is meant, whether she realizes it or not, to be one more step in establishing her own virtue and her own right to salvation. Kindness such as Cora’s is essentially selfish, debasing both the giver and the recipient” (64).

(120). But, for that same reason, he alone can hear Addie speak her desire to “lay down her life”, and he alone pities the degradation to which she is put by the other members of her family (215). Almost explicitly, he envisions the destruction of her corpse as the occasion for a transcendent emancipation from what Parry calls the “profane world of suffering.” When the funeral procession comes to the swollen river, Darl views it as “the place where the motion of the wasted world accelerates just before the final precipice,” and he describes the log that nearly frees her as “surging and heaving desolation like Christ” (146, 148).

But, of course, Addie’s corpse is not freed from the suffering of this world, either at the river or at Gillespie’s barn. Nor, of course, does Darl’s act of Christian martyrdom actually liberate him from “this world.” As it imposes high costs on the Gillespies, it also results in his own, more brutal confinement. There are neither free gifts, it seems, nor free individuals in the world of As I Lay Dying. In fact, the funeral journey that both fulfills and traduces Addie’s last wishes merely epitomizes this pattern. “My revenge would be that he would never know I was taking revenge,” Addie says of the promise she demands from Anse. Her formulation is yet another striking illustration of both the logic of the free gift and of its impossibility (173). Nothing more aptly demonstrates the cruelty and the potential horror of social reciprocity, after all, than the cycle of revenge.<sup>7</sup> And nothing is more strongly reviled in each of the ethicized salvation religions. As she does everywhere, Addie looks to escape those potentially endless cycles of obligation by finding a kind of ultimate donation that will somehow escape routine transitivity. Revenge that is not recognized as revenge is the ultimate kind of recompense, Addie

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<sup>7</sup> Miller points out that in Icelandic sagas, the obligation to return gifts and the expectation that injury demands revenge are explicitly analogized (tk).

realizes, because theoretically it can never be returned. But, of course, the very journey to Jefferson, and the degrading treatment to which her corpse is subjected, proves Addie's theory wrong. Anse, who is surely not fool enough to miss the vengeance Addie takes on him, understands how to get his own back.

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Seeing Anse Bundren in such a light does not make him any more attractive to most of my students than he seems at first blush. Indeed, considering As I Lay Dying in the manner I have been suggesting only strengthens their impression that Faulkner is a powerful, but also strange and rebarbative writer whose fiction dramatizes beliefs and attitudes that are deeply foreign to what they most value. But looking closer at the economic and social implications of Faulkner's story, and considering the related ideological conflict that perhaps lies at the novel's core, does help my students get a grasp on a work that at first glance strikes many of them as mysterious and unaccountable. In the view of the novel I propose to them, As I Lay Dying turns on the unresolved, unending conflict between Addie and Anse and implicitly on the broader, less evident cultural conflict their battle represents. Even as Addie seeks helplessly to transcend it, that is a conflict, the novel's famous conclusion suggests, that Anse is determined to continue.

To bring home the possible significance of that determination, I ask my students to consider a question strangely unaddressed in most discussion of the novel: just why does Anse want to replace Addie with a new Mrs. Bundren anyway? He is no longer

young or healthy. He has children who will labor in his fields and home and little incentive to find new mouths to feed. What purpose can be served for him by finding a new wife?

Noting the Bundrens' perilous economic state, some astute students will plausibly suggest that the new Mrs. Bundren will provide not only a graphophone, but the infusion of capital that Anse needs if he is to maintain possession of his farm and keep control of his family. Others will make what seems to me a related, but still more likely suggestion—that Anse desires and seeks a renewal of the emotional and ideological struggle he experienced with Addie, and that he needs that goad if he is to survive psychically as well as financially. Kate Tull points to something along these lines early in the book in response to her father's comment that Addie "kept . . . [Anse] at work for thirty-odd years." "She'll be behind him for thirty more," Kate says. "Or if it ain't her, he'll get another one before cotton-picking." What Anse seeks in this view is neither, as some critics have suggested, brute labor to exploit, nor a soul mate with whom he might find a transcendent union, but rather a battle partner who will spur him into fulfilling his customary obligations. Considering that thought leads my students to confront a vision of love and obligation that they often find distasteful, but, one that, as Mauss might predict, they also come to acknowledge as at once foreign and disturbingly familiar.

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