

THE IDEOLOGY OF AUTONOMY:  
FORM AND FUNCTION IN *AS I LAY DYING*

In the early sections of William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, Cash Bundren remains in the background urgently working to construct his mother's coffin in time for her passing and, subsequently, for the family's burial march across Yoknapatawpha County.<sup>1</sup> Despite the imminent deadline—or perhaps because of it—the final product is a testament to the precise execution of design that Cash deeply values as a result of his strong work ethic and dedication to craftsmanship. But completion also brings a moment of truth for the carpenter: the time when production gives way to reception and the object enters into the traffic of the world. In this regard, Cash's project serves as a metaphor for the production of the novel itself, establishing Faulkner's concern with form and function as a means of exploring relations between art and social reality and, in turn, of laying bare the ideological dimensions of artistic autonomy—a fundamental principle of modernist aesthetics under considerable stress at the time of the novel's production.

Significantly, Faulkner began work on *As I Lay Dying* against the backdrop of a national crisis—the stock market crash of 1929. Joseph Blotner highlights this contextual frame when describing the genesis of what would become Faulkner's fifth published novel: "On October 25, 1929, the day after panic broke out on Wall Street, [Faulkner] took one of these [onion] sheets, unscrewed the cap from his fountain pen, and wrote at the top in blue ink, 'As I Lay Dying.' Then he underlined it twice and wrote the date in the upper right-hand corner" (1: 633). Faulkner's composition process unfolded in the immediate aftermath of this signal event, providing now a precise historical and cultural frame of reference for examining how his treatment of autonomy responds ideologically to a severe blow delivered to the intertwined bodies of late capitalism and literary modernism.

The market crash hit with sudden and considerable force, sending debilitating shock waves across the spectrum of American society. As T. H. Watkins observes, the crash was so devastating because "the failure of the greatest speculative fever in American history profoundly weakened confidence in the

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<sup>1</sup>I presented an initial version of this essay during a panel called "Faulkner and the 1930s," sponsored by the William Faulkner Society at the 2004 MLA Convention in Philadelphia. I wish to thank the Society for the chance to test some of the ideas contained herein and to receive feedback from other Faulkner scholars. In particular, I want to acknowledge a debt to John T. Matthews, the panel respondent, for constructive comments that led me to think about the ideological implications of autonomy in *As I Lay Dying* and, consequently, to reconfigure my approach in a fundamental way.

basic soundness . . . of one of the nation's economic foundations" (75). It was an outcome that Faulkner, a writer branded by detractors and defenders alike as indifferent to current events in pursuit of aesthetic perfection, had already predicted via Jason Compson in the third section of *The Sound and the Fury*. "The market will be unstable, with a general downward tendency," Jason fires off in an angry telegram to a broker. "Market just on point of blowing its head off" (SF 244). Whether or not the crash was a result of suicidal tendencies, it posed a serious threat to material well-being and feelings of national stability. Responses to the crisis registered in many sectors, including the cultural formation of literary modernism—a movement long marked by concern about the modern marketplace and mass culture. The abrupt economic downturn that engendered a loss of faith in fundamental American economic principles and social institutions prompted authors to reevaluate the concept of autonomy in defining relations between literature and social reality.<sup>2</sup> Placing *As I Lay Dying* in this context shows Faulkner's hand in this cultural work, as he responds to the prevailing condition of post-crash anxiety and, in so doing, undermines the claim to artistic autonomy staked by the novel's modernist form.

Read in this way, *As I Lay Dying* functions in part as a symbolic stage for the aesthetic and ideological tensions that Peter Bürger identifies in his landmark study, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. For Bürger, the modernist text is caught in a dialectical struggle between retreat and engagement with social reality. On the one hand, the modernist uses formal techniques to construct a protective façade of autonomy around the text to guard against vulnerability to market forces and reduction to the level of base commodity; on the other hand, the modernist collects shards of social reality to "shore these fragments against our ruin," (50) to borrow T.S. Eliot's phrase, by seeking to impose order, coherence, and meaning on chaotic modern life.<sup>3</sup> While modernism remains largely an aesthetic enterprise, in Bürger's estimation, the avant-garde mounts a fundamentally revolutionary and counter-cultural mission against the ideological apparatus of "art" as a social institution formed during the rise of the bourgeoisie. The aim of the avant-garde, then, is not merely to seek innovation within artistic boundaries but to erase the boundaries altogether, in the process restoring the severed ties between art and social reality. As Bürger explains, "art was not to be simply destroyed, but transferred to the praxis of life where it would

<sup>2</sup>This understanding of *As I Lay Dying* in cultural context derives from examinations of the relationship between modernism and modernity found in Marxist cultural theory. See, for example, Jameson, Harvey, and Williams. For Jameson, high modernism and mass culture in capitalism are, in effect, born as twins. In Harvey's estimation, disruptions in spatial and temporal depiction in modernism constitute a cultural reaction to what Marx identifies as the increasingly rapid pace of turnover in modern life, i.e., time's destruction of space. For Williams, the initially adversarial relationship between modernism and modernity quickly warms, to the point that the visual and narrative elements of modernism contribute to a "universal myth" in bourgeois society, an "intense, singular narrative of unsettlement, homelessness, solitude, and impoverished independence . . ." (34).

<sup>3</sup>Eagleton sounds a similar note: "Modernism is among other things a strategy whereby the work of art resists commodification, holds out by the skin of its teeth against those social forces which would degrade it to an exchangeable object" ("Capitalism" 140). A serious consequence, Eagleton argues, is that in the process of closing itself off from social reality, "modernism must simultaneously bracket off the political forces which seek to transform that order" ("Capitalism" 140).

be preserved, albeit in a changed form" (49). As it happened, the crash paved the way for advocates of a revitalized social realism to take up this avant-garde cause with fervor, exacerbating tensions within modernism as a consequence. Faulkner's aggressive turn to the formal practices of this waning literary movement in *As I Lay Dying* is influenced in large measure by these forces converging at a crucial point in American cultural history.

When taking into account Bürger's comparison between modernism and the avant-garde, it becomes clear that Faulkner's literary sensibilities and practices are more in line with the former than the latter. For this reason, Faulkner's relationship to modernism has been a source of much critical discussion.<sup>4</sup> Early in his career, Faulkner professed an open disdain for the publishing industry in a move that aligned him with the anti-institutional mission of the avant-garde, at least on the surface. However, his preferred means of rebellion was to employ the weapons of style and form associated with modernism and to invoke an absolute authorial claim to artistic autonomy. The guiding philosophy is evident in Faulkner's recollected discovery that his "postage stamp of native soil" could provide a wealth of material for his fiction. "It opened up a gold mine of other peoples, so I created a cosmos of my own," Faulkner explains. "I can move these people around like God, not only in space but in time too" (*LG* 255). Rather than seeking to break down the wall between art and social reality constructed through the aesthetic practices and modes of cultural production developed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Faulkner relies on the wall as a shield from the influence of mass culture and the artistic compromises that it would inevitably force upon him. If he must scale that wall to "write trash" for cash, as he expressed in a letter to his agent on one occasion, he could always take heart in the option of retracing his path to enjoy once again the comfort of renewed creative independence (*SL* 84).

This conception and function of autonomy is visibly on display in Faulkner's remarks about *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying*, the works in his canon most exemplary of modernism. In the introduction to the 1932 Modern Library edition of *Sanctuary*, Faulkner draws clear distinctions between these texts and the one at hand—a book "deliberately conceived to make money" (*ESPL* 176). For Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury* is an object of affection because of the purely artistic endeavor that writing the book had been

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<sup>4</sup>See Moreland and Singal for comprehensive studies of Faulkner and modernism. The modernist features of *As I Lay Dying* have prompted debate since the novel's publication, leading to some pointed criticism. Eric J. Sundquist describes two complaints repeatedly lodged against the novel's form: "that the author or narrator (the two are easily confused) has fallen victim to his own fantasies of technique; or that a character or speaker (these two are also easily confused) has been allowed a command of language incommensurate with his place in the novel's realistic or representational scheme" (29). This criticism reinforces Faulkner's own comments about the self-conscious effort to write an innovative novel that would document his creative genius for posterity. Matthews draws on Marxist cultural theory to assert a constitutive relationship between historical and socioeconomic conditions and the novel's form. For Matthews, *As I Lay Dying* clearly illustrates "the process by which the autonomy of the modernist work establishes itself" (73). Drawing on the aesthetic theory of Theodor Adorno, Matthews tries to "identify the sedimented empirical reality in *As I Lay Dying* as modernization" (79). In some respects, my analysis dovetails with Matthews's, but my approach differs fundamentally by foregrounding how Faulkner's novel responds to a moment of national crisis and, in so doing, exposes autonomy as an ideological concept.

for him. Claiming to have rejected all concern for the marketplace, Faulkner writes that the Benjy section engendered in him “that ecstasy, that eager and joyous faith and anticipation of surprise which yet unmarred sheets beneath my hand held inviolate and unfailing” and then compares his relationship with the novel to that of an ancient Roman who lovingly kisses his Tyrrhenian vase (*ESPL* 295).<sup>5</sup> Faulkner describes the composition of *As I Lay Dying* in much different terms, yet still emphasizes its separation from the outside world. Accordingly, Faulkner casts the writing process as an autonomous enterprise of creative ingenuity and efficient literary production bound to an isolated time and space. Noting that he wrote the novel while working nights in a power plant, Faulkner sets the scene: “I had invented a table out of a wheelbarrow in the coal bunker, just beyond a wall from where a dynamo ran. It made a deep, constant humming noise” (*ESPL* 177). In synch with the mechanistic pace, Faulkner implies, he entered into a productive phase not unlike Cash Bundren’s in the early stages of the novel now underway. Enhancing the aura of efficiency is Faulkner’s claim that “I wrote *As I Lay Dying* in six weeks without changing a word” (*ESPL* 177-78). Along similar lines, he refers to it as “a deliberate book” and a calculated “tour de force,” suggesting the sort of highly contained and self-conscious writing often attributed to and professed by practitioners of modernism (*ESPL* 297).

Faulkner’s claim of artistic autonomy in general, and with regard to the composition of *As I Lay Dying* in particular, brings into relief the ideological dimensions and implications of the concept. Bürger delivers an instructive explanation of this phenomenon, beginning with a fundamental definition of autonomy as “art’s (relative) independence in the face of demands that it be socially useful” (24). Bürger insists that the story of how this condition developed must be understood as “part and parcel of the developmental logic of bourgeois society. As the division of labor becomes more general, the artist also turns into a specialist” (32). Under these conditions, treating autonomy as the “nature” or “essence” of art means ignoring that this division is historically and socially conditioned. Likewise, conceiving of autonomy as merely a function of the artist’s imagination, as in the case of Faulkner’s “cosmos of my own,” negates the contributing historical and social factors. As a consequence, Bürger asserts, the “relative dissociation of art from the praxis of life in bourgeois society thus becomes transformed into the (erroneous) idea that the work of art is totally independent of society” (46). This outcome suggests that autonomy functions ideologically by inducing a sort of false consciousness: the belief that the separation between art and social praxis is not a function of society but rather the inherent nature of art.

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<sup>5</sup>Faulkner’s remembrance calls to mind Eagleton’s claim about the ironic consequence of modernism’s urgent flight from the forces of commodification. For Eagleton, just as the modernist work avoids becoming “an abstract, serialized, instantly exchangeable thing,” it falls prey to the flip side of the coin: commodity fetishism. As he explains further, “The autonomous, self-regarding, impenetrable modernist artifact, in all its isolated splendour, is the commodity as fetish resisting the commodity as exchange, its solution to reification part of that very problem” (“Capitalism” 140).

In spite of how Faulkner's recollection of writing conspires with the modernist form of *As I Lay Dying* to promote the ideology of autonomy, we do well to remain mindful of conditions outside the parameters of his unlikely writing space that jeopardize the isolated condition he claims to enjoy. This aspect of the novel is especially pronounced in Faulkner's representation of the coffin as an object of contested symbolic value in the context of the Bundren family and the community they inhabit. The coffin takes shape from Cash's frenzied sawing, hammering, and nailing to execute his design—a simple and practical blueprint reflective of the man himself. This construction is far from an act of “sound and fury [apparently] signifying nothing,” as Faulkner's preceding novel stages repeatedly. Instead, Cash's carpentry is both the skilled labor of an artisan and a show of filial devotion—a rare fusion of sweat, toil, and raw natural and emotional material that elevates Cash's work beyond the mechanistic ennui of reification. From Darl's point of view, Cash's labor of love signals the kind of union between human and machine either desired or feared, depending on the perspective, in the context of industrialization.<sup>6</sup> Adding to this rendering, Darl notes, “The air smells like sulphur,” before describing how Cash works with “one thigh and one pole-thin arm braced, his face sloped into the light with a rapt, dynamic immobility above his tireless elbow” (*AILD* 76). A moment later, Darl observes, “The saw has not faltered, the running gleam of its piston edge unbroken.” Undaunted by sudden rain, Cash “takes up the saw again; again it moves up and down, in and out of that unhurried imperviousness as a piston moves in the oil . . .” (77). Similar to Faulkner's writing of the novel, if we take his recollections at face value for the sake of argument, Cash Bundren's building of the coffin emerges not so much an unqualified glorification of mechanistic precision as an emblem of individual industriousness and productive capacity at a time of danger for these practices and, on a broader level, for the market economy they had heretofore driven.

In a related vein, Cash's rendering as an artisan dramatizes the conditions of cultural production under late capitalism that support and, in turn, are supported by the ideology of autonomy. Perception of Cash's carpentry illustrates how supply and demand exert outside pressure on art and the artist and how labor division and specialization collaborate to delineate artistic production and reception as an autonomous zone. From Jewel's perspective, for example, Cash's construction project is but an extension of his lifelong devotion to a transparent exchange between what people want from him and what he is then

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<sup>6</sup>Depictions of the relationship between human beings and the machinery of industry permeate forms of cultural expression in the Industrial Age, running the gamut from idealized harmony to destructive manipulation. The former mode of representation can be seen in various illustrations featured on the covers of *Fortune* magazine in the 1920s and early 1930s—images of humans and machines drawn with similarly precise lines, curves, and angles that promote the idea of natural and productive partnership. Ayn Rand's aesthetic incorporates this representational scheme as well. On the other side of the spectrum is Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, with its depiction of fatal machines in the meat-packing industry that dismember and, in some instances, literally consume workers who are exploited to the point of being helpless to resist. Likewise, the famous image in Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* of a worker who is ingested and processed through a series of conveyor belts and pulleys makes a compelling statement about the plight of the worker as, both literally and figuratively, a cog in the wheel of industry.

compelled to produce. Accordingly, Jewel relates Cash's current building project to a childhood memory of his brother's aim to satisfy Addie's demand: "It's like when he was a little boy and she says if she had some fertilizer she would try to raise some flowers and he taken the bread pan and brought it back from the barn full of dung" (*AILD* 14). Jewel sees this very same motivation now driving his brother, observing with much consternation that Cash's work space is beneath Addie's window "where she can see him saying See. See what a good one I am making for you" (14). Jewel also recognizes how Cash's skills in carpentry lend to the construction of material objects and of his social identity:

Sawing and knocking, and keeping the air always moving so fast on her face that when you're tired you cant breathe it and that goddamn adze going One lick less. One lick less. One lick until everybody that passes in the road will have to stop and see it and say what a fine carpenter he is. (15)

For Jewel, the circumstances surrounding Cash's building transform specialization into spectacle, placing heightened emphasis on the isolated artisan and the dynamic process of production rather than the coffin's primary function and intrinsic symbolic value as the final resting place for Addie. On some deep level, Jewel senses that this elevation of process, marked by the mechanical repetition of "One lick less," means that form and function are now woefully out of balance.

Jewel's concern in this regard is ironic, given that Cash has devoted much thought and care to the execution of a singular design to achieve perfect harmony between form and function. The first section narrated by Cash is, in fact, a testament to this facet of his aesthetic vision. In reference to the coffin, Cash tries to justify why "I made it on the bevel" by submitting a variation on the geometric proof (*AILD* 82). Each of the numbered points supports the form as a functional necessity, citing as grounds the added "gripping-surface," the runoff patterns of water, key stress points, and the inevitable slanting pattern brought by a dead body's "animal magnetism" (82-83). Read out of context, Cash's conclusion that the bevel "makes a neater job" might seem a purely aesthetic judgment, but in light of the preceding points of justification, it makes clear that Cash does not separate the shape of the coffin from what it must do.

As John T. Matthews observes, Cash's brand of unique design makes the coffin's worth measurable in units of use value rather than exchange value and suggests that it "might represent art before the age of mechanization and commodification" (75). Along similar lines, I would add that Cash's attempt to fuse vocation and avocation at the stages of design and production signals the idealized model of integrated art and social praxis put forth by avant-gardistes bent on exploding conventions of "art" as an autonomous social institution. However, it is important to bear in mind the faintness of this signal as an indicator of the profound challenge confronting this mission of reconciliation and restoration. As Bürger explains:

When art and the praxis of life are one, when the praxis is aesthetic and art is practical, art's purpose can no longer be discovered, because the existence of two distinct spheres (art and praxis of life) that is constitutive of the concept of purpose or intended use has come to an end. (51)

In this light, the emphasis placed on use value in the depiction of Cash's carpentry as an analogue to artistic production affirms the very rift between art and social praxis that his work appears to heal. Here Faulkner exposes the ideology of autonomy as dependent upon the division between form and function, between cultural production and social praxis, to validate its claim.

The tenuousness of this arrangement becomes even more pronounced as the coffin moves from the phase of design and construction into that of use. With the benefit of a visual rendering inserted into the flow of the text, Tull admires how the result of Cash's construction is completed "with every joint and seam bevelled and scrubbed with the plane, tight as a drum and neat as a sewing basket" (*AILD* 88). The supreme craftsmanship makes it all the more disturbing for Tull that the form of the coffin has been, in effect, misinterpreted by those seeking to make it function. Tull bemoans the fact that Addie's body has been placed inside the coffin "reversed" so as not to "crush her dress" (88). This act of misinterpretation prompts Cash's ongoing concern with balance once his coffin engages the world and he is left to bear witness to the fate of his design. Blaming Addie's misdirected internment on "them durn women," Cash, like Faulkner, invokes the creator's prerogative, with now futile stress on his intended integration of form and function: "I made it to balance with her. I made it to her measure and weight" (90). Later, facing the prospect of crossing the flooded river with the coffin, Cash offers the repeated caution, "It aint on a balance" (144, 145). This chronic state of imbalance during the burial journey further aligns the coffin with the modernist text it inhabits. The coffin is thus enlisted in the novel's compulsive interrogation of autonomy, repeatedly underscoring that the separation of the artist's specialized work from the conditions of practical life is a product of social relations rather than an essential condition of art.

The point that the coffin is subject to interpretations not in keeping with the craftsman's design grows even more forceful when Darl subjects it to his own brand of aesthetic theory and practice. As critics have pointed out, Darl's way of perceiving the world is in line with aesthetic principles of post-Impressionism.<sup>7</sup> This aspect of Darl's character is on display frequently in the novel when he articulates visual descriptions crafted from abstract spatial representation and subjective imagery and symbolism. For example, he describes a "path [that] runs straight as a plumb-line" and a sunrise "poised like a bloody egg upon a crest of thunderheads" (*AILD* 3, 40). When Darl reaches the decision, after the initial legs of the harrowing burial journey, that he must end the unseemly spectacle, he applies the visual perspective of a modern artist to carry out his plan. After torching Gillespie's barn to cremate his mother, Darl tries to

<sup>7</sup>See Reid for a comprehensive and instructive reading of connections between Faulkner's fiction and modern art, including careful analysis of Darl's post-Impressionist aesthetic vision (90-94).

arrest the fiery scene with powers of abstract perception: "The front, the conical facade with the square orifice of doorway broken only by the square squat shape of the coffin on the sawhorses like a cubistic bug, comes into relief" (219). Later, Darl performs the same kind of aesthetic maneuver when he describes Gillespie's struggle to keep Jewel from running into the flames to save his horse: "They are like two figures in a Greek frieze, isolated out of all reality by the red glare" (221). In one sense, Darl reads here as Yoknatawpha's Dada artist in residence, seeking to employ the movement's theory of creative destruction in his expression of loving devotion to Addie. In a more pronounced way, however, Darl is not a true representative of the avant-garde cause, since his work exacerbates rather than reconciles the division between art and social reality. Darl divorces the two so completely that he shows himself to be entranced by the ideology of autonomy and seriously hindered from understanding that his act will be interpreted by society not as a form of creative expression but as blatant arson.

Darl pays a heavy price for investing heavily in such a radical conception of autonomy. As a consequence of burning Gillespie's barn, Darl causes familial and communal forces to marshal against him immediately as a threat to social order. Patrick O'Donnell conducts an astute reading of Darl's committal to the asylum in the context of the Bundrens' engagement with state authority. For O'Donnell, the "comic strategy" of the novel sees to it that Darl is "sacrificed to the state so that, in several senses, the Bundrens may complete their arrangements, move through the city, and return home largely intact" (84). Matthews casts Darl's committal in sacrificial terms as well, putting it in the context of aesthetic politics. Through Darl's fate, Matthews argues, Faulkner delivers a "repudiation of the sort of art that too effortlessly fills the gaps of a story, that too readily composes itself abstractly, and that too hastily universalizes its meaning" as a means to "exorcise the strictly aestheticist impulse of his modernism" (90-91). Taken together, these readings speak to the constitutive relations between text and context that form as Faulkner tests the bounds of autonomy in trying, much like Cash Bundren, to strike an aesthetically pleasing yet enduringly useful balance between form and function.

In retrospect, this prominent concern exhibited in *As I Lay Dying* suggests Faulkner's keen awareness of emergent forces on the American cultural landscape at the time of the novel's production. After all, by the time *As I Lay Dying* appeared on the scene in 1930, the cultural conflict that Edmund Wilson aptly dubbed the "literary class war" (319) was on the verge of erupting with Michael Gold's scathing indictment of playwright Thornton Wilder in the *New Republic*. Gold branded Wilder an artistic collaborator in bourgeois decadence and brutal exploitation of the poor. Inspired by rapidly worsening conditions in the aftermath of the stock market crash, Gold and a host of fellow travelers on the radical left turned up the volume on the clarion call for proletarian literature in the United States. According to Gold, this literary endeavor would be an agent of social and political reform and, stylistically, would reject the aesthetic ideology of high modernism by aiming for "swift action, clear form, the



direct line, cinema in words" ("Proletarian Realism" 207). Not surprisingly, the insurgence of proletarian literature—or, more generally speaking, the revival of social realism—at the outset of the thirties prompted cultural conservatives to respond in kind. Writing also in the *New Republic*, a major battleground in the literary class war, Allen Tate reasserted, in effect, the prerogative of "art for art's sake." Summing up his case in the final installment of a three-part series, Tate argued that "poetry finds its true usefulness in its perfect inutility, a focus of repose for the will-driven intellect that constantly shakes the equilibrium of persons and societies with its unrelieved imposition of partial formulas upon the world" (240). Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, as we have now seen, was already a battleground for this conflict, with Cash's and Darl's conceptions of the coffin foregrounding the issues of artistic autonomy and complex engagement between art and social reality. As a result, this function of Faulkner's novel invites further inquiry, compelling examination of its own implication in these very issues.

In *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, Terry Eagleton constructs a useful theoretical framework for such a critical enterprise. Eagleton argues that discourse around the aesthetic has allowed for "a certain indeterminacy of definition" that enables it to pertain to a wide range of concerns in modern society, the conception of autonomy among them. For this reason, the conception of the "aesthetic artefact" is aligned with the construction of "the dominant ideological forms of modern class-society, and indeed from a whole new form of human subjectivity appropriate to that social order" (3). However, as Eagleton adds, the aesthetic also harbors within it the dialectical capability of powerfully contesting those dominant forms. Under the guise of the aesthetic, the work of art and the bourgeois subject are fashioned in parallel form as "autonomous and self-determining" at the same time they mysteriously affirm and uphold ordering principles in capitalist society in a manner not explicitly acknowledged (23). In this regard, autonomy is a function of a broader ideological form that "shapes into harmonious unity the turbulent content of the subject's appetites and inclinations" and substitutes the power of "self-identity" for the coercion of "autocratic power" in the marketplace (23).

In *As I Lay Dying*, Faulkner exposes this ideological condition for critical reflection by transforming elements of social reality into fictional form. The reaction to Darl's arson is an instructive case in point. Faulkner's depiction of this harrowing episode in the Bundrens' epic journey achieves heightened literary effects at the same time it dramatizes how private property—an analogue to artistic autonomy, to apply Eagleton's theory—functions as a conceptual and material ordering force for shaping both individual identity and social order. Faulkner accomplishes this feat by honing in on the chronic anxiety and sense of urgency unleashed by Darl's barn burning.

Given Cash's name, it is not surprising that he is the one who weighs the consequences of Darl's property destruction in the context of capitalism. Revealing the extent to which economics governs social relations in Yoknapatawpha, Cash understands that the barn burning has changed his family's relation-

ship with Gillespie from communal to adversarial and that the Bundrens must commit Darl or otherwise "have Gillespie sue us" (AILD 232). As Cash reveals, Jewel is even more assured of this conclusion, appealing to Anse for immediate action to prevent Darl from being a continued threat: "Goddamn it, do you want to wait until he sets fire to the goddamn team and wagon?" (233). Both Jewel and Cash calculate the worth of the team and wagon in added value, taking into account that Anse acquired them by trading with a Snopes the prized stallion that Jewel labored diligently to purchase.

As he considers the barn burning further, Cash continues to employ the parlance of economics, recording the consequences in a virtual ledger. "Sometimes I think it aint none of us pure crazy and aint none of us pure sane," Cash says, "until the balance of us talks him that-a-way" (AILD 233). Unlike his brother Darl, Cash is acutely aware of the limitations placed on autonomy in the context of social relations: "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" (233). For this reason, Cash's admission that "I can almost believe he done right in a way," one which is based solely on familial concern, is a poor match for the more powerful extrinsic argument that "nothing excuses setting fire to a man's barn and endangering his stock and destroying his property" (233). For Cash, private property is an extension of the self, as suggested when he counts the loss of Gillespie's barn as "the deliberate destruction of what a man has built with his own sweat and stored the fruit of his sweat into" (238). Significantly, though, Cash's affirmation of private property as sacrosanct is qualified, drawing toward a concluding refrain that conveys ambivalence at a time of great uncertainty in both the text and its context: "But I aint so sho that ere a man has the right to say what is crazy and what aint" (238). By alternatively affirming and challenging private property as a dominant ordering principle, Cash's response to the barn burning not only registers socioeconomic anxieties prevalent at the historical moment but also complicates the autonomous claim that the novel's modernist form aggressively stakes.

Cash's interpretation of the barn burning is but one panel in a broader fictional tapestry whose patterns take shape in tangible ways from the material of social reality. Another one is the thematic motif drawn from the vagaries of investing in a free-market economy with very little guarantee of return. Early in the novel, for example, Cora tells of a cake-baking operation gone bust when Mrs. Lawington, a woman in town, decided to cancel the order after the ingredients had been purchased and the cakes had been made. Cora's friend Kate reads the incident as emblematic of a discrepancy in individual liberty, explaining that "those rich town ladies can change their minds. Poor folks cant" (AILD 7). Rather than press the case further, however, Cora defers to divine judgment to recover the loss in some fashion: "Riches is nothing in the face of the Lord, for he can see into the heart" (7). Later, in one of Tull's sections, an unidentified voice rendered in italics responds to the prospect of natural disaster by viewing crop investment as a game of chance: "*If nothing didn't happen and everybody made a big crop, do you reckon it would be worth the raising?*" (90). As demon-

strated above, Jewel's prized horse represents a sizeable investment of his labor and earnings, making Anse's move of trading it on the sly all the more difficult to accept. Jewel's urgent effort to rescue his horse from Gillespie's burning barn thus reads as a vivid rendering of the urgent desire to protect personal investment against devastating loss. In Addie's monologue delivered from the afterlife, she articulates her philosophy of hopelessness by invoking her father's view of life as a process of nihilistic investment: "I could just remember how my father used to say that the reason for living was to get ready to stay dead a long time" (169). Considering the widespread panic and high anxiety engendered by the sudden economic downturn, this preoccupation with investment in the text can be viewed as influenced in large measure by forces active in its context. Such a connection highlights Faulkner's self-described process of "sublimating the actual into the apocryphal" (*LG* 255) and exposes the ideological function of the novel's autonomous claim.

The major theme of tensions between individual and collective identity works as well to underscore the ties between text and context, as the rendering of the Bundren family makes clear. The burial march to Jefferson tests this family's mettle, repeatedly forcing them to place the common good above their individual concerns. Darl's incarceration, as we have seen, is an instance of the Bundren family's protecting itself by means of sacrificing one of its own individual members. Another example is Jewel's painful acquiescence to the trading of his beloved stallion for a team and wagon capable of transporting his mother to her final resting place. On the surface, the Bundren family holds that the purpose behind the journey is fulfilling Addie's final wish to be buried with her people in Jefferson. However, Faulkner is at great pains, especially toward the end of the novel, to remind us of the individual desires that impel the Bundrens to keep moving forward—Vardaman's longing for a new toy train, Dewey Dell's hope of getting an abortion, Cash's wish for a graphophone, and Anse's successful plan to acquire a new set of teeth and, ultimately, a new Mrs. Bundren. Symbolically staging consumer behavior in the capitalist marketplace, the Bundrens bury an object of need (the coffin) to go in vigorous pursuit of objects they want. In each instance, Faulkner's novel shows how the desire to purchase goods and services, the longing for "just a shape to fill a lack" (*AILD* 172), fuels the engine of what can be called the Bundren familial economy.

During the course of the novel's production from late 1929 to early 1930, the notion that stimulation of the individual desire to acquire goods and services could enable passage through hard times was particularly resonant. This feature of *As I Lay Dying* is yet another tie among several that establish connections between text and context and, in so doing, place the ideology of autonomy under the light of scrutiny. A primary imperative of this ideology, to invoke a couple of familiar American phrases, is to impose art's declaration of independence from the tyranny of the real by proclaiming its freedom and liberty as self-evident truths. If Faulkner's own remarks about writing *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying*, his most thoroughgoing exercises in high modernism, provide any indication, his investment in the ideology of autonomy was quite

considerable. However, as I have tried to argue here, reading *As I Lay Dying* against its historical backdrop uncovers a different function for the assertion of autonomy made by the modernist form. Instead of affirming the inherent autonomy of Faulkner's, or any artist's, creative output, the components of the novel's fragmented form, like Cash Bundren's beveled boards, point to their condition as material for a useful yet tenuous construction. As the symbolic value of the coffin conveys, the artist heavily invested in autonomy is always already preoccupied with how to strike a balance between seeking repose from the material world and simultaneously relying on that world to give art much of its shape and meaning.

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