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“‘It aint on a balance’”: Slippage in *As I Lay Dying*

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Throughout the text of *As I Lay Dying*, Cash's obsession with the "balance" of the coffin is rendered by different linguistic forms of the word itself; it is either used as a noun or as a verb conjugated in the future, present and past tenses: "It wont balance" ("Cash," 56); "It aint on a balance" ("Darl," 84); "It aint balanced right for no long ride" ("Darl," 62); "It wasn't on a balance" ("Cash," 95). The novel mirrors a quest for equilibrium or at least resistance to fall or slippage. This polysemous word can sometimes apply to falling prices and the stock exchange, which is all the more ironical as William Faulkner started writing his *tour de force* after the Wall Street crash, another variation on the fall. The word "slippage" suggests a downward movement usually leading to a worse condition or state, or it may even convey the idea of an impending and uncontrollable disaster. The tragic dimension of Faulkner's novel is built around the fact that the Bundrens are quite often described as being on the verge of "slipping," either literally or figuratively, after going down the hill on which their house seems to be suspended, isolated from change and transition. John T. Matthews sheds light on the "crisis of disintegration" the Bundrens are going through, and which he equates with a loss of balance: "Burdened by the dead past which continues to exercise its will ghoulishly over the present, the Bundrens lose their balance" (83).

Slippage is definitely linked to the characters' obsession with frames and geometry, especially diagonals and slanting movements, which participates in the interplay of vertical and horizontal lines inscribed in the text. The Bundrens are obviously afraid of losing their balance, physically, psychologically and even economically, and this fear is epitomized by the erratic movements of the coffin itself, which has a metonymic relationship with Addie, the "fallen woman" in the eyes of religion. She is definitely "dropped," both unholy and un-whole, into a hole at the end of the Bundrens' odyssey to Jefferson. Slippage is also central to the texture of the monologues, which are brimming with shifts and breaks in syntax or typography, as well as with images of hiatus or suspended motion that are as many bulwarks against the fluid, even

liquid, quality of the text. The narrative is flooded with semantic fragments surging out of the flux of words. One can wonder if such tension between what is slipping and what is standing does not vanish at the end of the novel, when a semblance of order and balance is restored and when the acrobats—the Bundrens—become monkeys eating bananas. The text hovers between fragmentation and completeness and rests on some fragile equilibrium, a kind of embodiment of “the dead word high in the air” (“Addie,” 101) the writer is striving to bring to life again: “The logic thus presents itself of speaking of the novel as a corpse, as a narrative whose form is continually on the verge of decomposition and whose integrity is retained only by heroic imaginative effort” (Sundquist 31). Slippage brings about narrative breaks and discontinuity, which are rendered by isolated monologues that require a kind of acrobatic reading. The novel seems to exemplify Emily Dickinson’s famous verse:

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—
Success in Circuit lies
[...] (Poem 1129)

Faulkner’s reptilian narrative technique is also oblique, relying on to and fro movements, on both linear and circular routes, as if the path to Truth—whether it is concealed or not in the flooded palimpsest of the novel-as-river—were always a winding route.

The Bundrens as Equilibrists in a Land of In-Betweenness

Right from the beginning of the novel, the Bundrens’ world, as depicted by the different characters, is built round slopes and hills that make the family linger: “We go down the path, toward the slope” (“Darl,” 57). Horizontal and vertical movements are constantly referred to, whether by Anse, who opposes “long ways, like a road or a horse or a wagon” to “up-and-down ways, like a tree or a man” (“Anse,” 23), or by Darl whose reading-grid of the world is also influenced by rise and fall, both geographically and figuratively: “That’s why you must walk up the hills so that you can ride down” (“Darl,” 131); “We descend as the hill commences to rise” (“Darl,” 132). The chalk line is thus a major tool, for it enables human beings to give a frame or at least a shape to spatial reality and objects.

Such up-and-down movements convey the impression that characters have to keep their balance in a world subjected to oscillation.

Cash, who could be perceived as the falling man in the novel, keeps losing his balance although he insists on making well-balanced objects. Moreover, things also keep falling onto people: “If it had just been me when Cash fell off of that church and if it had just been me when pa laid sick with that load of wood fell on him [...]” (“Jewel,” 10). The Bundrens’ burden, the coffin, also keeps slipping away from their control; Anse’s “shabby and aimless silhouette” (“Darl,” 44) emphasizes his distorted figure, thus suggesting that he is also bound to fall socially without his neighbours’ help. He is associated with slippage, on account of his laziness and inability to get committed to his family’s survival: “It’s like a man that let’s everything *slide* all his life to get on something that will make the most trouble for everybody he knows” (“Tull,” 52; my emphasis). Likewise, the fall appears as a run-on metaphor in Tull’s monologue, slippage being linked with wetness and water, the usual symbols of womanhood:

“A fellow can sho slip quick on wet planks,” Quick says.
 [...]
 If it takes wet boards for folks to fall, it’s fixing to be lots of falling before this spell is done.
 [...]
 I don’t mind the folks falling. It’s the cotton and corn I mind. Neither does Peabody mind the folks falling. How about it, Doc?
 (“Tull,” 52)

The overall concern for fall and loss of balance is a way of emphasizing transience and precariousness and it partakes of Darl’s Armageddonism. He is haunted by the end of the world, the Fall being the beginning—the Fall from the garden of Eden—and the end; it is the impending disaster, etymologically the loss of a favorable star, of what is suspended in the sky. Addie’s death (dis)embodies the end, which is also the end of Darl since he is evacuated from both the social field and the realm of art.

Quite symbolically, Addie’s passing away triggers an elemental imbalance that blurs boundaries between earth and water, but also between earth and air, since the coffin is the elusive box over which the Bundrens keep losing control, after “balancing it as though it were something infinitely precious” (“Darl,” 57):

Cash begins to *fall* behind, hobbling to keep up, breathing harshly; then he is distanced and Jewel carries the entire front

end alone, so that, *tilting* as the path begins to slant, it begins to rush away from me and *slip* down the air like a *sled* upon invisible *snow*, smoothly evacuating atmosphere in which the sense of it is still shaped. (“Darl,” 57; my emphasis)

In this extract, the verbs refer to diagonals and the risk of slippage; the reference to snow looks quite incongruous after the emphasis laid on heat and fanning in the first monologues. The coffin seems to be flying in the air, losing its solidity and becoming as light as a feather, an image used by Darl when he describes the acoustic effects in the Bundren house: “A feather dropped near the front door will rise and brush along the ceiling, slanting backwards, until it reaches the down-turning current at the back door: so with voices” (“Darl,” 13). The coffin also defies gravity and is compared to a straw: “It seems to me that the end which I now carry alone has no weight, as though it coasts like a rushing straw upon the furious tide of Jewel’s despair” (“Darl,” 57). Water, suggested by the proleptic image of the tide, and air, hinted at by the weightless box, are intermingled and signify elusiveness. Even the characters’ voices are described as being detached and suspended in the air, as if the speakers themselves were acrobats or equilibrists. During the fire, the coffin, suspended in the air for a moment, also seems to be challenging gravity:

[...] for an instant it *stands* upright while the sparks rain on it in scattering bursts as though they engendered other sparks from the contact. Then it *topples forward*, gaining momentum, revealing Jewel and the sparks raining on him too in engendering gusts, so that he appears in *a thin nimbus of fire*. Without stopping it overends and rears again, *pauses*, then crashes slowly forward and through *the curtain*. This time Jewel is *riding upon it, clinging to it*, until it crashes down and flings him forward and clear [...]. (“Darl,” 128; my emphasis)

The whole scene is described as a performance or a circus act, as suggested by the word “curtain.” Jewel is trying to tame the coffin slipping away from him. The box is a substitute for Jewel’s horse, which calls to mind Pegasus, the winged horse symbolizing creativity and its Promethean fire. The horse is itself a substitute for Addie, whose corpse he is trying to save from destruction by fire. The symbolical meanings are interwoven into a palimpsest in which meanings keep being displaced, they keep slipping and merging into one another.

Addie herself is obsessed with balance and yearns to fly as high as the wild geese she can hear at night. Her monologue is rife with images conveying suspension and poise. For example, she uses the image of “spiders dangling by their [children’s] mouths from a beam, swinging and twisting and never touching” (“Addie,” 99). However pragmatic and cynical she may be, Addie sometimes sounds like an overreacher who, through her passion and transgression, wants “to shape and coerce the terrible blood to the forlorn echo of the dead word high in the air” (“Addie,” 101), over the void created by floating or “dangling” signifiers. To some extent, she is an acrobat or trapeze artist flying on the wings of desire. In the eyes of religion, she is a “fallen woman,” on account of her adulterous relationship with Reverend Whitfield, which is associated with the woods and the earth. Jason S. Todd points out that Addie’s loss of balance, like Cash’s, is actually connected with the church, “Addie by falling from grace with the minister, and Cash, who himself has little time for metaphor, by falling quite literally from the church” (53). Yet, for Addie, such a fall does not constitute any form of slippage as such, since she deliberately chooses to transgress and does not fall for Whitfield at random: in her scale of values, the higher the transgression, the more she feels human, and the wilder her blood is. Moreover, the desire to clean her house also consists in achieving an economic balance between her children and motherhood. It is thus the instrument of an arithmetic trick or *tour de force*: “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. And then I could ready to die” (“Addie,” 102). Even Addie’s death seems to be deliberate: she does not “fall” dead. Yet, however assertive and convincing she may sound, if we take into account the fact that she and Anse respectively have two and three children, the balance is questionable, attesting to the tension between balance and imbalance in the book. Addie may stand for balance as the cornerstone of the family, but psychologically she was thrown off balance by Jewel’s lies when he secretly worked at night to pay for his horse, the betrayal leading her to cry. Her thirst for revenge against Anse results in elemental disorder when she dies, and this disorder also entails a form of slippage, since the boundaries between earth and water become blurred and elusive.

Addie’s disembodiment, basically represented by a kind of stinking liquefaction or even evaporation, reverberates onto the land and the treacherous landscape that loses its bearings. Her death tolls the knell for elemental balance and her own dissolution. Similarly, Dewey Dell’s wish

to get an abortion brings about haemorrhage, the forces of life and death being at odds in Nature itself: "The sun, an hour above the horizon, is poised like a bloody egg upon a crest of thunderheads; the light has turned copper: in the eye portentous, in the nose sulphurous, smelling of lightning" ("Darl," 24). The setting is a harbinger of the hardships to come, a combination of water and fire rendered by visual and olfactory sensations that send us back both to earth and air. The crossing of the river turns into an acrobatic feat that consists in challenging and overcoming gravitational forces.

Significantly, Dewey Dell's leg is compared to "that lever which moves the world; one of that caliper which measures the length and breadth of life" ("Darl," 60). The indirect allusion to Archimedes who wrote a book on the principle of hydrostatics known as *On Floating Bodies*, and whose research dealt with balance and gravity, reveals the characters' concern for stability while they have to assume the weight of their physical and personal burdens. Dewey Dell herself considers the child she bears as a burden. In a topsy-turvy world characterized by deliquescence, beings or things seem to be suspended over chaos, on the verge of slipping and vanishing. The text is saturated with words such as "to slant" or "to tilt": "The tilted lumber gleams dull yellow, water-soaked and heavy as lead, tilted at a steep angle into the ditch above the broken wheel [...]" ("Darl," 29). The destructive action of the log, nearly humanized, compared by Darl to Christ walking on water ("Darl," 86) and perceived by Cora as the hand of a vengeful God, can also be construed as a symbol of randomness, drifting and causing the wagon to tilt over.

Paradoxically, finding the ford can be made easier by identifying movement under the surface: "*I felt the current take us and I knew we were on the ford by that reason, since it was only by means of that slipping contact that we could tell that we were in motion at all*" ("Darl," 85; my emphasis). A nearly oxymoronic phrase like "slipping contact" draws attention to the ambivalent rendition of space, which, both liquid and solid, can also be an anchorage point. The phrase can also apply to the ambiguities of Faulkner's elusive writing. The log itself can give clues to the men reading the surface of the river: "It would show up and whirl crossways and hang out of water for a minute, and you'll tell by that that the ford used to be there" ("Tull," 71); yet it ultimately proves unreliable and destructive, an agent of imbalance and slippage.

The bridge, which symbolizes both victory over Nature and communication between humans, is depicted by Tull as "shaking and

swaying under us” (“Tull,” 79) and suggests the precariousness of the world oscillating between nothingness and completeness: “But it was still whole; you could tell that by the way when this end swagged, it didn’t look like the other end swagged at all: just like the other trees and the bank yonder were swinging back and forth slow like on a big clock” (“Tull,” 79). Time, like space, is characterized by to and fro movements; the landscape lies in a kind of hiatus before the ultimate collapse: “[...] that single monotony of desolation leaning with that terrific quality a little from right to left, as though we had reached the place where the motion of the wasted world accelerates just before the final precipice” (“Darl,” 85). The chaos evoked by the quotation is not that of *Genesis*, but that of Apocalypse, for Darl perceives the scene through the lens of his own obsession with the end. The comparison of the setting with a clock reminds the reader of the clock-shaped coffin. Just as Addie’s soul is in limbo, the world itself mirrors undecidability and elusiveness, while aleatory forces prevail over human will, as suggested by Aurélie Guillain: “Through their random order, the drifting fragments symbolize a loss of the principles according to which experience can be categorized” (my translation).¹

Balance is inevitably upset by random fragments, a log among other logs: “[...] the wagon sheers crosswise, poised on the crest of the ford as the log strikes it, tilting it up and on” (“Darl,” 86). Quite often, the movement of things follows a vertical line, reaches an apex and then suddenly slips away, the collapse inevitably following a kind of stasis. The rope is an agent of salvation, a lifeline, and enables the characters to keep their balance and to remain safely steady while facing violence: “We submerge in turn, holding to the rope, being clutched by one another while the cold wall of the water sucks the slanting mud backward and upstream from beneath our feet and we are suspended so, groping along the cold bottom” (“Darl,” 91). The protean waterscape, which, like a monster, threatens to swallow them down, causes them to become acrobats—“rope dancers,” one might be tempted to say—to prevent the coffin and Cash’s tools from vanishing into some malevolent womb, a liminal place combining earth and water that living creatures fail to comprehend: even geometry does not make it possible to comprehend a world characterized by slippage. Liquidity is one of the most elusive forms of slippage and the fish sliding out of Vardaman’s eyes

¹ “Par les agencements aléatoires qu’ils forment, ces fragments à la dérive symbolisent une perte des principes de classement de l’expérience” (47).

exemplifies elusiveness, since the mother it stands for remains a remote transitional object associated with flux and blood.

Cash, “the falling man,” may remind us of Icarus but he is not an overreacher either; he seems to be rather doomed to fall and, like Job, he is put to the test: he becomes a floating object and then a cripple, losing his balance for good. To some extent he embodies a form of physical slippage, whereas his brother Darl slips into mental limbo, no longer moored to himself. Such moments of mental slippage are first hinted at by his fits of laughter right from the beginning of the Bundrens’ odyssey. His setting the Gillespies’ barn on fire has, on the contrary, sometimes been construed by critics as a sane and lucid response to his family’s absurd determination, which is denounced as an outrage by the community’s women. Claude Romano thus points out “this shifting border between delirium and lucidity” (my translation).² Darl’s action is not devoid of any aesthetic purpose and Jewel’s performance, aimed at saving the coffin from fire, gives him the opportunity to draw a tableau out of the blaze.

Darl’s delight in aestheticization leads him to cross the threshold of sanity and such slippage is conveyed by the shift from “I” to “Darl” in his final monologue: “Darl has gone to Jackson” (“Darl,” 146). In the text, “going to Jackson” becomes a periphrasis meaning “to go crazy” or, according to Vardaman, “further away than crazy” (“Vardaman,” 145). The loss of psychological and mental balance takes on a spatial dimension that confirms the major role played by geography and geometry in the text. But Faulkner’s *tour de force* is built around a pendulum swing between matter-of-factness and poetic sublimity: “Thus, the whole novel keeps its necessarily unstable balance between the crests of common sense and insanity, matter-of-fact farce and the most sublime poetic expression” (my translation).³

Narration and Language: From Slanting to Slippage

The monologues, which are sometimes polylogues on account of the mimesis of dialogues they contain, present the reader with a wide range of languages, which are more or less transparent or oblique. For example, Cora’s speech, which often borrows sentences or even clichés

² “cette lisière mouvante entre délire et lucidité” (170).

³ “De la sorte, c’est tout le roman qui se tient en équilibre—évidemment instable—entre la crête du bon sens et de la folie, de la farce terre-à-terre et de l’expression poétique la plus sublime” (Romano 170).

from religion, seems all the more clear and straightforward as she relies on her interpretation of God's logos. However blind she may be, she seldom uses tropes that are likely to yield to semantic elusiveness. She sounds quite assertive: "And my life is and has ever been a open book to ere a man or woman among His creatures because I trust in my God and my reward" ("Tull," 42-43). Unlike Cora's, Darl's approach to what he sees is both geometrical and aesthetic, which is far from being incompatible if we think of Cubism and of his perception of the coffin inside the barn as "a cubistic bug" ("Darl," 127). Darl's wish to give a frame to his perceptions accounts for his construction of reality along straight or slanting lines, circles or squares, in order to freeze or petrify what seems to slip away from his visual control.

Darl's passion for accuracy is clearly visible in his first monologue; the expository scene abounds in words referring to geometrical shapes: "straight as a plumb-line," "center," "right angles," "square," "opposite," "circles," "single file" ("Darl," 3). An almost scientific reading of the world thus counterbalances his slippage into insanity. Yet the oxymoronic phrase "fading precision" ("Darl," 3) shows that his geometrical rendering of reality, like Addie's "gaunt face framed by the window," gives way to "a composite picture" ("Darl," 28), or, like Jewel's horse, to "an unrelated scattering of components" ("Vardaman," 33). Representation itself proves as slippery as reality. Likewise, in his description of Jewel's neck, the zooming-in effect is undermined by the simile that juxtaposes what he perceives and what he imagines or projects, basically his obsession with bones, that is to say the physical materiality of death: "[...] the back of his head is trimmed close, with a white line between hair and sunburn like a joint of white bone" ("Darl," 24). Darl constantly deviates from an accurate, nearly mimetic and onomatopoeic approach—his play with sounds is reminiscent of Cratyism—in order to aestheticize his experience, which can easily slip from mundane reality into poetic sublimity. His portrayal of Jewel struggling with Gillespie is a *mise en abyme* of the process: "They are two figures in a Greek frieze, isolated *out of all reality* by the red glare" ("Darl," 127; my emphasis). Despite Darl's reliance on geometrical designs, what he draws from reality loses its realistic outlines and seems to emerge out of reality, as if the scene were only a pretext for sublime expression; actually, as the novel is deprived of any omniscient voice, Darl's narrative authority being shattered by his slippage into insanity, the whole text of *As I Lay Dying* presents us with different

representations of and deviations from reality and thus hovers between different genres and styles.

Tragedy can easily slip into comedy and one of the most striking occurrences of such slippage in tones is Tull's reference to the men's laughing at their own jokes: "We laugh, suddenly loud, then suddenly quiet again. We look a little aside at one another" ("Tull," 52). Their oblique eye-contacts convey both their hesitations and confusion while the Bundren family is bereaved. Some characters like Peabody, Samson or Armstid bring comic relief and the "frustrated funeral"—a phrase used by Patricia Schroeder (40) when referring to a tradition inherited from Southwestern humor—turns the Bundrens' odyssey into a farce. The frontier between tragedy and comedy, realism and farce, is thus quite slippery: "These tales, which use humor to reduce the familiar frontier specter of death to comic proportions, are characterized by grotesquerie (a corpse was often used as a comic prop) and shockingly realistic detail" (Schroeder 40).

Besides, Addie's section constitutes a major unexpected break in the succession of monologues and the fact that the dead woman is given a voice—a form of *prosopopeia*—is not devoid of humor. Verisimilitude is questioned and the novel falls within the category of the tall tale, an extravagant story based on excess and hyperbole. The mosaic of styles, and especially the use of dialect, which contrasts with Darl's sophisticated prose or Vardaman's nearly poetic reliance on images—he is a budding writer—, brings about breaks in the narrative which give an asymmetrical dimension to the novel. Cash's *vademecum* can be read as a writer's handbook and the coffin is definitely a metaphor for the novel, a box containing different monologues that showcases the same lack of balance. Cash's insistence on making the coffin "on the bevel" reveals his concern with diagonals, slanting lines and oblique designs: "The animal magnetism of a dead body makes the stress come slanting, so the seams and joints of a coffin are made on the bevel" ("Cash," 48). Obliquity is thus praised by the carpenter as a response to imbalance, and the monologues, however mimetic they may be, are only oblique approaches to experience, for no authorial voice gives validity to the narrative filtered through the different speakers' minds. Information is provided only indirectly, not in a straight line.

The structure of the novel testifies to some asymmetry or even ex-centricity. Cash's comic repetitions—"It won't balance" ("Cash," 56)—can be read as a metatextual commentary on the novel itself. *As I Lay Dying* is composed of fifty-nine monologues, which is an odd number,

and the length, style and contents of the monologues show major variations. Fifteen characters have their say, or are trying to have their say, but minor characters such as Moseley or MacGowan are heard only once. So are Jewel and Addie, though they can hardly be considered minor or flat characters. A character's major role in the plot does not necessarily mean that he or she will be given a substantial narrative span. Jewel expresses himself more through action or *praxis* than through logos and is basically an aesthetic construction in Darl's mind. Addie pulls the strings although she is dead. Her monologue, the fortieth section, quite unexpectedly surges—like the log—more than halfway through the novel and is thus slightly decentered, although quite a few critics lay the emphasis on its centrality, Addie being regarded as a kind of absent center. One may also think that she is an ex-centric, unconventional woman and her voice is deferred/displaced, framed by two monologues (Cora's and Whitfield's) focusing on religion and conventions, until she slips into the margins of both the narrative and the family at the end of the novel. Such asymmetry is reinforced by the structural interaction between the line—the linearity of the narrative—and the circle, namely the fact that Addie has completed the journey taking her back to her roots. Between the line and the circle, Addie's axis is oblique or aslant to some extent. Symbolically, the position of her body in the coffin is inverted and violates the principles established by Cash as regards balance and gravity. Slippage is thus made inevitable in a world where everything is likely to go awry.

The diegetic texture, through ellipses and paralipses, is deprived of a smooth surface and creates effects of imbalance. Addie's absence is made up for by her monologue, just as the iconic sign—the coffin similar to a hole in the page ("Tull," 51),—contrasts with Addie's blank matrix ("Addie," 100). Both the drawing of the box and the hole in the text are figurations of slippage, which appears here as a form of rupture and discontinuity. The play with typography—and especially the shifts from roman type to italics—also signifies a kind of slippage, especially since italics are, to some extent, diagonals. What is straight (roman type) can easily slip into what is oblique, even distorted. The italics often refer to an emotional experience and are usually used in texts that rely on the stream of consciousness technique. Dewey Dell's monologue exemplifies stylistic slippage, also conveyed by dislocated syntax and anacoluthon: "It is because in the wild and outraged earth too soon too soon too soon" ("Dewey Dell," 69). This repetition of "too soon" echoes Darl's repetition of "yes" at the end of the novel, as if language itself became a

kind of stumbling-lock. The logic of the sentences is disrupted, creating inconsistencies, and ironically, the use of roman type can also refer to an action that has not actually taken place: “That was when I died that time. *Suppose I do. We’ll go to New Hope. We wont have to go to town.* I rose and took the knife from the streaming fish still hissing and I killed Darl” (“Dewey Dell,” 69). Darl’s death is merely symbolic, but the murder mentioned in roman type, which is usually an assertive form of typography, foreshadows Dewey Dell’s cruel behavior towards her brother at the end of the novel. Unexpectedly, this death wish is not rendered in italics, which proves that no stylistic principles are clearly established. Randomness seems to prevail.

The use of deictics or pronouns the referents of which are difficult to make out, contributes to creating an impression of disorder and hermeneutic slippage. The logic of some sentences is hard to grasp, since ideas are sometimes disconnected. Vardaman says: “Pa shaves every day because my mother is a fish” (“Vardaman,” 58). What is probably implied is that since the mother is dead, her husband has decided to shave so as to find another wife. The reader is led to play with the child’s implicit codes. Slippage is characterized by blankness when Cash’s monologue is suddenly interrupted: “It wasn’t on a balance. I told them that if they wanted it to tote and ride on a balance, they would have to [blank space]” (“Cash,” 95). The writing slips into blankness, as if it were literally a slip of the tongue.

Actually, many tropes, like blank spaces, illustrate the slipping contact between signifier and signified and semantic excess—or grandiloquence—can also be considered as an accident or a stumbling-block in our reading experience. Oxymoronic phrases create semantic uncertainty, for example when Cash’s movements are described by Darl: “[...] his face sloped into the light with a rapt, dynamic immobility above his tireless elbow” (“Darl,” 44). Darl once again plays with contrasts between geometry and diagonals (“sloped”) and physical tension between motion and rigidity, so that meaning appears to be elusive. Metaphors are even more puzzling on account of the widening gap between the tenor—the subject to which the metaphoric word is applied—and the vehicle, the metaphoric word itself. The rope slanting into the water is unexpectedly compared to “the nozzle of a firehose” (“Darl,” 92): the inversion is all the more ironical as the landscape is flooded. Yet it is also a proleptic hint at the burning barn. Jewel’s eyes are compared to “spots of white paper pasted on a high small football” (“Darl,” 123). Such an image, and especially the reference to a football,

can appear incongruous, showing that Darl often uses his perceptions as a springboard to make daring literary constructs; hence the complex imagery in the following passage, which is nearly baroque because of its circumvolutions: "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" ("Darl," 85). The circle, or rather the spiral, replaces the line, and language is characterized by an accretion or accumulation of layers of meaning which generate slippage between signifier and signified and keep deferring meaning. In a note, John Matthews summarizes one of Patrick O'Donnell's analyses according to which "language signifies through the slipping contact of signifier and signified, and [...] this conceptualization of metaphor informs the imagery describing the uncertain relation between surface and depth, inner and outer, embodiment and essence" (note 31, 87).

These examples illustrate Addie's theory on words: "That was when I learned that words are no good; that words dont ever fit even what they are trying to say at" ("Addie," 99). Paul Louis Calkins underlines "Addie's notion of horizontal and vertical axes of 'doing' and 'saying'" (100). Words are the shapes the meaning(s) of which is/are fading. Symbolically enough, in the beginning, Cash suffers from aphasia, as suggested by his "words fumbling at what he was trying to say" ("Darl," 76). Cash seems to find his voice at the end of the novel, since he has the last word. Just as the novel opens with Darl's monologue, it ends with the carpenter's section characterized by some return to a straightforward, matter-of-fact language in which the slippery gap between signifier and signified has shrunk again. The text is actually a *mise en abyme* of the dangers of hermeneutic slippage entailed by representation: "[...] Faulkner and his intellectual heroes, like Joyce and Stephen Dedalus, come in the wake of *Hamlet* as the dramatization of the quest for an elusive and fragmented voice" (Simon 110). The fact that Cash, the falling man but also, ironically, the *homo faber* obsessed with balance, has the last word, may lead us to ponder over the possible restoration of balance at the end of the odyssey.

Cash values daring and risk-taking: "When something is new and hard and bright, there ought to be something a little better for it than just being safe, since the safe things are just the things that folks have been doing for so long they have worn the edges off . . ." ("Darl," 76) The Bundrens take the big leap and run the risk of slipping; nevertheless endurance and obstinacy pay off in the end, especially thanks to Jewel

who is particularly gifted at acrobatics while trying to tame his horse. The scene is imagined by Darl and the fact that the horse, “a circus animal” (“Anse,” 61), is winged like Pegasus, shows Jewel’s mastery of gravity and his oblique link with poetic creativity, for, to some extent, he is Darl’s muse: “He flows upward in a stooping swirl like the lash of a whip, his body in midair shaped to the horse” (“Darl,” 9). He is explicitly compared to an acrobat: “*He [Jewel] applies the curry-comb, holding himself within the horse’s striking radius with the agility of an acrobat, cursing the horse in a whisper of obscene caress*” (“Darl,” 106).

Jewel, who, like the Centaur, has both human and animal features, is made of wood and knows how to control contrary forces and to keep his balance: “[...] and with the hub turning smoothly under his sole he lifts the other foot and squats there, staring straight ahead, motionless, lean, wooden-backed as though carved squatting out of the lean wood” (“Darl,” 133). Even deprived of his horse, adamant, he preserves his unflinching integrity as an individual. Jewel always goes in a straight line and does not seem to lose ground at the sight of the new Mrs. Bundren. Actually, after getting rid of two burdens, the mother’s corpse and the son who committed arson and endangered other people’s property, the family mathematically recovers its balance: Addie is replaced by a new woman and the loss of Darl is made up for by Dewey Dell’s future child. Cash is physically crippled but linguistically empowered. Todd even perceives Cash as the man who has restored the balance of power within the family and especially his father’s authority which had been undermined by Addie. His neurotic obsession with the balance of the coffin conveys his wish to bury his subversive mother: “Addie has subverted the patriarchal order of things, and Cash’s neurotic logic says that her burial will enable the reversion of that order” (Todd 57). The loss of Darl’s aesthetic vision is counterbalanced by the graphophone that Cash is so eager to listen to, as if music were ultimately the most adequate way of finding balance and harmony. As for Anse, he is finally rewarded for having been faithful to his pledge and his rewards are new teeth and a new wife.

Doreen Fowler questions the validity of the Bundrens’ resort to replacements or substitutes: for example, Vardaman is given only bananas and instead of getting the toy train he was yearning after, he is ironically separated from his brother Darl by the real train which is “a sorry substitute for an original plenitude with no lacks or exclusions of any kind” (328). Fowler underlines the fact that the surviving members

of the family “vainly attempt to plug up the gap at the center of their being with substitute after substitute, metaphor after metaphor” (328). Ted Atkinson also lays the stress on the Bundrens’ pursuit of materialistic happiness: “Symbolically staging consumer behaviour in the capitalist marketplace, the Bundrens bury an object of need (the coffin) to go in vigorous pursuit of objects they want” (25). The Bundrens are thus doomed to displace their desires endlessly and, like Addie who fails to match deeds on earth with words in the air, they will never match reality with their innermost desires. Some signs of imbalance can be seen in what Fowler refers to as “the novel’s closing cartoon-image” (328). The woman is physically distorted, “a kind of duck-shaped woman” (“Cash,” 149) and Cash notices “them kind of hardlooking pop eyes like she was daring ere a man to say nothing” (“Cash,” 149), so that she may be expected to impose tyranny on the family. The mother figure is likely to be replaced by a tyrant.

Substitutes are fallacious. Moreover, the split within the family body—the amputation—is summarized by Cash in the very last lines, when he regrets Darl’s absence from the domestic sphere: “This world is not his world; this life his life” (“Cash,” 149). Darl’s final monologue loses any form of transparency and shows that “something” is amiss not only in his life but also in life more generally. He first notices the two men’s “mismatched coats” (“Darl,” 146) and then remembers images appearing on the nickel and in the spy-glass that include both animality and humanity, and suggest monstrosity. He first emphasizes the apparent ordinariness of his family whose balance seems to be restored right in the heart of the Southern *topos*, the square and its courthouse. Yet, Darl slips into a form of delirium that is definitely brought about not only by these monstrous images but also by the grotesque vision of his family eating bananas and ready to hit the road without him. The repetitions of his “yes” may be his response to the final tableau of a family whose balance may prove artificial and illusory and whose future is quite uncertain. The end of the novel does not provide any narrative closure and gives free rein to interpretations, illustrating once again the conventionality of signs and the slipping contact between signifier and signified, similar to Addie’s floating coffin that keeps slipping away. The clock-shaped box, like the graphophone, is definitely a metaphor for the novel, itself a tenuous construction composed of building-blocks, “on the bevel,” which is always on the verge of collapsing. *As I Lay Dying* provided Faulkner with another opportunity to experiment with the limits of narrative technique and language through a baroque concert of voices

that could easily slip into cacophony, as one can easily lose one's balance and one's sanity: "When you write, you renounce the certainty of knowledge, run the risk of losing your sanity and venture to the edge of insanity" (my translation).⁴

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⁴ "Écrire, c'est renoncer à l'assurance des savoirs, s'exposer à la folie, s'aventurer jusqu'à son bord" (Bleikasten 272).

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