



Mesopotamian Faulkner: *As I Lay Dying* and the Southern Anthropocene in the 1930s

Abstract: This article attempts to read William Faulkner's novel *As I Lay Dying* (1930) within the recent theoretical framework of the Anthropocene. It pays particular attention to the local appearance of the Anthropocene in the interwar American South, which became visible in flooding and deforestation. It argues that the story of the hill-farming Bundren family requires more than an ideological reading that would emphasize the eventual assimilation of the family to the modern market in the New South. It advances instead an ecological-historical interpretation, central to which is a reading of the deceased Addie Bundren as a topographical figure for the toxic southern soil. Her family are seen as continuers of a tradition of "agrilogistics" (Timothy Morton) that dates back over twelve thousand years to Mesopotamia. The article tries to identify the consequences of this reading for Faulkner's representation of character, which can be seen as a static product of the deep time of geological periods. Finally, it argues that Darl Bundren's subjectless, extreme consciousness is the only one in the novel that has some comprehension of the advent of the southern Anthropocene, although he has no way of extracting himself from this advent apart from absolute madness.

Keywords: literature of the interwar South, cotton agriculture, the Anthropocene, flooding, "agrilogistics", deep time, World War One, the monster-mother, anthropological characteristics of the human, masks, comedy of survival

On a summer Sunday in June 1936 James Agee was driving through Centerboro, Alabama, while researching his project about cotton tenants that was to become *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941). Suddenly a "sunday deathliness" fell on him, a deadly grip that seemed to have "the whole of the south" in its power. He writes: "It was like returning several thousand years after the end of the world, when nothing but the sun was left, faithfully blasting away upon the dead earth as it twisted up, like a drowned body swollen light and lifted to the surface."¹ Agee is describing the debilitating hold that the sharecropping economy has on the region during the low cotton prices of the Depression decade: however, he does this not through a cool documentation of poverty and debt in the manner of a New Deal sociologist, but rather through an acceleration into the timescale of post-human worlds. It was

1. James Agee, Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960), 380–381.

as though Agee was describing *avant la lettre* the results of the Anthropocene, the era that was first named by geologists in 2000 and which refers to the minuscule time period of late technological civilization when humankind starts irreversibly to influence geological formations and puts the biomass on a course toward extinction (the beginning of the Anthropocene has been variously dated by earth scientists from 1610 to 1964).² But it was not only Agee among southern artists in the 1930s and 1940s who saw various geological mutations of the “dead earth” as tableaux morts. Others also recorded such ecocidal forms as red gullies, flooded rivers, deforested lands, and tobacco roads (from Erskine Caldwell’s fiction of the poor white to Walker Evans’s Farm Security Administration photographs of the northern Mississippi hills to Pare Lorentz’s film *The River* [1938]). Arthur Raper and Ira Reid, sociologists of the Chapel Hill school, viewed these topographical formations, particularly red gullies, as a long-term consequence of the crop monoculture of the slaveholding plantation system and of its continuation in sharecropping.³ But what is prophetic in southern writers of the 1930s is the peculiar weft of their literary imagination, which anticipates the concept of the Anthropocene and its “ground-breaking attempt to think together Earth processes, life, human enterprise and time into a totalising framework.”⁴ One novel stands out for its catastrophic intertwining of human and geological time: William Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying* (1930). It narrates the mule-drawn journey of a family of Mississippi farmers, the Bundrens, to bury their mother in the town of Jefferson. The most powerful scene concerns the crossing by the funeral cortège of a flooded river, a crossing that is hindered by the cutting down of trees around the fording place (the novel was published three years after the Great Mississippi

2. Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Anthropocene Time,” *History and Theory* 57(1) (2018): 19. In “Defining the Anthropocene” Simon Lewis and Mark Maslin present a detailed review of the possible dates for the onset of the Anthropocene, noting that some commentators push this date back to the widespread adoption of agriculture around eight thousand years ago. For Lewis and Maslin, however, any new geological era, such as the Anthropocene, needs to be initiated by a global marker in stratigraphic material (such as rock or ice). Early farming, in their argument, produced only local and diachronous effects. Their two candidates for the starting date of the Anthropocene, therefore, are 1610, the time when the discovery of the New World provides a stratigraphic “golden spike,” and 1964, when another “spike” is evident after the use of nuclear bombs. See Simon L. Lewis and Mark A. Maslin, “Defining the Anthropocene,” *Nature* 519 (March 2015): 171–180, especially 174.

3. Arthur D. Raper and Ira De A. Reid, *Sharecroppers All* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1941), 220. See also Paul S. Sutter, “What Gullies Mean: Georgia’s ‘Little Grand Canyon’ and Southern Environmental History,” *Journal of Southern History* 76.3 (August 2010), 579–616.

4. Clive Hamilton, Christophe Bonneuil and François Gemenne, “Thinking the Anthropocene,” in: *The Anthropocene and the Global Environmental Crisis: Rethinking Modernity in a New Epoch*, ed. Clive Hamilton, Christophe Bonneuil, and François Gemenne (London: Routledge 2015), 2.

Flood of 1927 and probably refers to this event). Darl, the most preternaturally sensitive of the Bundren family, observes how at the center of the river “the motion of the wasted world accelerates just before the final precipice.”⁵ That sudden speeding up of a “wasted world” mimics what earth scientists have recently called “the Great Acceleration” of the Anthropocene.⁶ In addition, just as Agee converts the southern Anthropocene into the image of a female corpse, so Addie’s body is a tableau mort that can fold into itself the topographical drama of a region. André Bleikasten observes that the Homeric title “as I lay dying” – Agamemnon’s description in *The Odyssey* of his descent into the underworld as he is being killed by his wife’s lover – applies to each member of the family as they contemplate in the mother’s body how “the process of dying” is paradoxically at the “heart of life.”⁷ If Addie when alive is identified through her monologue with “the dark land” and its “wild” eroticism, then it could be said that her death marks the loss of the site of the archaic Mother.⁸ This site can no longer provide the consolations of epic poetry or of the formal pageantry of bereavement. The mourning process now spins off into atomized monologues of the family mourners in which the words and phenomenological worlds of the speakers are hollowed out according to various schemes of disembodiment. Vardaman’s seeing Jewel’s horse in the dark barn as “an unrelated scattering of components” is one vivid symptom of this disembodiment.⁹

Why should it be the supposedly backward, even neo-feudal, area of the 1930s South that can be associated with the Anthropocene *avant la lettre* when this concept is usually associated with technological overdevelopment? One answer is that the economy of the 1930s South was not, strictly speaking, pre-modern: as scholars such as John T. Matthews have insisted, the plantation economy of the region was being combined in the 1920s and 1930s with a growing modern commodity market, urbanization and factory growth.¹⁰ James Agee was prescient when he wrote in *Cotton Tenants*, the first draft of his later work on the three tenant families, that the interwar South was “a society which is not merely one thing but two:

5. William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying* (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1963), 115. Susan Scott Parrish reads *As I Lay Dying* as Faulkner’s response to the devastating Mississippi floods of 1927. See *The Flood Year 1927: A Cultural History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 209–229. I am indebted to this interpretation, which also makes use of the recent theorization of the Anthropocene.

6. Hamilton, Bonneuil, and Gemenne, “Thinking the Anthropocene,” 1.

7. André Bleikasten, *The Ink of Melancholy: Faulkner’s Novels from The Sound and the Fury to Light in August* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 164.

8. Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 138.

9. Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 47. On “problems of disembodiment” in the novel see Eric J. Sundquist, *Faulkner: The House Divided* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), 29.

10. John Matthews, “As I Lay Dying in the Machine Age,” *boundary 2*, 19.1 (1992), 74–83.

a dizzy mixture of feudalism and of capitalism in its latter stages.”¹¹ The opening scene of Robert Penn Warren’s *All the King’s Men* (1946) pulls together Agee’s two stages of feudalism and modernity in one topographical ensemble. Governor Stark, a southern version of a 1930s dictator, speeds up a hypnotic white slab of Louisianaian autobahn while in the same historical moment Afro-American cotton laborers watch his automobile disinterestedly, their hoes unchanged since the time of Moses and Hammurabi.¹² At one side of the highway, Warren’s narrator notes ominously, there are red gullies that were caused by the logging industry after the Civil War – these gullies being the most definitive anthropogenic markers of the southern Anthropocene. Governor Stark and his automobile sit at the apex of a system of extraction of fossil fuels (first wood, then petroleum) and convert it into the empty signifier of speed, the God-term of technological modernity. This blankness is exchangeable with the political void implicit in Stark’s totalitarian logic of modern power.

But the hoes say it: the origins, if not the conclusion, of the Anthropocene lie not in the machine but in agriculture. Perhaps in order to understand this early prominence of the Anthropocene in the South one needs to consider agriculture, as Timothy Morton does, as the first technology and as the first form of ecocide. Morton sees the origins of what he calls agrilogistics – “the machine that is agriculture as such, a machine that predates Industrial Age machinery” – in the cultivation of wild barley and wheat in Mesopotamia 12,500 years ago. This toxic redefinition of the natural earth then spread into Eurasia and with it, Morton argues, came a specific ontological regimen that marked off Aristotelian substance from the nonhuman and from the accidental (allowing for the creation of private property).¹³ As Warren’s synopsis history at the beginning of *All the King’s Men* shows, Morton’s agrilogistics had its own trajectory in the Depression South, one that started in the plantation economy of the Old South, continued into the sharecropping system and small independent farms of the New South (farms such

11. James Agee, *Cotton Tenants: Three Families*, ed. John Summers (New York: Melville House, 2013), 222.

12. The remark about the Mosaic hoes is taken from Raper and Reid, *Sharecroppers*, 21.

13. Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 42–59 (quotation 42). Morton’s argument that the Anthropocene begins in early agrilogistics is evidently at odds with the position of Lewis and Maslin because they contend that early agriculture did not bring about a shift in geological eras (see note 2 above). But the development of a “Mesopotamian” agriculture, particularly in Faulkner’s South, could be seen as a powerful accessory to the global processes set in motion with the discovery of the New World (which, according to Lewis and Maslin, do produce a stratigraphic marker around 1610). Faulkner’s story “Delta Autumn” shows how the logic of “Mesopotamian” agriculture and the destruction of native peoples work in tandem.

as those of Stark's father or of the Bundrens), and then went on to produce hyper-modern governments such as that of Governor Stark.

The lives of the Bundren family in *As I Lay Dying* may be tracked on this southern trajectory. The Bundrens are not quite the autonomous farmers that were praised by the Southern Agrarians of the 1930s; they can rather be seen as dependent participants in an international, commodified market. Their Mississippian soil is described in "Delta Autumn" (1942), Faulkner's later threnody to the ecological devastation of the Yoknapatawpha region, as an "untreed land warped and wrung to mathematical squares of rank cotton."¹⁴ The first monologue in *As I Lay Dying*, that of Darl, sets out a spatial logic of agrilogistics as he passes through one of these mathematical squares. Darl walks with his brother Jewel down a path as "straight as a plumb-line" between the apportioned cotton rows of the family field.¹⁵ They reach the yard of their home where Darl observes Cash who, as he cuts up planks and measures his mother's coffin, is compulsively driven by a concern with geometrical exactitude and balance. It is a tunnel vision that ends with Cash's acquisition of a "graphophone" in Jefferson and with his assimilation into the new urban marketplace. Cash – now the regressive consumer of popular music familiar from the studies of the Frankfurt School – finds that "a little music" is "about the nicest thing a fellow can have" when "he comes in tired of a night."¹⁶ The other Bundrens are similarly absorbed into the new market of commodities when they reach Jefferson. Anse, for example, buys false teeth to help him marry a "duck-shaped woman" and eat "God's appointed food."¹⁷ The whole family in the last scene consume bananas out of a paper bag. Further, the black of Cash's skin when his cast is taken off, and the black cream on Jewel's burns from the barn fire, are signs of the growing proletarianization of their bodies, their closeness to unpropertied black labor.¹⁸

Many critics – John T. Matthews and Jay Watson amongst them – have argued for this ideological reading of the Bundrens' journey. But a Marxist narrative of a coordination of pre-modern interiorities to the capitalized economy of a New South cannot be the whole story. What the novel also shows is that the development of this

14. William Faulkner, *Novels 1942–1954* (New York: Library of America, 1994), 261. According to Charles S. Aiken, "the hill lands of the north Mississippi Loess Plains," where the Bundrens have their farm, were already by 1860 one of the most eroded parts of the United States because of "careless tillage practices" and because of the susceptibility of loess soil to erosion. See Charles S. Aiken, *William Faulkner and the Southern Landscape* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009), 145–146.

15. Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 7.

16. Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 206.

17. Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 208, 151.

18. This point is made in Jay Watson, *William Faulkner and the Faces of Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 194–195.

agrilogistics in the South – precisely because it weaves the human into the larger causative scheme of topography and climate—is approached by Faulkner through what Susan Scott Parrish calls “a new kind of timeline” and through a poetics of the Anthropocene.¹⁹ Dipesh Chakrabarty observes that in the Anthropocene it is the *anthropos* or the species that is the subject of geohistorical process rather than a “universal of capital.” “It is more like,” he says in a comment applicable to the characters of *As I Lay Dying*, “a universal that arises from a shared sense of a catastrophe.”²⁰ There is, as it were, a collective “we” that manifests itself in the Bundren family; it is a planetary “we” that is born out of an attunement to the slow temporality of the loess hills and to the poisonous agrilogistics that has been seeded within them. Anse, in one example of this attunement, “gazes out over the land, rubbing his knees” and says “I am a luckless man.”²¹ Dewey Dell similarly sees the land as the petrological grave of human time: “the hard girdle in which lie the outraged entrails of events” (she is also superimposing onto geological formations the outrage of her own “girdle,” the one that contains her unwanted foetus).²² Animal life is, if anything, more aware of the “catastrophe” in the environment. The mules pulling the cart, who are shortly to be drowned, can see “the shape of the disaster” in this water, a clairvoyance apparent to animal consciousness because it is embedded more intimately in natural processes.²³

Faulkner’s later comments that he subjected the family to “fire and flood” might suggest natural or Biblical disasters, but in the novel these two forms of disaster are started by or intensified by human actions (Darl sets light to the barn containing his mother’s coffin and the devastation of the flood is made worse by deforestation such as that practiced by Tull to pay his mortgage).²⁴ Susan Scott

19. Parrish, *Flood*, 7.

20. Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History: Four Theses,” *Critical Inquiry* 35.2 (2009): 222. Other commentators, who prefer terms such as the Capitalocene, have argued that the *anthropos* of the Anthropocene is too essentialist a term and that it overlooks the role of social processes and dominant (particularly western) classes in creating the conditions for the climate change. But Chakrabarty says in response that the concept of “capitalist globalization” does not account for the totality of damaging human interventions that have accrued over long periods of time. He, nevertheless, argues against the position that there might be a “human subject of history” (212, 215).

21. Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 17.

22. Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 93.

23. Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 115. The greater percipiency of animal consciousness over human in the context of the Anthropocene is explained by Bruno Latour. He observes that animal voice has traditionally been downgraded in “the Western metaphysics of speech” but in the modern era it has become the privileged place for “the articulation of a destabilized modern subject.” See Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Polity, 2017), 58.

24. William Faulkner, “Faulkner at Virginia,” 30 May 1957, https://faulkner.lib.virginia.edu/display/wfaudio18_2.html#wfaudio18_2.20.

Parrish observes how the Great Flood of 1927, on which Faulkner's novel is based, was seen by contemporaries as a man-made disaster that called to mind the mud and bodies imagery of the First World War.²⁵ It is Darl whose personal history threads together the war and Mississippian disaster. In his last monologue he reveals that he has been in the war: "Darl had a little spy-glass he got in France at the end of the war. In it it had a woman and a pig with two backs and a face".²⁶ His "spy-glass" and its artificial optic sees a monstrous anamorphosis hidden in the "mathematical squares" of Yoknapatawpha; it uncovers figures of war that are not apparent to the calculative vision of Cash or the sheer vitalism of Jewel. After Darl, for example, sets fire to the barn that contains his mother's coffin he views the blaze through the war cubism of artists such as Paul Nash: the coffin is a "cubistic bug" and "the hall-way looks like a searchlight turned into rain."²⁷ Earlier the rain of the flood is not just warm to Darl, but "warm as though fired from a gun" – rain as a surreal projectile launched by artillery in France.²⁸ When Darl surveys the flood scene he sees – after his experience of trench warfare – earth, water and air interfuse with one another. As the cortège rides by the river, he watches the "floorless" road rise up between felled trees "as if the road too had been soaked free of earth and floated upward," a trope of the "spectral" mimicking of land that Faulkner particularly associated with the fiction of the western front.²⁹

More broadly, in the crossing Darl sees the natural world as mechanized. The river itself is "like machinery": a description that cuts across the hitherto self-enclosed divides of nature and the machine.³⁰ Bruno Latour argues that one consequence of the theory of the Anthropocene is an alteration of the Enlightenment episteme according to which the animated human subject transfers intention to an inanimate object. Now, in the Anthropocene, the object is re-animated and the subject

25. See Parrish, *Flood*, 43. From the perspective of Georges Bataille's history of energy as expenditure, the First World War resulted from the need to burn off the vast accumulation of fossil fuel energy that had been building up over the nineteenth century. See Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy. Volume One: Consumption*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1988), 24–25.

26. Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 202.

27. Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 175.

28. Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 62.

29. Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 112. In a review on "Literature and War" (1924), Faulkner observed that war novelist Henri Barbusse in *Under Fire* (1916) could depict a hill so soaked by rain that "the very particles of earth rise floating to the top of the atmosphere, and air and earth are a single medium..." See William Faulkner, *Essays, Speeches and Public Letters*, ed. James B. Meriwether (New York: Modern Library, 2004), 254. Earlier on the lumber trip the ex-soldier Darl had described the rain as creating a "runnel of yellow neither water nor earth" that flows "down the hill dissolving into a streaming mass of dark green neither of earth nor sky" (Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 42).

30. Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 130.

correspondingly de-animated.³¹ In the Bundrens' crossing of the river, for example, a log heaves up, carrying "a long gout of foam [...] like the beard of an old man or goat," and vengefully upends the wagon.³² An inert thing becomes a resuscitated Pan, Silenus or a "Christ" (Faulkner's description).³³ But at the center of the river these metamorphic exchanges of subject and object reach a state of pure circularity that Darl calls a "myriad original motion." Darl senses that this "motion" can completely de-animate individual identity: "As though the clotting which is you had dissolved into the myriad original motion, and seeing and hearing in themselves blind and deaf; fury in itself quiet with stagnation."³⁴ He is describing how, in this "original motion," the differentiation between subject and object falls away. As a consequence, the "clotting" of identity – blind to both what is inside and outside itself – is unclotted. One result for the brothers is the severing of the umbilical link of the self to Mother Earth – the earth-being referred to by Addie Bundren and Dewey Dell in their monologues.³⁵ For the "dead eyes" of "three blind men" (Darl, Jewel, and Cash) the wet, pregnant body of Dewey Dell beneath her dress – its shape following "the horizons and the valleys of the earth" – are "mammalian ludicrosities."³⁶ It is Darl who is most aware of this unclotting since his perspective is that of the subjectless or 'mad' self. He can distribute himself, evacuate his own selfhood, into a type of omniscient, portable consciousness that is similar to that of the author (Darl is telepathic: he sees the moment of Addie's death when she is miles away; he knows about Dewey Dell's secret pregnancy; and he is aware that Jewel's father is the Reverend Whitfield.)

Yet Darl's is not just an arbitrary madness. It is a madness that has distinct topographical implications, one that specifically cleaves to a map of the internationalized South of the 1910s and 1920s. A relatively new road runs past the Bundrens' home (probably part of Governor Vardaman's modernizing drive for state highways of 1906, which his Progressivist successor realized in 1916) and Anse curses it for saddling him with taxes and for taking away his son to France. Anse likes vertical things such as a tree, a stand of corn or a man because these show God's intention that such things "stay put" (there is a conservative-agrarian sense of *anthropos* behind this hankering for the upright and rooted), but he feels disquiet over the intrusion of objects that suggest lateral movement, such as roads. Now with the road running past his house his life has been, as it were, lateralized:

31. Latour, *Facing ...*, 58–62.

32. Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 117.

33. Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 116.

34. Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 130.

35. Thinking about her secret pregnancy Dewey Dell says: "I feel like a wet seed wild in the hot blind earth" (Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 53).

36. Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 130.

“the land” has been “switched [...] around longways” and this “longways” now extends overseas. When Dewey Dell says that Darl’s eyes are “full of the land dug out of his skull and the holes filled with distance beyond the land,” she is observing that these eyes move along the lateral lines of the road, lines that extend outwards to include Mississippi within a globalized space.³⁷ To comprehend this new space – the space of the “hyperobjects” of world war and of the Anthropocene – requires an excessive, pluralistic consciousness such as Darl’s.³⁸

Darl’s desubstantialization of entities is capable of an uncanny critique of the capitalized economy of the Mississippi. On doing a last extra job of carting lumber before Addie’s death, Darl lies awake under “a strange roof.” He thinks of the mysteries of the commodity and its difference from the natural object (his example – a pertinent one given Mississippian deforestation – is that of wood). Extending the radical implications of *esse est percipi* that he uses to unravel his own sense of self, Darl thinks that the wagon load of wood lies outside in a limbo of unrealization, dependant upon his own perception to make it actual: “I can hear the rain shaping the wagon that is ours, the load that is no longer theirs that felled and sawed it nor yet theirs that bought it and which is not ours either, lie on our wagon though it does, since only the wind and the rain shape it only to Jewel and me.”³⁹ The wood lies between buyer and seller, belonging to neither; it thereby turns into a slippery agrilogistical fiction. This piece of transgressive economic thinking is prompted in Darl by his experience of war: the rain on the roof, shortly to bring the flood, is the same rain he heard on “strange roof[s]” of billets during the First World War (the situation is similar to that described in Edward Thomas’s “Rain”).⁴⁰

Darl shows his antipathy to the laws of property in his burning of Gillipsie’s barn, that historic gesture of poor white anger at large landowners. He is also trying to burn up the coffin of the mother he hates. He says, “I cannot love my mother, because I have no mother.”⁴¹ Are these two motives conjoined? For the mother in the novel is also a figure for southern agriculture: both mothers produce defective offspring, either in Addie’s unwanted children or in a land-eroding agrilogistics. Darl’s response to this mother-matrix – which appears to him as the beast in the spyglass – is one of an existential fear. It could be that he is calling up the oldest image of the mother, the one that Jean-Joseph Goux says

37. Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 31, 32, 24.

38. Hyperobject is Morton’s term for objects such as the Anthropocene that are too large for perception. See, for example, *Dark Ecology*, 25.

39. Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 65.

40. Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 65. Edward Thomas, *Poems* (London: Selwyn and Blount, 1917), 54–55.

41. Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 75.

belongs to the “monomyth” of Greek literature.⁴² This monomyth is a trial narrative where the hero figure (Jason, Perseus, Bellerophon, Oedipus) has to kill this mother-monster and cut himself off from the terrifying submergence in primary, animal materiality that she embodies (the hero’s reward is marriage with a king’s daughter).⁴³ As in an arrested, incomplete version of the trial narrative, Addie’s presence as mother-monster hangs over the entire novel, lingering in inchoate animal forms. Darl and Vardaman imagine her transformation into a horse (as the mother of Jewel) or a fish. In Vardaman’s notorious one-line monologue – “My mother is a fish” – Addie becomes kin with the viscid materiality of Goux’s monster-mother, particularly in that Vardaman’s fish is composed of blood, cut-up sections, and mud. This mother never dies, in Vardaman’s mind, because her material form always metamorphizes into other people (he says of the fish: “Tomorrow it will be cooked and et and she will be him and pa and Cash and Dewey Dell and there won’t be anything in the box [coffin]”).⁴⁴ Darl regards his multiple, portable consciousness as a type of shield against this monster-mother. There is a curious conversation that Vardaman reports having with Darl in which Darl denies his own existence: “‘But you *are*, Darl,’ I said. ‘I know it,’ Darl said. ‘That’s why I am not *is*. *Are* is too many for one woman to foal.’”⁴⁵ Darl is saying that his plural consciousness is conjugable, in a grammatical sense, with “are” and not “is.” What Darl wants to defend himself against is the quantitative or normative self that is the “I.” Behind this “I” lies the shade of the mother-monster who is incorporated and repressed as part of that self’s formation (the monster is the horse-woman who “foal[s]” the “is”). Adapting Goux’s thesis, Timothy Morton argues that the presence of the monster-mother as figure of the land precedes the astrologistical revolution and remains contained within it as an “arche-lithic” predecessor.⁴⁶ It is a baleful, feminized body that is very different from Agrarian or Dionysian versions of southern earth (such as Anse’s praise for rooted corn or Dewey Dell’s land as “wet seed”). The presence of the mother-monster hints at the toxicity of the meme of generation, both agricultural and sexual, in interwar Mississippi (in another way this toxic meme of reproduction is suggested in the unwanted pregnancy of Dewey Dell, who conceives her child while she is picking cotton).

This particular symbolic genealogy of the modern managerial state in Mississippi is set out in the notoriously obscure final monologue of Darl. Darl voices this

42. Jean-Joseph Goux, *Oedipus, Philosopher*, trans. Catherine Porter (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 3. For a brief summary of Goux’s thesis see 2–3.

43. Goux, *Oedipus Philosopher*, 7–8.

44. Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 67, 55.

45. Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 79.

46. Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 63. Morton defines “arche-lithic” as “a primordial relatedness of humans and nonhumans that has never evaporated.”

monologue as he is taken by train to the state asylum for the insane (the improvement of which was part of Governor Vardaman's Progressivist legacy). He goes off on an obscene riff concerning the fronts and backs of bodies, a riff which sets out the entire state system as a system of unnatural violations and forced equivalences. A state, in other words, obscurely informed by the incestuous presence of the "arche-lithic" mother. The two guards with the identical haircuts "are riding on the state's money which is incest": "incest" is intended in the symbolic sense that both guards are representatives of a state that reduces its citizens to an abstract equivalence. This equivalence is similar to the economic equivalence of the seller or the buyer in the supposedly free market that is generated by "the state's money." Then Darl considers versions of this money that present sanitized combinations of woman and beast (a buffalo) on a nickel coin; these are in the anodyne form of two faces (without the lewd appearance of the "back" parts of the body). Finally, he slides into the foundational scandal – the primary scene of agrilogistics – the representation of the mother-monster in the French spy-glass. This beast with the "two backs and no face" brings to mind Darl's fury against his mother and suggests that in Darl's mind there are complex interconnections of the modern technological state and a primal monstrosity.⁴⁷ Both are implicit in the unfolding of agrilogistics in its passage toward the Anthropocene.

This aberrant consciousness of Darl's is peculiarly receptive to the "shape of the disaster" that is the Anthropocene. Yet Darl's prescience is powerless to avert the "disaster" and can only escape awareness of its approach through absolute madness, the madness that bursts out in his Bataillian laughter as he is carted off to the asylum. Darl is a uniquely tragic figure, but for all of the pettiness of the other members of the family – their hankering for dentures, bananas and music boxes – they are also in their way calibrated to a deep time, to the slow time of earth processes.⁴⁸ This time is very different from the small-scale time of usual historical processes (which is why an ideological reading of the Bundrens as examples of proletarianized southern labour seems incomplete). In the novel deep time is most explicitly invoked in the flood scene. As Darl, Cash and Jewel are about to cross the river, Darl observes that now time does not run "straight before us in a diminishing line" but is rather a "looping string" between him and the opposite bank – a time, in other words, that recapitulates itself and is almost static.⁴⁹

47. Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 202.

48. For one explanation of "deep history" see Chakrabarty, "Climate of History", 212–213.

49. Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 115. This deep time is almost static, but it is actually slow moving and it can suddenly become explosive. This pattern is noted by James E. Caron in "Emerson's Sublime Pastoralism, Parody, and Second Sight in Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*," *The Faulkner Journal* 29.1 (2015): 89. The action of the delayed fuse – resulting in catastrophic consequences – is the way that time behaves in the model of the Anthropocene. There is also a distinct causality that is

The Bundrens' attunement to deep time is reflected in the pre-psychological way that Faulkner depicts character in the novel. The human qualities of the family do not seem to arise primarily through psychological development but seem species characteristics that are correlated with the landscape.⁵⁰ Peabody, the doctor who comes to visit the dying Addie, says: "That's the one trouble with this country: everything, weather, all, hangs on too long. Like our rivers, our land: opaque, slow, violent: shaping and creating the life of man in its implacable and brooding image."⁵¹ "Implacable and brooding" are qualities of slow temporality that translate readily into Anse's disposition. Anse is also filled with "outrage" – that quintessential Faulknerian characteristic that denotes an impotent metaphysical protest against embeddedness in an environment. When Anse curses the rain for delaying the funeral, he appears as a "humped silhouette partaking of that owl-like quality of awry-feathered, disgruntled outrage within which lurks a wisdom too profound or too inert for even thought."⁵² Anse's wisdom is "inert" and "profound," which is to say it is a petrological wisdom that originates in deep time. These topographical elements of Anse's character often mean that his inner life is frozen in a mask. Later, for example, he stands in the rain and presents "a face carved by a savage caricaturist [over which] a monstrous burlesque of all bereavement flowed."⁵³ The mask, apparent also in other characters, strips the face of agency and produces what Latour calls the "petromorphism of humans."⁵⁴ These petrological features of character might suggest that the influence of landscape is that of a Taine-like naturalistic milieu imposing itself on passive recipients. But Anse, by pursuing hill-farming, is following an anthropogenic course of action: the loess hills, where he lives, are a primary example of landscape erosion produced by his practice of cotton monoculture. Peabody shrewdly notes Anse's contribution to ecocide: "Too bad the Lord made the mistake of giving trees roots and giving the Anse Bundrens He makes feet and legs. If He'd just swapped them, there wouldn't ever be a worry about this country being deforested someday."⁵⁵

appropriate to the Anthropocene in which human actions are not apparent as causes but rather as long-delayed effects (See, for example, Latour, *Facing Gaia*, 56, 71).

50. Chakrabarty observes that "Species thinking [...] is connected to the enterprise of deep history" ("Climate of History," 213).

51. Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 38

52. Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 41.

53. Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 63.

54. Latour, *Facing Gaia*, 115–116. Other examples of this freezing of expressive contour in a mask are Darl's description of Jewel and his horse as "two figures carved for a tableau savage in the sun" and Darl's comparison of the struggle of Jewel with Gillipsie in the barn as that of "two figures in a Greek frieze" (Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 13, 175).

55. Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 35–36.

As I Lay Dying, however, is not only a dark tale of the Anthropocene. The outlandish funeral journey is also in the tradition of the nineteenth-century southwestern humorists such as George Washington Harris, particularly with regard to their topos of “the frustrated funeral” (indeed Faulkner’s novel can be regarded as an expansion of Harris’s Sut Lovingood tale, “Well! Dad’s Dead”).⁵⁶ But the peculiar tension of the novel is that it is both social comedy and apocalyptic fable, both about Anse’s marriage to the “duck-shaped woman” and about “the shape of the disaster” in the land. Character exists on the level of human pettiness and at the more primordial level of deep time. This double-tiering of character is apparent just before Darl and Cash cross the river, when they talk of “old trivial things” such as Tull’s paying off his mortgage. These “trivial” preoccupations can co-exist with a more primal way of looking. For the brothers suddenly “plunge unimpeded through one another’s eyes and into the ultimate secret place where [...] Cash and Darl crouch flagrant and unabashed in all the old terror and the old foreboding.” The “ultimate secret place” seems to be at a pre-psychological or anthropological level, which is sensitized to the southern Anthropocene and responds with the “crouch[ing]” and “foreboding” of prehistoric men.⁵⁷ There is a hidden link that ties together these two discourses – the discourse of social comedy and that of the *anthropos* implicit in the Anthropocene. The link is the drive for survival in characters such as Anse, Cash, Jewel, and Dewey Dell – what Faulkner called their capacity to “endure [...] even in [their] folly.”⁵⁸ What the comic push toward survival is on one level of the plot is, on the other, the unconscious destructiveness of a species engaged in an anthropogenic agriculture. For to survive within the so-called natural world is to survive within what Morton calls a “twelve-thousand-year old human product” called “Nature.” This, as Morton argues, is an “illusion” that seems at first to be a beneficial subordination to the rhythm of the seasons but which has, from the beginning, the momentum of agrilogistics contained within it. So merely to survive within this “Nature” – as the Bundrens so steadfastly do – is hasten the acceleration of the Anthropocene or “Nature in its toxic nightmare form.”⁵⁹

56. For the type of southwestern story called the “frustrated funeral” see Patricia Shroeder, “The Comic World of *As I Lay Dying*,” in: *Faulkner and Humor*, ed. Doreen Fowler (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1986), 40.

57. Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 111–112.

58. Faulkner, “Faulkner at Virginia,” 30 May 1957, *Faulkner*. https://faulkner.lib.virginia.edu/display/wfaudio18_2.html#wfaudio18_2.20.

59. Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 58–59.

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