

Empty Images and Holy Relics

Photographic Complications in *As I Lay Dying* and *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*

by

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Abstract

William Faulkner began writing his novel *As I Lay Dying* the day of the 1929 stock market crash. James Agee and Walker Evans's book *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* was published near the end of the Great Depression. Despite the stretch of time between the publications of the two novels, both Faulkner and Agee pay a tremendous amount of attention to sight and ways of seeing. Additionally, both authors deal with ways of seeing in the rural South in these two works. This paper will argue that both authors use a photographic way of documenting and seeing the world. The first chapter will deal with how Darl and Addie in *As I Lay Dying* and Agee himself see using photographs or a kind of photographic vision. Yet, to talk about photographs in the South is to inadvertently join into a tradition of Civil War photography. This photographic tradition consists of photographs strewn with bodies of the dead and of those that are doomed to die. The Southern image seeks to mediate the passage of time and its decay.

Additionally, a photographic vision allows the past to be preserved. A past preserved in images, however, serves only as a reminder that the past is lost. During the Depression, the poor white farmer in the South was socially marginalized. Both these works deal with the marginalization of the small farmer. For these kinds of characters to see photographically means that their vision is one of loss and of death. As a result, Agee and Darl deal with a sense of trauma as well as a desire to preserve and document what is lost—a desire to make monuments, to mythologize. Both authors deal with this desire differently, however. Faulkner focuses on the emptiness of loss, on what sparks the desire to remember in the first place. Agee, on the other hand, focuses on how loss is monumentalized and does so through the bodies of his subjects. He uses his subjects, in particular Annie Mae Gudger, almost as holy monuments or relics.

The second chapter will deal with the issue of what it means when photographic vision is turned on, or perhaps even given to, women in the text. Traditionally, the gaze is thought to objectify women. While arguments certainly have been made that women serve as objects in these works, this chapter will seek to move beyond that sense of the gaze in order to find out what happens when women serve as photographs. The represented bodies of women, through their reproductive function, much like the camera itself, serve as a way to connect the present thrust of desire with a past that is constantly lost. In the South, fear surrounds the “purity” of the female body as it serves as a vehicle to perpetuate whiteness. The male Southerner worries very much about its demise. Yet death and decay converge in the maternal body through the fight to preserve it photographically.

This thesis will conclude with the idea that the maternal body is looked to in times of hardship to assuage fears of death and decay. However, the issue of how meaning is made, of how we remember still remains.

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Introduction

Photographs haunt the world we live in. They make the moments that have passed present. They make us remember. I can walk through my parents' house and see myself grow-up, see my parents age, and look into the shallow eyes of dead relatives. William Faulkner wrote, "The past is never dead. It's not even past" (Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun*). His words express truth for, especially in the presence of a photograph, we remember and have a record of that which has been lost. The photograph keeps the past in the present and serves as a record of loss.

Following the stock market crash of 1929 and throughout the Great Depression, the photograph was used as precisely that: a record of loss. When thinking of the images of that time, one pictures the bowed heads of men in breadlines, the hungry faces of children, and the tired frames of dilapidated houses. These are pictures of shame, of want, and of a longing for that which was. These pictures show the losses of a nation. Historian Morris Dickstein writes that the 1930s in particular had a certain "fascination with the lower depths, with people rendered almost invisible by our almost religious faith in American prosperity, equality, and social mobility" (18). Though not necessarily for the first time in American history, the Depression did herald in an American era of attempting to see the socially invisible with a camera, to find and to know the people and parts of life that had no place in the concept of the American Dream. In other words, the Depression prompted people to think about what was left wanting in America, to think about those who were invisible and forgotten—those who had been lost.

One of the groups of Americans who were lost, whose lifestyle was disappearing were the small farmers. President Roosevelt created the Farm Securities Administration (FSA) in 1936 to document the hardships faced by farmers. In order to mediate the reception of the FSA's actions, Roy Stryker (head of the FSA) sent out photographers to demonstrate that there was a

need in rural America that needed to be filled (Wells, 80-1).¹ Stryker's army of photographers traveled across the country looking to document and preserve a loss that needed to be recovered. One of the places where poverty, loss, and want converged was in the deep South. The sharecroppers and tenant farmers in the south were probably the poorest of Americans (Kennedy, 192). As critic Ted Atkinson remarks on the Southern farmer:

The damaging effects of the Great Depression hit particularly hard in rural America, home to the small farmer and repository of many ideals that had been formed in the nation's infancy...the yeoman farmer had remained one of the most enduring figures of strength and independence in American mythos...Once a paragon of productive work ethic, the yeoman farmer now became a gauge for measuring weakness and want..." (173-4)

Interestingly, it was this small southern farmer and his family that William Faulkner constructed his novel *As I Lay Dying* around and around this small southern farmer that James Agee and Walker Evans focused their documentary book *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Both these works engage with a way of life that has collapsed.

Both these works seek to preserve and monumentalize a vanishing way of life. I will argue that both works do so using the power of the photograph and rely on narrators that see the world and its collapse photographically. Faulkner's novel and Agee's book rely extensively on

¹ Photography critic and historian Liz Wells categorizes the aesthetic of the FSA photographs. She writes, "The FSA photographs are almost always of individuals and families, and often show them as weary and defenseless. They evoke images of strain, of mental fatigue, but they also tease out the bonds of affection and connection between people; especially between mothers and children. And, of course, they show people on the road, moving out; their possessions packed away, their furniture roped to the tops of cars or heaped on to a rickety truck. In these images, the solid elements of domestic life are often dissolved and relocated in strange, outdoor spaces" (81). I would like to point out the special attention she gives to pictures mothers and children as well as the images of fatigue. These themes are characteristic of photographs in the Depression.

sight and observation, on eyes and on lenses. This kind of photographic vision allows both Faulkner and Agee to deal with themes of death, loss, and the march of history as they seek to immortalize the present. Photographic vision also allows these authors to see with what cultural critic Susan Sontag calls a “mournful vision of loss” (67)—a way of seeing that is fixed on that which is not there, that which is vanishing. Yet what is important here as well is that both authors rely on photographic vision and, as a result, a “mournful” vision, in order to monumentalize the lives of poor farmers. In the South, to speak of photography, of being “mournful” and of monuments is also to speak of the Civil War. For a Southerner of the 1930s, the memory of the war was never far away and Civil War photography consists predominantly of images of the dead and daguerreotypes of soldiers doomed to die. I point this out not to dwell on the finer points of Civil War photography but to complicate the idea of photography in the South. I want to establish for the purposes of this thesis that a Southern photograph enters into a tradition strewn with dead bodies, with the idea of loss, of a past that is still remembered, and a trauma that is still inflicted onto memory. I want to suggest that the traumatic experience of the Crash and of poverty in the Depression as documented by Agee and Faulkner, to a certain extent, intersects with this earlier photographic sensibility.

In the first chapter of my thesis, I will focus on characters that *look*. I will tease out the ideas of the past, of death, and of loss as presented by Faulkner’s character Darl Bundren and Agee himself as represented in the pages of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. I will explain how I see photographic vision emerging. Agee includes photographs taken by Walker Evans in his book and so the photographic connection between words and images is explicit. Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying* proves more challenging as it is not traditionally spoken of as a photographic novel; neither is it spoken of as being a typical Depression-era novel. The plot revolves around the

Bundren family's struggle to reach Jefferson, Mississippi to bury their mother, Addie. The novel is narrated from various points of view, ranging from family members and Addie herself to outsiders observing the family. Their journey is Biblical in nature as they face decay, flood and fire to reach their final destination. The changing points of view suggest a divide not unfamiliar to a photograph because it creates a divide between the observer and the observed and raises problems about the construction of identity and how that identity manifests itself visually and externally versus identity as an internal concept. The novel expresses a kind of self-scrutiny that is mirrored by the 1930s documentary impulse. Indeed, literary critic Alfred Kazin commented on the 1930s, saying that "Never before [was] a nation...so hungry for news of itself" (Kazin, 378-9). Darl Bundren, Addie's second son, narrates the most sections. His thoughts on what he sees often have to do with death and memory and his way of seeing the other characters is photographic. Sontag, without meaning to, eerily describes Darl's special sight when she writes that photographing people "is to violate them, by seeing them as they can never see themselves, by having knowledge of them they can never have" (14). Darl's eyes act as a kind of intrusive lens that allows him to see the hidden aspects of people. Addie too, as a dead body framed by her coffin, is made to act photographically. When she finally speaks in her section, she muses over the inability of words to express the self, suggesting that the self is better understood as a whole image. She also thinks about the importance of the divide between the self and the body—a common problem of the photograph which contains the image of but not the actual, person.

I also believe that a consciousness about the time period is expressed. Faulkner's biographer, Joseph Blotner, notes that:

On October 25, 1929, the day after the panic broke out on Wall Street, he took one of these [onion] sheets, unscrewed the cap from his fountain pen, and wrote at the top in blue

in ‘As I Lay Dying.’ Then he underlined it twice and wrote the date in the upper right-hand corner. (238)

Faulkner was clearly conscious of the time he was writing in, though this does not mean necessarily that he was writing with any kind of political intent. Rather, it suggests an awareness of time and place—an awareness of surrounding and setting, of the feel of an era. Faulkner’s attention to date also implies that the moment he began writing needed to be documented; that this was a period of transition into an even more widely collapsed era. The Depression did not necessarily introduce a new wave of problems to the area as the South had been in a depression throughout the 1920s (Dickstien, xx). The Crash, however, meant that the poverty and loss already suffered by Southerners would spread to a national level and become visible.

Additionally, Faulkner wrote *As I Lay Dying* while working at a power plant. Most importantly, he wrote the novel “...just beyond a wall from where a dynamo ran. It made a deep, constant humming noise” (Blotner, 248). He wrote the book with a constant reminder of the technology of light and power—a technology of visibility. This is not to say that the hum of the dynamo is the driving force behind the novel but to suggest that the context from which *As I Lay Dying* emerged is equally and even similarly as complex as the novel itself. After all, Faulkner is writing a novel that revolves around comedic twists in the face of death—he is, in a sense, creating a novel out of tones of black and white, of the dark side and the lighter side of life.

Faulkner’s concern with the visible, with light, with ways of seeing the world anticipates the photography of the FSA. Atkinson writes:

With such visual imagery, Faulkner evokes a stark pastoral aesthetic that anticipates the fusion of post-Impressionist interest in shapes and lines with the visual clarity of social

realism found in, say, the Depression paintings of Thomas Hart Benton or the photographs that would comprise the Farm Security Administration collection.” (188-9)

Faulkner’s work, while often thought of as separate from the social concerns of the Depression, does seem to anticipate and engage in the artistic concerns of the decade.² I believe this is because the “visual clarity of social realism” that Atkinson speaks of relates to the past, to loss, and to death. Faulkner was also interested in the way photography was used to convey the image. According to critic Katherine R. Henninger:

Beginning at least as early as 1918, Faulkner staged or commissioned photographs of himself as a wounded ‘war hero’ in the Royal Canadian Air Force, with an obvious intent to stretch the truth; other times, as in numerous personal and publicity portraits taken by his hometown photographer, Colonel J.R. Cofield, with an apparent, but entirely conventional, desire to control his own public image. (“Faulkner, Photography, and a Regional Ethics of Form,” 125)

As was previously mentioned, the Depression-era photographs were concerned with justifying government aid—with maintaining a public image. In order to do so, the FSA photographers had to fit faces with the loss of a nation, to make poverty human, and to humanize those whose

² Critic Ted Atkinson points out that, traditionally, “Faulkner’s place in 1930s culture has been defined in terms of alienation, from both contemporaneous and retrospective points of view. During the Depression, Faulkner’s fiction appeared out of touch with what many influential denizens of the literary establishment, energized by leftist activism, considered relevant and worthwhile” (2). However, Atkinson debates this claim and conclude that Faulkner was perhaps more in touch with the times than has been previously thought. Additionally, critic Barbara Ladd points out, that in terms of women, “The search for textual evidence that Faulkner hated women, feared female sexuality, and punished female desire has been a preoccupation for many readers over the years...The only good woman in Faulkner was a dead woman, figuratively if not literally...The consequence is that Faulkner has been misconstrued as more socially conservative than he is” (28-9).

dignity had been lost through poverty. I think that in some respects, the FSA photographers, Walker Evans among them, above all else wanted to resurrect Americans who felt dead, who felt down trodden and reinvigorate them through the photograph because the photograph has the power of resurrection and perhaps even redemption. *As I Lay Dying* revolves around the death of Addie Bundren and it is through the form of the novel that she is resurrected, that she speaks from beyond the grave, that she becomes more than a rotting corpse. Additionally, the novel, while not necessarily always sympathetic, offers the reader a glance at the poor white Southern farmer in a way that makes him more human than he is traditionally depicted.³

Agee engages in a similar task in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. The book originally began as an assignment for *Fortune* magazine. Agee partnered with Walker Evans and traveled to Alabama to document the lives of poor sharecroppers in the South.⁴ The book is a collection of narratives, observations, details, and photographs, taken by Walker Evans. Yet rather than simply document their subjects, Agee takes certain liberties in his narration to craft the book. Indeed, it is almost as though he uses the lives of these southern farmers to uncover himself. Agee, throughout the book, is aware of his tenuous position as an observer, as someone who looks and witnesses the everyday lives of these representative American families. While in the South, William Faulkner was never far away from Agee's thoughts on his project. A southerner

³ Scholar Benjamin Joshua Doty wrote his MA thesis at Auburn University on the humanization of poor white farmers. Sylvia Jenkins Cook also writes about the depiction of the poor, Southern white in her book *From Tobacco Road to Route 66: The Southern Poor White in Fiction* and touches on both *As I Lay Dying* and *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*.

⁴ *And Their Children After Them: The Legacy of Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, James Agee, Walker Evans, and the Rise and Fall of Cotton in the South*, was written in the 1908s. A reporter and photographer went back to Agee and Evans's South and found the lifestyle greatly changed, if not entirely gone. I will not be using this book, however, I will talk about how documentation was important for Agee and Evans to do because it was a way of recording the past, of making sure loss was felt, that people remembered what had passed them.

himself, Agee was influenced by Faulkner's work and even, according to Laurence Bergreen (Agee's biographer), "...dreamed of William Faulkner..." while working on *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (219). This connection potentially suggests that Agee was engaging in the same aesthetic tradition as Faulkner; that it is possible to look at these two works published at different ends of the Depression as having a similar approach to their respective projects. It is my contention in this thesis that this similarity of approach can be seen through the photograph and photographic vision. In *As I Lay Dying*, Faulkner begins to think about the photograph implicitly in the text. Agee fleshes out the division between words and images by including actual photographs in his work.

The second chapter of this thesis will address the issues that arise when photographs and photographic vision are used by these authors. Specifically, it will focus on issues of the gaze,⁵ for it is impossible to talk about photography and the image without talking about how the image is made, perceived, and consumed. In this chapter, I will look at the maternal figures Addie Bundren and Annie Mae Gudger. Both texts revolve around the theme of men looking at women who are mothers. As mentioned earlier, photography in the Depression era enters into a conversation with Civil War photography—a conversation having to do in part with bodies: bodies that are dead and bodies that are doomed to die. Yet in the Depression era, the "doomed" bodies seemed to be female, rather than male soldiers. I think the fact that Dorothea Lange's "Migrant Mother" has become one of the signature images of the Great Depression speaks to this sense that the Depression weighed heaviest on and challenged families and the traditional flow of

⁵ When I speak of the gaze, I refer to the idea articulated by feminist film critic Laura Mulvey: "Woman then stands in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his phantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning" (8).

domestic life. The maternal body also serves as a connection to time, as it is through the maternal body that lineage ensures the continuation of history. I will argue that in the wake of the turmoil of the Depression, Faulkner focuses on the emptiness of the maternal form while Agee reconnects with traditional, Christian imagery for the sake of his own salvation. Both *As I Lay Dying* and *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* have two mothers as characters that serve an important purpose. In *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, Annie Mae Gudger is the person Agee finds himself drawn towards the most and he chooses to conclude the book with an image of Annie Mae and her baby son. Her portrait is also perhaps the most haunting and direct of Walker Evans's photographs making her stand apart from the others. *As I Lay Dying*, of course is structured around Addie Bundren's death and the act of carrying her body to her burial site.

Both works have a focus on women. How, then, does this relate to ideas of photography and photographic vision? For Agee, the answer is rather simple as the photograph of Annie Mae Gudger plays a large role in the formation of his book. Faulkner proves a little more troublesome as there are no explicit references to photography or photographic vision in *As I Lay Dying*. However, I believe that Addie is presented as a character who is contained within a frame—the frame of her bed as she dies, the frame of the door as Darl watches her die, the frame of her window where she watches her son Cash construct her coffin, and the frame of her coffin itself. Addie also speaks from beyond the grave—she is resurrected. Photographs resurrect the dead and the past as well, suggesting that the power of the image also rests in Addie. One of the issues Addie addresses in her section is the idea that “...words are no good; that words dont ever fit even what they are trying to say at” (Faulkner, 1921). She is concerned with the inability of words (and perhaps images) to convey meaning, to explain the workings of the inner self. Addie's problem is one that the critic Roland Barthes grapples with in his essay on the

photograph, *Camera Lucida*, which I will use to explain the way in which Addie's problem heightens the idea that she acts like a photograph in the text. Because both Annie Mae and Addie are presented as images, I will touch briefly on the objectification of the gaze. I feel, though, that it is important to move beyond the idea of the objectified woman in addressing these two characters. While their objectification is real and readily apparent, I feel that, the question I want to grapple with, because it is more elusive, is what does thinking of these women photographically do for these works as a whole?

As I Lay Dying and *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* both represent mothers. The books pay special attention to family, to lineage and to reproduction. A photograph in the south often has to do with dead bodies, as in the Civil War photographs or has to do with reanimation as in the Depression era. Photographic vision in these texts allows for an odd meeting of the two, since Addie is dead and Annie Mae described as "a shadow" (Agee, 361). Both these women are ghostly presences on the page. However, the fact that they walk a fine line between life and death does not negate the attempts of Agee and the other Bundrens to reanimate them through the erotic, to make them seem whole and desirable, to free them from the dead sounds of words and flat images. Agee and the Bundrens attempt to exercise control over Annie Mae and Addie's sexuality through the photograph. These women are preserved through the photograph because of the function of their bodies. Women reproduce; they are the source of new generations. Bodies, as preserved in the photograph, help mediate desire with the march of time. The body holds the secret to the sense of loss that pervades the image and offers a chance for redemption. Redemption of the body is offered through the photograph because the photograph allows the loss of a body to leave a visible trace on the earth.

Chapter I: Preserving the Past

The photograph has the power to resurrect the dead. In looking at the image, the viewer is always conscious that the photograph captures a moment that has passed. Barthes writes about “that rather terrible thing which there is in every photograph: the return of the dead” (9). Death resides in the image because it captures a world in a state of motion. The world we live in is a world in constant decay, a world moving through time to an end point. People live only to die. The photograph challenges such a linear concept of time. To look at a photograph is to behold that which has been lost, sacrificed to the flow of time. To look at a photograph makes the past present because it shows the viewer a time that has come and gone, a moment that has passed. As a result, the image haunts us. The idea of the image as a kind of ghost and as a means of resurrection proved troublesome for James Agee in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* and William Faulkner in *As I Lay Dying*. Both works are weighed down with the bodies of the dead: Faulkner’s Bundren family carries around their dead mother framed in her coffin while Agee includes photographs by Walker Evans of the people he writes about allowing the blanched images of his subjects to linger in the pages of his narrative.

For Faulkner, the past lingers and persists in memory. Literary critic Stuart Burrows writes, “Faulkner was [not] interested in the photograph as a technology for restoring the past but as evidence that he was interested in the ways in which the past is lost” (118).⁶ At first, this seems to contradict Faulkner’s belief that “the past is never dead” (Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun*), however Burrows suggests that the photograph serves as a reminder that the past is gone,

⁶ He wrote this about Faulkner’s later novel, *Absalom, Absalom!*, traditionally thought of as Faulkner’s greatest work dealing with the problems of the past and of memory. I believe that the themes of the past and memory are never far from any of Faulkner’s works and can be applied to *As I Lay Dying* as well. Faulkner’s thoughts on the past can also be connected with Agee’s work, as I will demonstrate further.

that it cannot be made present save in imaginary projections or through media devices like the photograph. Thus it is through a combination of photographs and imaginary projections that the past kept alive. Though a photograph, in a sense, can restore the past and make it present, it also reminds the viewer that he or she is looking at something that is gone, making the photograph a conscious, ever present lament. Burrows' statement can also be applied to Agee's book. Agee writes, "If I could do it, I'd do no writing at all here. It would be photographs; the rest would be fragments of cloth, bits of cotton, lumps of earth, records of speech, pieces of wood and iron, phials of odors, plates of food and of excrement" (12). Agee's task was to document the lives of such families, to preserve them, to remember them, to include them in the history of a nation, to show that they were important. He chose the families in his novels through chance meetings. The men and women in the book are not "*Famous Men*," but ordinary ones whose lives would have otherwise dissolved into dust. However, this statement seems to acknowledge the failure of words to tell the stories of these people. If he were to tell their stories, it seems that he would not include the people themselves but merely the relics of their lives as if they were already dead and gone as he writes. Agee wants to assemble their lives as if he were an archeologist rather than a documentarian. Including the photographs in the book summons his subjects into the present, visual moment and simultaneously allows him to push his subjects to a distance, losing them to the passage of time. However, the longing for the distance of death and the past in order to reconstruct the stories of the lives of these people becomes complicated by violence. When he says that "A piece of body torn out by the roots might be more to the point" (Agee, 13), he suggests that the image he would like to use to explain how he would like to tell his story is one that expresses death in the form of a mutilated body—a body ravaged by the pull of the past and summoning of the present moment.

The idea of the “mutilated body” is perhaps why Agee chose to focus on the poor, Southern sharecropper. As the introduction established, the Depression was a particularly difficult time for the South. From 1890-1921, the boll weevil destroyed cotton crops across the region (Brown, 25-6), further devastating a landscape already corroded by mass deforestation and soil erosion (Rieger, 9). The families Agee writes about are subjected to and worn down by such elements. Their lives are difficult and delicate—it would be so easy for Agee to misrepresent them on paper, to see only the ugliness, the dirt between their floorboards, the sparseness of their lives. Yet he and Evans see something worth preserving, a style of life that should not go undocumented. As historian George Brown Tindall points out, this is the last generation of sharecroppers as the hardships of the Depression years and the forces of modernity cannot sustain this way of life (Brown, 25). Agee and Evans position themselves in a world centered on loss and attempt to integrate themselves in a world that is disappearing. Faulkner situates his Bundren family in this blighted landscape as well. The Bundren family lives on the edge of a bluff and Doctor Peabody acknowledges “a worry about this country being deforested someday” (Faulkner, 1874) as he climbs the steep path to their house to attend to Addie. Cora Tull, one of the Bundren’s neighbors, categorizes the Bundrens as “loving nobody, caring for nothing except how to get something with the least amount of work” (Faulkner, 1866), reiterating the stereotype surrounding the “poor white.”⁷ Agee and Faulkner are dealing with people (or characters) that belong to a world that is on the verge of collapse as well as a world in which they are dismissed and downtrodden.

⁷ According to Cook, the poor Southern white’s “image is an elusive one, compounded of popular prejudice, a rich literary tradition, and myriad sociological investigations; but more typically it derives from the alliance of extreme material deprivation with slyness, sloth, absurd foll, and random violence” (ix).

Why place value on these small, stricken lives? Why preserve and document them for generation to come? Why introduce them to the flow of time and history when they perhaps could be forgotten? Historian David Kennedy observes that the documentary impulses of the era reflected a need of the American people “just as they poised to execute more social and political innovation than ever before in their history, felt the need to take a long and affectionate look at their past before they bade much of it farewell” (257). Those who were socially marginalized had their place in the American past. Yet to look back on them, even affectionately, is to look on them as if they were already gone, as if they were, in a sense, dead. The poor white Southerner is caught between two destructive forces: the force of modernity, which threatens to leave him behind and the force of preservation, which preserves him in death as in the process of taxidermy, and makes him an irrelevant relic of the past. Faulkner said, “The aim of every artist is to arrest motion, which is life, by artificial means and hold it fixed so that a hundred years later, when a stranger looks at it, it moves again since it is life” (Faulkner, “Jean Stein Interview,” 22). Yet to arrest the movement of the poor, white Southerner is to arrest decay and destruction, to arrest the destruction of a body in time torn between the preserved image and a lost reality. Motion, Faulkner says, is life. Addie Bundren, however, says, “the reason for living is getting ready to stay dead” (Faulkner, 1923). Life in its very essence is a movement towards an eventual destruction—the motion of life is a motion towards death. The photograph, and art itself, arrest moments of decline and hold them in place. When one looks at a photograph after it has been taken, one sees a record of age and loss, of bodily decay suspended in time.

The destruction and decay of the poor, white Southerner is tied to the idea of photography when Agee goes to visit the local cemetery:

On others of these stones, as many as dozens of them, there is something I have never seen before: by some kind of porcelain reproduction, a photograph of the person who is buried there; the last or the best likeness that had been made, in a small-town studio, or at home with a snapshot camera. I remember one well of a fifteen-year-old boy in Sunday pants and a plaid pullover sweater... Somebody's arm with the sleeve rolled up is against him; somebody who is almost certainly still alive: they could not cut him entirely out of the picture. Another is a studio portrait, close up, in artificial lighting, of a young woman...The image of her face is split across and the split has begun to turn brown at its edges. (395-6)

He goes on to note that the graves have also been decorated with objects like toys, china, light bulbs, clamshells, and buttons. In the graveyard, all the bits of rubble of people's lives that Agee mentions earlier in the book have been assembled. One of the photographs even has a piece of a represented body: an arm that has been cut from the rest of the (still living) person. The photographs on and memorabilia strewn around the grave serve as a way to remember the faces of the dead and offer Agee the opportunity to reconstruct a narrative out of these remnants and broken pieces. Agee's task is inherently sad, though. To write using broken pieces is to acknowledge that something has been lost to begin with, that he is offering up an empty work, a representation that constantly looks backwards. The representational space of the photograph provides a means for the living to exist with the dead—it is a space where the disembodied arms of the living still extend towards those that are dead.

The South is indeed a place that constantly looks backwards. Critic Barbara Ladd writes that:

Faulkner understood memory, having grown up in Oxford, Mississippi, where memorial sites and monumental memory coexisted and sometimes conflicted with the memory work going on in environments of memory, real places, not sites, made up of family names, community stories, and often-repeated legends, all learned through the body, by hearing about the past and speaking about it over and over again. (90)

Ladd makes a few important connections here. First, she introduces the idea that the body serves as a way of accessing the past, a site of memory.⁸ Yet bodies in Agee's and Faulkner's work are unstable places, subject to decay. Ladd also introduces the idea of monuments as more permanent source of memory. Photographs provide a place for bodily memory and monumental memory to meet as they preserve a likeness of the natural state of the body but do not make the body into a statue. Photography in the South, however, holds an interesting position because The Civil War was the first time that the camera was used to document violent conflict (Wells, 62). The Great Depression is, in its own right, a time of violent conflict because of the way hardship wore away at the bodies and the character of a nation. The photographs of the Depression are perhaps not so far removed from the photographs of the Civil War. Both are concerned with preserving, and, in a sense, monumentalizing the bodies of the dead and dying. The Civil War photographs do this in a literal sense and those of the Depression seek to monumentalize the bodies of those who are socially dead because they are lost and marginalized. Southern photography enters into a dialogue centered on the attempt to recollect the past through a continuous lament represented in the arrested image of a dead body, torn apart by the ravages of time.

⁸ More will be said about this in my second chapter, which has to do with the body and its perception in images.

Of course, there is a difference between the socially dead and the physically dead and yet Agee wants to treat the socially dead as though they are physically dead. He does so, in a sense, to sanctify them. In the following example of a Civil War photograph (**Fig. 1**), the body of the dead soldier is hidden, as he seems to dissolve into the earth and stone. The focus of the photograph is not on the loss of the soldier as an individual as he is swallowed into a greater, more permanent landscape. In a review of critic Timothy Sweet's book, *Traces of War: Poetry, Photography and the Crisis of the Union*, critic Ed Folsom points out "Sweet argues that even the photographs of the battlefield dead were framed and posed and captioned in ways that rendered death harmless and restorative" (4). Death is a natural phenomenon and the photograph seems to argue that point, as the soldier seems to disappear into the land. Yet, in becoming part of the land, the soldier takes a place in the natural world and can never truly die. He is resurrected in the landscape. The soldier's dead body, in a way, occupies a Christ-like position. What makes this photograph even more effective is to compare it with the presentation of the whole, living bodies in regiment photographs (**Fig. 2**). To combine the two images together presents a stark contrast between life and death and draws attention to the limbs of a dead body which act as they should not—they are limp and uncontrolled rather than stiff and disciplined. This same contrast occurs in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Evans's photographs precede Agee's words and present people who seem dignified and whole. Yet Agee then looks to tear them apart, to fit his own voice inside their image and speak through them. Photographic historian Alan Trachtenberg mentions "The swift dissolve from corpse to martyr..." (*Reading American Photographs: Images as History, Matthew Brady to Walker Evans*, 85) in Civil War photographs, namely, the way the body of a dead soldier was not merely a man who had died, but rather, a man who had died for a cause. Through Evans's images, Agee is able to perform a

similar kind of eulogistic violence on his subjects. He violates their lives, riffles through the collection of ‘stuff’ on tombstones, in order to find a body of people to stand in, much like Christ on the cross, for the bodily sacrifice of a dead nation. I will examine this phenomenon more closely in the second chapter but it is important to understand precisely how Agee looks at his subjects and how he uses them.



Figure 1: Alexander Gardener, *Home of a Rebel Sharpshooter*.



Figure 2: Unknown, *Soldiers from the 103rd Infantry*.

Likewise, it is also important to understand how Darl, the predominant narrator of *As I Lay Dying*, sees the world and the people around him. Critics do not often write about *As I Lay Dying* as a novel imbued with a photographic sense.⁹ Perhaps this is because it is a novel without much sense of history, without much sense of a past that can reappear, without connections to the passage of time. The characters do not seem to have pasts in that the reader does not know where they come from. Faulkner barely reveals that Darl fought in the war and Addie has family and has lived in Jefferson but tangible connections with the past are hazy. Addie dies and is replaced

⁹ *As I Lay Dying* is, however, often written about in connection with other kinds of artistic sensibilities. For example, critic Watson Branch has written about the similarities between the cubist movement and the opening passage of the novel. Critic Andre Bleikasten has also written about the painterly techniques used by Faulkner (103).

by the new Mrs. Bundren and Darl is carted off to an asylum at the end of the novel, demolishing the family's connection with the flow of historic time in the outside world. For the most part, the story resembles Anse, who may well have sprung from the blighted soil he works on and says he "would be beholden to no man" (Faulkner, 1899). The novel, in other words, works to demolish the connections it creates with the outside world. The Bundren family is not connected to history on a grand scale—any hint of lineage has disappeared by the end of the novel, especially as Addie's maternal body has been buried and with it, a sense of connection to passing time. Faulkner is not writing, like he does in *Absalom, Absalom!* or *Go Down, Moses* about Southern planters who can trace their family back in time through dusty records and black and white photographs in dusty albums. The Bundrens are a family that the rest of the world can easily forget. Yet Sontag writes the "American partiality to myths of redemption and damnation remains one of the most energizing, most seductive aspects of our national culture" (48). Certainly, the Bundren family is "damned," cast adrift to face flood and fire on their own. Yet with their damnation comes the ability to forget, to redeem, to condemn people like the Bundrens and Agee's farmer families and these actions are part of the making of myth and of history, demonstrating a partiality to the power of the artist/photographer to arrest the motion of decay.

If we take Burrows's word that Faulkner's sense of history is that it is always disappearing and that photography documents the disappearance of history, it complicates the reading of *As I Lay Dying*. The process of forgetting then gains importance. The novel, in Faulkner's sensibility, acts photographically—it preserves the decline and erasure of a family. The novel acts as the family photo album the Bundrens never had. Susan Sontag and Roland Barthes have commented that the family photo album is critical in an understanding of the way photography functions. Barthes writes, "The Photograph gives a little truth, on condition that it

parcels out the body. But the truth is not that of the individual, who remains irreducible; it is the truth of lineage” (103). The photograph tells the story of relations between people, of family, of the passing of time from one generation to the next. The photograph tells a collective story of a family. *As I Lay Dying* is a story that deals with the issue of lineage. Jewel, after all, is an illegitimate child.¹⁰ Darl is able to figure out that Jewel is illegitimate by simply looking at him: “‘Jewel,’ I say, ‘whose son are you?’ ... ‘Your mother was a horse, but who was your father, Jewel?’” (Faulkner, 1936). Similarly, Darl is able to figure out that Dewey Dell is pregnant just by looking at her. He is able to trace the development of the family through sight, by studying the bodies of the other members of his family as one would study a photograph or the progression of photographs in a family album. Sontag writes “Cameras go with family life...Through photographs, each family constructs a portrait-chronicle of itself—a portable kit of images that bears witness to its connectedness” (8). The novel itself, with its multiple points of view, establishes this sense of connectedness by spreading out interactions and relationships between the members of the family and the outside world. Yet it is through Darl’s narration that these relationships and interactions take on a photographic quality. Darl *looks* at the other members of his family and they, as a result of his gaze, become images for him to look over. He sees Jewel, surrounded by his brothers and sisters and knows he is different. He looks at Dewey Dell and can see that she has changed, ever so slightly, from her past self. Darl’s documentation of his family’s lineage is lost when he is taken away at the end of the book. The Bundrens and their struggles are forgotten, eased with the acquisition of a phonograph and false teeth.

Darl is a character invested with the ability to see the inner nature and hidden desires of the other characters in the novel. His method of seeing what others choose to hide is eerily

¹⁰ More will be said about this in the second chapter where the connection between bodies and photography will be drawn out farther.

described by Sontag when she writes that photographing people “is to violate them, by seeing them as they can never see themselves, by having knowledge of them they can never have” (14). Darl’s eyes act as a kind of intrusive lens that allows him to see the hidden aspects of people as well as the connections between them. His neighbor, Tull remarks:

He dont say nothing; just looks at me with those queer eyes of hisn that makes folks talk. I always say it aint never been what he done so much or said or anything so much as how he looks at you. It’s like he had got into the inside of you, someway. Like somehow he was looking at yourself and your doings outen his eyes. (Faulkner, 1902)

Darl sees from perspectives other than his own. The photograph as well as the vision that goes along with the camera, would allow him to reexamine the world in a new light as well as from new perspectives in order to figure out the truth. After all, that was the purpose of the camera: the documentation of truth (Baudelaire, 88). Darl’s eyes, like Agee’s own, reveal truth through images as they record and arrest the stories of passing life. When the Bundren’s neighbor, Gillespie’s barn burns down, Darl looks at Jewel through the flames and describes him as “a flat figure cut leanly from tin” (Faulkner, 1938). Darl’s description of the image has photographic resonances, as the image of Jewel is “flat” and metallic, like a tintype. Darl’s vision helps him realize the transaction between truth and the photograph—in Darl’s previous narration, he confronts Jewel about his origins and now he solidifies them through the photograph.

Darl’s ability to see also extends below the surface of the image—he tries to understand the arrested life residing within the image. The photograph is the medium that makes the connections and secrets of the internal lives visible in the image. Barthes writes that he feels “the Photograph creates my body or mortifies it” (11). While the photograph can realize, or make

real, the condition of life, of people, and of their relation to what has been, it separates the image from the flow of time as it arrests motion. The photograph “mortifies” the body and to see photographically means that the seer has knowledge of life but does not have the ability to create life as it can create only representational bodies and unanimated vehicles for life. Instead, the photographer has the power to freeze life, to make it that which has been rather than that which is. Agee, too, writes and sees his subjects in this way. He writes:

...that these I will write of are human beings, living in this world, innocent of such twistings as these which are taking place over their heads; and that they were dwelt among, investigated, spied on, revered, and loved, by other quite monstrously alien human beings, in the employment of others still more alien; and that they are now being looked into by still others, who have picked up their living as casually as if it were a book... (12)

Unlike Darl, Agee is conscious that he sees people in this way. Agee writes about and observes people who, according to him, are oblivious to the turning world around them, who go about their lives with a kind of long forgotten purity. His subjects do not notice, do not understand, that after his book has been published, they will exist both in Evan’s images and Agee’s words. Agee’s families will exist long after they are dead, preserved in words and photographs. Theirs will be an existence over which they have no control. Through their represented bodies, others will claim to have knowledge of these people. The forms of their bodies are created, mortified, and lost as their forms are absorbed into a greater national dialogue.

Both Agee and Darl create meaning from bodies. Agee does so by casting them into the flow of history and by making them relics. Darl creates meaning through the process of making an image, by seeing what is around him and recording it. Andre Bazin writes,

If the plastic arts were put under psychoanalysis, the practice of embalming the dead might turn out to be a fundamental factor in their creation... Thus by providing a defense against the passage of time it satisfied a basic psychological need in man, for death is but the victory of time. To preserve, artificially, his bodily appearance is to snatch it from the flow of time, to stow it away neatly, so to speak, in the hold of life. (Bazin, 237-8)

In having a fascination with images, Agee and Darl have a fascination with death that is expressed in the photographic elements of vision. Yet they do not necessarily seek to preserve life itself—rather it's the states of decay that interest them, the reason why the dead must be preserved. Barthes writes, "When we define the Photograph as a motionless image, this does not mean only that the figures it represents do not move; it means that they do not *emerge*, do not *leave*: they are anesthetized and fastened down, like butterflies," (Barthes, 57). In *As I Lay Dying*, Addie's body is nailed down like Barthes's butterflies:

And the next morning they found him in his shirt tail, laying asleep on the floor like a felled steer, and the top of the box bored clean full of holes... When they taken the lid off they found that two of them had bored on into her face. (Faulkner, 18885)

Additionally, her coffin serves as a kind of frame to contain her dead, mutilated body. She is not embalmed or preserved—much fuss is made about the stench that comes from her coffin as the result of her decay. At one point, Vardaman puts his ear to her coffin, "...we can hear her inside the wood... I put my ear close and I can hear her. Only I cant tell what she is saying," (Faulkner, 1937). Though Addie is dead, framed, and nailed inside her coffin, Vardaman can hear and feel a force stirring inside. Addie has been presented as a kind of monumental photograph as a body framed and pinned down. A male gesture and male tools have disfigured her yet, rather than

confine her, Addie is perhaps liberated by her disfigurement. The image is a form that can be manipulated—Faulkner was well aware of this because, as mentioned in the introduction, he was interested in the effect of a portrait and the ways the image could be manipulated to convey a certain sense of a person. Rather than stay nailed down and disfigured, Vardaman says that Addie moves and speaks in her coffin. She is arrested, confined movement. Still, no one truly knows Addie. She's dead, and her secrets have died with her, though she reveals some of them in her chapter. The image, in some ways, has failed to keep and preserve Addie. The image for Faulkner is not simply a preservationist memorial. Addie, like the Civil War soldier, disappears into the earth. As a result, what's nailed and memorialized in the coffin is death, is decay and loss—those are the things that photography preserves. She is not, unlike Agee's subjects, part of a struggle for resurrection.

The inability of the photograph to truly serve as a permanent monument and means of a Christ-like resurrection troubles Agee. When Agee visits the graveyard and sees the photographs and the collection of objects decorating the graves, he notices that one of the photographs of a young woman has split and turned brown. Despite the best efforts of people to remember and to preserve their loved ones, the way they remember and can see back into the past through photographs also decay and fade. In the end, the graves become homage to the decline of life rather than to the lives those buried have lived. Agee meditates on the march of time when he writes:

Their father and their mother before them were, in their time, the children each of different parents, who in their time were each children of parents: This has been happening for a long while: its beginning was before the stars: It will continue for a long while: no one knows where it will end... (52)

The timeless march scares him, the concept of the infinite is one he cannot fully grasp. The march of time is what makes people anonymous, what causes them to fade from memory and their images to yellow. The past consumes the present. A photograph in some ways could provide an antidote—by marking a grave with a photo, the face of the departed remains. Sontag suggests that photographs have a “mournful vision of loss” (67). Sontag is correct for all the photographs offer is loss—a reminder that the person no longer exists. The faded face serves to remind the viewer of decay.

Decay and death, however, open up a creative space for both Agee and Darl as they “arrest” the motion of loss. Agee can narrate and give meaning to the lives of those who leave behind those empty vessels and objects. Darl, however, is deeply disturbed by the emptiness of relics and monuments, by what his photographic vision does. He says that:

In a strange room you must empty yourself for sleep. And before you are emptied for sleep, what are you. And when you are emptied for sleep, you are not. And when you are filled with sleep, you never were. I dont know what I am. I dont know if I am or not. Jewel knows he is, because he does not know that he does not know whether he is or not. He cannot empty himself for sleep because he is not what he is and he is what he is not. Beyond the unlamped wall I can hear the rain shaping the wagon that is ours...since only the wind and the rain shape it only to Jewel and me, that are not asleep. And sleep is is-not and rain and wind are *was*, it is not. Yet the wagon *is* because when the wagon is *was*, Addie Bundren will not be. And Jewel *is*, so Addie Bundren must be. And then I must be, or I could not empty myself for sleep in a strange room. And so if I am not emptied yet, I am *is*. How often have I lain beneath rain on a strange roof, thinking of home. (Faulkner, 1888)

For Darl, sleep is an emptiness in the consciousness of an individual since “when you are emptied for sleep, you are not.” Sleep acts as a temporary death. Though death, or the idea of emptiness, are predominant themes in the passage, Darl is also thinking about the possibilities of creation that accompany death. For example, the wagon comes into being through the natural forces of the rain and the wind that “shape” it, that carve out its place in the world. The wagon is created through a kind of negative space—an artistic process of cutting out, of elimination. Darl establishes a connection between the unconscious state of sleep and the elimination of being through the shaping of the world. Agee’s assembly of himself through the bodies of the Gudger family also requires an emptiness on his part. The violence of emptying oneself for sleep provides the opportunity for artistic, image-based creation. Vardaman, the youngest Bundren, says later on in the novel as he and Darl lay down to go to sleep, “It is on the back porch where we can see the barn, and the moon shines on half of the pallet and we will lie half in the white and half in the black” (Faulkner, 1938). Here, the photographic tones of black and white are connected with sleep. The sleeping body enters into a stilled world where, interestingly, identity becomes uncertain. The photograph, then, is necessary to understanding who one is and what being means.

Darl’s empty shaping of the world around him demonstrates a kind of concern with the formation of the visual world in one’s conscious state of being. He achieves a connection with the world around him through language. Critic Homer B. Pettey writes about the way Darl sees the world, how he fixes and frames others within his gaze and can pierce his way into their unconscious. He writes, “For Darl the act of framing is an act of representation and an act of re-representation. Representation relies not on how the object depicted conforms or deviates from reality, but on the structuring system which achieves a sensation of reality” (Pettey, 32). Pettey

presents a few key issues: one, that Darl is concerned with framing the world around him and two, that this method of representation imitates reality. He also calls attention to the structuring system that preserves a sense of reality which, for Darl, is a camera's apparatus. Darl sets up the world as one would a photograph—with concern for the frame of the image. Sontag writes that a photograph is “something directly stenciled off the real, like a footprint or a death mask” (154). The image, then, is not the thing in itself but a record of what was, a way of summoning the sensation of the past. Not only is Darl concerned with perception, but also with memory—the memory of his mother and how one can reconcile the fact that memory mingles with the present in the perception of the present moment. He focuses on conjugations of the verb “to be” when he lies under a strange roof and thinks of home, marveling at the transition between “is” and “was.” He feels each moment pass and tries bitterly to cling to the present, to find something to hold on to and remember but is left only with the intangible sounds of the wind and the rain and the memory of home. The photograph—especially if thought of in a series of endless snapshots taken in succession—are a way to hold on to time, of capturing the sensations of a fleeting world through the camera and could potentially provide a way to define and eliminate the boundary between “was” and “is.” Darl perhaps needs to see the world as a photograph, to have memories and images, in order to understand how time works. Yet try as he might to preserve moments, to capture the distance between “is” and “was,” he cannot. The glass lens, like the roof of the barn, stops him from permeating the landscape and Darl remains an observer. He is able to see the larger picture, the decline of bodies and their relations to the surrounding world, but he cannot stop death and time long enough to recover the sensation of life.

Agee, as a photographic seer, also gets tangled in issues of sleep, death, and identity. He too, sets himself apart, describing himself as “alien; a bodyless eye...My whole flesh; my whole

being; is withdrawn upon nothingness” (168). Like Darl, he finds himself disconnected from the rest of the world and focuses on the lives of other people. As a result, the world he looks into becomes increasingly still. He talks about “the square pine room” (Agee, 19) where the Gudger family lives. He sees them framed within the walls of their house. The Gudgers then become an image to be observed, their lives moments to be arrested and preserved for the sake of history. He also observes the family sleeping as he wanders around their home and writes:

There was no longer any sound of the sinking and settling, like gently foundering, fatal boats, of the bodies and brains of this human family...Bone and bone, blood and blood, life and life disjointed and abandoned they lay graven in so final depth, that dreams attend them seemed not plausible. (Agee, 19)

Sleep once again acts as a kind of death of consciousness and Agee is able to observe these people as though they were already photographs with no dreams and were simply disjointed life. The feeling of disjunction, however, is not unfamiliar in the South but Agee tries to remedy the feeling of alienation. Barbara Ladd writes, “Attention to place, family, and memory in the work of southern writers often focuses on change and loss; attention to the past and the timeless is a dream that comes out of a feeling of alienation from the past and the timeless” (5). As Southerners, both Darl and Agee feel a disconnection from the general passage of time and instead dwell on moments and images of loss, of the emptying of bodies, and the making of relics out of the human body. They scour images, taken out of time, looking for meaning and struggling to understand why they so often find only emptiness in representation. Agee’s observed family is so deep in sleep they do not dream. They are merely bodies, bone and blood. Agee defamiliarizes these human bodies, seeing them as “life and life disjointed.” Perhaps there is a way in which these disjointed bodies resemble a muddled Eucharist—the flesh and blood

waiting to become bread and wine, empty vessels waiting to be filled with meaning. Agee watches the family “founder” in their sleep and he looks for a way to save them. Yet he can find no meaning in sleep, in represented death and so must construct one.

At the heart of the matter is death that pervades in the image of the South, of the family, of the passage of time. Despite the complications that Darl and Agee encounter, the emptiness and loss left and perpetuated by the photograph offers a chance for a different kind of creation.

Agee writes:

...there is a certain difference between life and lifelessness...the difference between a conjunction of time, place and unconscious...Certainly life is valuable; indispensable to all our personal calculations, the very spine of them: but we should realize that life and consciousness are only the special crutches of the living... (203)

Separated from the conscious and living in the realm of the photograph, Darl and Agee are able to create something different, to overcome the crutch of the living. They are the ones that wonder, who ask questions and probe into the secrets of the body. Henninger writes, “...the photographic metaphors in Faulkner’s work more often figure becomings, process, and irresolution, than stasis and resolution” (“Faulkner, Photography, and a Regional Ethics of Form,” 127). Darl is concerned with lack, with the inability of the photograph to truly preserve. Addie is still restless in her coffin, her body decaying, her faced ruined by an attempt to nail her down. Yet for Agee, the photograph serves as a relic and as a result, a way of accessing the past, a way of moving backwards in time and remembering. For Agee, rather than Faulkner, the photograph resurrects that which has been lost.

However, in *As I Lay Dying*, Addie is literally resurrected from the dead. This will be discussed further in the following chapter, but I wish to point out that while she is living, passing

into the realm of the dead, she too sees the world with a photographic vision. Cora Tull, a neighbor, first describes Addie when Addie is watching Cash construct her coffin outside of her window. Even then, Addie seems fascinated with the construction of and the framing of her death:

If we were deaf we could almost watch her face and hear him, see him. Her face is wasted away so that the bones draw just under the skin in white lines. Her eyes are like two candles when you watch them gutter down into the sockets of iron candle-sticks. But the eternal and the everlasting salvation and grace is not upon her. (Faulkner, 1861-2)

Addie's eyes preserve Cash's actions—they reflect what is going on around her. Her eyes are metallic and mechanical, with light “guttering down” in them. Her eyes sound very much like a camera taking a picture as their description combines the mechanical with light. In Cash's section where he details the process of constructing her coffin in a numbered list (Faulkner, 1888), he makes the process of framing death orderly and scientific. The making of a photograph is an orderly and scientific process as well and so it seems fitting that the camera as a recording device should be present as Addie dies. Inventor Louis Jacques Mande Daguerre wrote of the first form of the photograph that, “...the DAGUERREOTYPE is not merely an instrument which serves to draw Nature; on the contrary it is a chemical and physical process which gives her the power to reproduce herself” (13). Yet at the same time, Cash's “animal magnetism” (Faulkner, 1888) that he talks about as the driving force of coffin construction and Daguerre's reproductive process are both vehicles of carrying emptiness and loss. Cora Tull later says “when [Addie] finds me watching her, her eyes go blank” (Faulkner, 1862). Evans's photographs have a similar kind of layering of blankness in that an illusion of visual exchange is created between the lens of a camera, a subject's eyes, and between the flat eyes of an image and the eyes of a viewer. When

Doctor Peabody arrives, he too is drawn to Addie's eyes. "She watches me: I can feel her eyes. It's like she was shoving at me with them" (Faulkner, 1875). Addie's vision has an almost physical presence—it is a way of connecting, of touching, of "shoving" at those around her. Perhaps the dead world of the photograph seeks to reach out to the world of the living, to reconnect. Addie's eyes also function as a way to reconnect with the world of the living through the camera-like function of reproduction.

Darl, though, seems more involved in restricting his mother's vision and reproductive capabilities, with confining her within a frame. Darl imagines the scene of Addie's death. He says that before she dies:

She is looking out the window, at Cash stooping steadily at the board in the failing light, laboring on toward darkness and into it as though the stroking of the saw illuminated its own motion...He looks up at the gaunt face framed by the window in twilight. It is a composite picture of all time since he was a child...For a while she still looks down at him from the composite picture, neither with censure nor approbation. Then the face disappears...She looks at Vardaman; her eyes, the life in them rushing suddenly upon them the two flames glare up for a steady instant. Then they go out... (Faulkner, 1876)

Addie's death is conveyed through her eyes. Once more, they are full of light, they radiate outwards. The flames in her eyes glare like a camera flash—in the instant before her death, Addie becomes a camera rather than a passive image to be looked at by her family. Importantly, she looks at her youngest child, Vardaman, before she dies and it seems to be his image she is preserving. As her youngest son, Vardaman is perhaps most representative of her fertility, of her ability to create and reproduce. She seems to defy efforts meant to preserve her. In the moment

of her death, she is also watching Cash construct her frame—her coffin from a window (another kind of frame). As Darl is on the outside looking in, he assumes the role of a kind of photographer, documenting this “composite picture.” Yet this instant, the exchange of gaze between Cash and Addie and Darl’s observation of the gaze, is described as the “composite picture of all time.” Sontag writes that cameras and photographs are a part of family life, since “photographs give people an imaginary possession of a past that is unreal, they also help people take possession of a space in which they are insecure” (8-9). This moment, limited by frames, is perceived by Darl as a culmination of past and present, a way of bridging the gap between time and space, a way of constructing a moment of comprehension. Cash’s coffin similarly will provide a structure for Addie to decompose in, to become part of the eternal land though he makes it as a frame, a means of preservation and containment.

The space of the frame is particularly important because it is an empty space of creation, loss, memory, and decay. These ideas are what draw Agee and Darl to the photograph and cause them to see photographically. Darl confesses to the reader:

I used to lie on the pallet in the hall, waiting until I could hear them all asleep, so I could get up and go back to the bucket. It would be black, the shelf black, the still surface of the water a round orifice in nothingness, where before I stirred it awake with the dipper I could see maybe a star or two in the bucket, and maybe in the dipper a star or two before I drank...I could lie with my shirt-tail up, hearing them asleep, feeling myself without touching myself, feeling the cool silence blowing upon my parts. (Faulkner, 1862)

The bucket has sexual properties as Darl ends up masturbating without touching himself as a result of association with it. The bucket is described as “a round orifice in nothingness”—much

like Addie's "shape like a " (Faulkner, 1922) and her empty eyes like a guttered candlestick. These two images of emptiness, however, are also images of production. Addie's eyes are camera-like and bring images out of nothing but light and shadow. Addie's empty shape also brings form from nothing. In Darl's scene, the bucket is earthy (made from cedar) but also reflects the starry night sky. In its emptiness and nothingness it holds the universe; it holds everything. The bucket acts as a negative within a frame, a reflection of the night sky contained within a bucket. In Addie's " " shape, a connection is likewise established between Addie's female body and the photograph. Darl's masturbating body and Addie's reproductive body are both imagined as orifices of nothingness. These empty orifices cannot only be connected to the photograph but also to the camera, which, even in its earliest pinhole form, was simply a hole for light to pass through. In this space, reproduction occurs and this act contrasts with the echoes of death found in the photograph and the process of making an image. In this sexualized and reproductive as well as photographic space, an understanding of the body, of death, and of memory may be reached. The next chapter will explore these ideas.

Chapter 2: The Represented Maternal Body

At night, both Agee and Darl wander. In the darkness, they search for bodies—whether celestial bodies in the reflective surface of a cedar bucket filled with water or in the literal bodies of those who are emptied for sleep. They are filled with longing. Yet, in this shadowy world, stillness prevails. They can find no physical connections and instead, must content themselves with images and reflections. Agee struggles with this problem as he lies in his bed in the Gudgers' house. He writes,

Not even straining, can I hear their breathing: rather, I have a not quite sensuous knowledge of a sort of suspiration, less breathing than that indiscernible drawing-in of heaven by which plants live, and thus I know they rest and the profundity of their tiredness, as if I were in each one of these seven bodies whose sleeping I can almost touch through this wall, and which in darkness I so clearly see...Annie Mae's slender, and sharpened through with bone, that ten years past must have had such beauty, and now is veined at the breast, and the skin of the breast translucent, delicately shriveled, and blue, and she and her sister Emma are in plain cotton shifts...

But it is not only their bodies but their postures that I know and their weight on the bed or on the floor, so that I lie down inside each one as if exhausted in a bed, and I become not my own shape and weight and self, but that of each of them, the whole of it, sunken in sleep like stones; so I know almost the dreams they will not remember, and the soul and body of each of these seven, and of all of them together in this room in sleep, as if they were music I were hearing, each voice in relation to all the others, and all audible, singly,

and as one organism, and a music that cannot be communicated: and thus they lie in this silence, and rest. (Agee, 55)

Agee, in this section, enters an image he creates for himself as he lies sleeping and, much like Darl and the bucket, attempts to make some kind of connection with the empty vehicles of the sleeping bodies. He is drawn in, first by an earthy fertility, the plantlike qualities of a sleeping body and his mind's eye travels next to the breast of Annie Mae Gudger. Her breast, however, is aged, in a state of decay. The scene Agee has created for himself is somewhat erotic but it is also marked by decay and stilled life. He describes the bodies "like stones," giving the bodies a heavy, permanent quality but also says that they are "sunken." He makes the bodies sound like monuments that have passed out of time and consciousness to be sunken and discarded. The bodies, as forgotten, insignificant stone monuments, resemble the graves of small farmers. These graves do not matter to the larger world but yet are marked carefully with images of the deceased body. In this moment, Agee says he can hear "a music that cannot be communicated"—there is life, there is a promise of preservation that comes with the slowly rotting body in a deathlike slumber. These are corpse-like bodies, framed in a square room and Agee seeks to enter them and thus possess them as a part of himself. This is the image he is developing alone in a dark room. The body is waiting to be reanimated in its deathlike state, stones waiting to be erected into a monument. Agee, unlike Darl, tries to fill the emptiness of the image.

Agee does not want to be merely a "bodyless eye" but seeks to bridge the photographic problem between form and image. Barthes writes, "if only Photography could give me a neutral, anatomic body, a body which signifies nothing!" (12). Barthes almost seems to lament the fact that he does not have a "shape like a ' ' " (Faulkner, 1922) and that even photography, with its reproductive capabilities, cannot replicate the function of the female body that brings form and

image together in the process of reproduction. Agee is positioned in a similarly in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* as he attempts to gain control over the reproductive function of the camera and of the female body. Yet he, as a viewer, laments the his “bodyless” position because as bodyless, he has no vehicle for desire, no way of impacting the sleeping forms he imagines around him—he cannot connect to others physically and sexually. Agee cannot act on desire. Instead, he turns to the image in order to possess the bodies of others. Critic Joseph Entin writes, “For Agee himself, the realm of sexual desire exists beyond the bounds of those facets of perception that must be interrogated” (147). Yet in this passage, Agee deliberately puts himself in the position of the voyeur, at the intersection between perception and bodily desire. Perception, contrary to what Entin says, is dependent on desire or the lack thereof. Agee is conscious of this fact, though the text does not make it clear if Agee gets pleasure from looking at the sleeping bodies. Mulvey’s theory of the gaze relies on an idea of male pleasure in viewing the female body as the female identity is destroyed or ignored in pursuit of the fulfillment of male desire. In this instant, though, it is Agee who finds himself absorbed in the body and identity of the female, as he has no body himself. Agee has no body and as a result, has no vehicle for desire and reproduction. He does, however, have access to a camera which does permit him to access reproductive impulses. Annie Mae’s relation to her body and her image, at least in this moment, is dictated by the correlation of Agee’s words to Evans’s image. Through the camera, Annie Mae is exposed and reproduced—Evans’s photograph is the image in the reader’s mind, the woman whose breast Agee exposes as she is reproduced in the text. Agee gains control over Annie Mae’s body in this way and as a result, has control over the reproduction of her image.

Agee's confession of looking at Annie Mae's body produces tension because in the South, the body is a site of intense concern most obviously along the lines of race and womanhood. To talk of bodies, particularly of violated, white female bodies in the South is to inadvertently raise the specter of miscegenation.¹¹ Usually, this fear is where the white Southern obsession with protecting lineage, with family, comes into play. This obsession was discussed briefly in the previous chapter, as Darl knows his brother Jewel is an illegitimate child and Agee meditates on the development of the family (Agee, 52). As such a violent obsession implies, the family group is not stable and often acts as a site of fear and concern. Such a drama is played out through the figure of the mother. Through protection of the white, female body, constructs of race are preserved. Yet race is not the focus of this chapter, but it must be noted that whiteness is a race as well. Though Agee does have scenes in his novel that focus on these tensions, racial concerns are absent from the time he spends with the main families. Faulkner, also by creating a basically all-white world, barely gestures towards the southern color line in *As I Lay Dying*. With the conflicts along the color line quieted, a blatant fear of the female body and its reproductive qualities still remains—a fear that distorts the female bodies, though in different ways, in both these texts. Critic Patricia Yaeger points out, “In a culture dealing with crisis...change erupts abruptly, via images of monstrous, ludicrous bodies” (*Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women's Writing 1930-1990*, 4). Yaeger suggests that the body serves as a pivotal point, a place

¹¹ Literary critic Richard Godden writes that “...during the antebellum period, Southern white males of the owning class idealized womanhood, by raising the female gentry on pedestals above the reality of interracial sex between slave women and slave owners...By means of her propriety, husbands, fathers, and sons whitewashed their property and sustaining institutions. The cult of Southern womanhood raised the standard of the unbreachable hymen...” (106-7). Godden speaks of the color line between white planter families and their slaves. However, the same racial tensions can be extended to include poor whites. Even among the lower classes, the same elevation of white womanhood existed and it is precisely this drama that gets played out and played upon both in Agee and in Faulkner.

of action and change as well as a place of fear and distortion. In both these novels, the maternal figures serve as reproducers of whiteness and as a result, provide a means of accessing a regenerative purity. The body of the mother is a site of concern for male figures in the text as it offers redemption through the production of whiteness. As a producer, in a sense, of white history, Southern males are concerned with its demise. This fear and concern for female sexuality arises from the photographic nature of both male viewers as well as from women themselves. As was discussed in the previous chapter, to speak of photography in the South is to dredge up death and the past. This chapter will examine what it means when death, the past, and photographic imaging converge in the bodies of female characters.

The fear and obsession with the female body that Darl and Agee both experience stems from the way they deconstruct the bodies of women in the text. Darl deconstructs his mother's body when he imagines Addie's death scene and sees her as "the handful of rotten bones that Addie Bundren left" (Faulkner, 1876). He sees the decrepit, skeletal form that she has left and it is this figure, this handful of rotten bones that proceeds to haunt the pages of the rest of the story. Agee focuses primarily on the figure of Annie Mae Gudger, a childlike mother. He writes that the moment he entered the Gudger's household for the first time, "it is you I was first aware of from when I first came into this room, before you were yet a shadow out of the darkness, and you I have had on my mind while we sat here, and so much cared toward" (361). Agee refers to Annie Mae as a "shadow." Somehow, he makes it sound like she is developing into an image, a photographic negative coming into focus in the murky chemical baths. Addie and Annie Mae as women and as mothers have a power that the male seers do not have—the power to reproduce the human image. The drama of the body in space and time speaks to this as the body is subjected to death and is lost over time. The female body offers a solution to the loss of the body

over time as female bodies produce. The camera in the hands of the male viewer, however, also reproduces. The camera, in some respects, undermines the power of the female body to reproduce and to make.

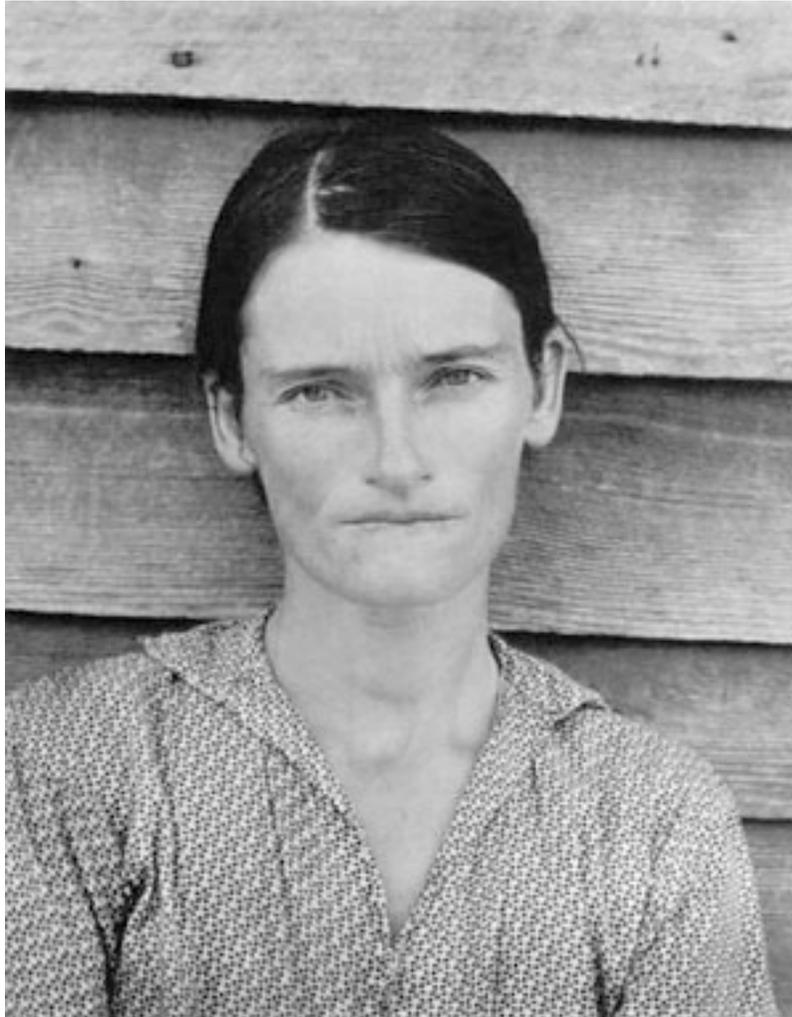


Figure 3: Walker Evans, *Sharecropper's Wife*.

As a result of the power of the camera, Evans's portrait of Annie Mae can never be far from Agee's mind (**Fig. 3**). In the photograph found in the text, her hair is pulled back tightly across her head. Delicate wrinkles nestle between her straight eyebrows. Her mouth is a thin, tense line. She stands against the wooden boards of her house. Though the composition of the

photograph is vertical, the picture spreads out horizontally through the boards of the house and the broad planes of Annie Mae's face, calling to mind the tension of horizons established by Anse in *As I Lay Dying*:

...why He laid them down flat on the earth. When He aims for something to be always a-moving, He makes it longways, like a road or a horse or a wagon, but when He aims for something to stay put, He makes it up-and-down ways, like a tree or a man...Because if He'd a aimed for a man to be always a-moving...wouldn't He a put him longways on his belly like a snake?" (Faulkner, 1871)

Applying Anse's logic, the photograph becomes a struggle between movement and stasis, between the desire to be known and understood, to move beyond the frame of the picture, and the desire to stay hidden. The world of movement, the curve of the road, of a slithering snake, is a peculiarly feminine world with its invocation of the curves of the female body and The Fall. This world is one of cycles of death and fertility: God's curse on women. Interestingly, Evans's photograph, apart from the ovular face of Annie Mae, is composed of mostly straight, angular lines. She looms in the photograph. The way she fills the frame is menacing. Concealed beneath the orderly surface, is some kind of force. Critic Lionel Trilling writes in his 1942 review of the book that Evans's photograph of Annie Mae:

...is a single concentrated phrase of suffering; you are bound to have an immediate outgoing impulse toward it, but this is at once hemmed in, at once made careful and respectful by what the camera does...the sitter gains in dignity when allowed to defend herself against the lens...she refuses to be an object at all. (Trilling, 100-1)

According to Trilling, Evans grants her the force of personhood. Yet, according to Barthes, the force of a photograph is violent: ““The Photograph is violent: not because it shows violent things, but because on each occasion *it fills things by force...*” (91). The act of making an image becomes sexually charged as the male photographer fills his female subject with force. However, when Agee fills Annie Mae’s image with the force of his words, he does so to document and to monumentalize her image as a relic. He, as will be discussed later, wants to see her as a saint or even the Virgin Mary. Because he wants to see her with such religious connotations, the force with which he enters her image in the text seems less sexualized. The force and purpose of the gaze in this context, then, is not one that is necessarily gendered—erotic pleasure is a by-product, not the aim or the goal of the look.

The image of bodies that Agee presents, both his own and that of Annie Mae Gudger, are in some way lacking. They are empty relics to be created or filled. Yaeger makes note of a trend in Southern fiction: “the strategy of speaking through the broken body” (*Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women’s Writing 1930-1990*, 241). Both Agee and Faulkner speak through the bodies of others. Darl as well is able to position himself in order to see through, or see out the eyes of others. These men see or act through others, suggesting that the body of the other is somehow lacking or broken, unable to speak or form itself. And yet, through this kind of bodily possession, the body is preserved, it endures as a result of the photographic nature of the text. A moment is captured and isolated, the body broken but made permanent, the delicately shriveled skin of Annie Mae’s breast always emblazoned on the page, Addie’s rotting bones imprisoned in her coffin. I do not wish to ignore the fact that the act of capturing bodies, of taking them outside time and embalming them is invasive. However, it would be far too simple to dismiss the power of the photograph as merely an extension of the gaze, “...the look,

pleasurable in form, [that] can be threatening in content...” (Mulvey, 4), or Sabine Sielke’s rhetorical paradigm of “rape, silence, and refiguration” (4-5). The eroticized female body is clearly present. The question, though, is not the way one looks at the body, but instead, for what purpose one looks at the body. In both cases, neither author nor character looks to exploit, rape, or silence. The objectification of the female body through the photograph allows Darl and Agee to touch on complications of death and the past through the idea of reproduction.

Annie Mae, obviously, is included in a literal photograph. Addie Bundren, however, functions in a far more complex manner in *As I Lay Dying*. Addie does not speak until her coffin has been submerged in the flooded river and reemerges. She is reinvigorated, or to look at it through the lens of Greek mythology, her family has simply crossed over the River Styx and into the realm of the dead—a world of shades and shadows, the hazy world the photograph is able to reach back into by means of the body, or perhaps image of the body. Barthes writes:

What the photograph reproduces to infinity has occurred only once: the Photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially. In the Photograph, the event is never transcended for the sake of something else: the Photograph always leads the corpus I need back to the body I see; it is the absolute Particular, the sovereign Contingency... (4)

Both Annie Mae and Addie hover through the text; they are women without full bodies as Annie Mae is broken down into representative parts (her breast) and flits through Agee’s mind like a shadow, a body to be filled, and Addie is a heap of bones in a coffin. Yet the photograph ties their bodily fragments to ideas of reproduction and wholeness, according to Barthes. When Addie speaks in her chapter, she is fascinated by these ideas of reproduction and wholeness and

particularly how she finds them lacking in her own body. For Addie, her body is simply an empty vessel, “a significant shape profoundly without life like an empty door frame” (Faulkner, 1922). The reference to “an empty door frame” harkens back to the moment of Addie’s death where her body is framed and acts as an image. Her body does bring life into the world but does so in a way that is destructive to Addie’s own individual being. After all, her own children are the characters that frame her and nail her down for the sake of preservation. It is important to note also, that Addie sees herself and her body “in the shape of a .” She does not name it; she does not identify it as female genitalia. She sees nothing there. Addie perhaps sees herself as more of a camera than an image. She acts as a director of vision in addition to a recipient of vision and as a result, is not merely framed by her sons but also emerges three dimensionally from the text in her own chapter as a producer of life and a mother. As a camera, Addie has power: the power of honesty. Addie not only sees but also *knows*. Like Darl, she looks at Jewel and knows he is the result of her extramarital affair. Addie cannot be ignorant and she does not lie to herself about the fact. The photograph and the camera as well are instruments of truth in that they record precisely what is put in front of them.

The camera produces the photograph and the female body produces lineage through empty space and light. The absence of the female genitals is not new to the novel, however. In some ways, Addie’s section and her own sexuality resemble the scene in Darl’s section with the cedar bucket. Addie’s body signifies nothing but it does reflect or absorb the world around her as she talks about “the land that was not of my body and flesh” (Faulkner, 1921). As much as Addie is disconnected from her own body, what is remarkable is that she manages to undo others from their bodies as well:

Why are you Anse. I would think about his name until after a while I could see the word as a shape, a vessel, and I would watch him liquefy and flow into it like cold molasses flowing out of the darkness into the vessel, until the jar stood full and motionless...

(Faulkner, 1922)

Anse, like Barthes, becomes a kind of “bottle imp...giggling in my jar.” Addie has the power to undo form from matter—Addie acts like a camera. Oliver Wendell Holmes remarked, in his essay on the camera, that the camera’s most striking ability was to separate form from matter. He writes, ““*Form is henceforth divorced from matter*. In fact, matter as a visible object is of no great use any longer, except as the mould on which form is shaped... We have got the fruit of creation now, and need not trouble ourselves with the core” (80-1). He connects the ability to make images with the idea of creation—a connection that Addie makes as well as she turns Anse into liquid and watches her children emerge from her “shape of a .” Emptiness becomes productive both photographically and biologically.

Addie’s ability to create, however, troubles her. She realizes, “But for me it was not over. I mean, over in the sense of beginning and ending, because to me there was no beginning nor ending to anything then” (Faulkner, 1923). Addie’s life, as she sees it, is defined by the act of bringing children into the world. Motherhood leaves something to be desired. Motherhood, for Addie, does not bring about unity, but chaos. It is after she has Cash that she realizes “that words are no good” (Faulkner, 1921). Her “aloneness,” her wholeness, is “violated” by Cash’s birth (Faulkner, 1921). She cannot possess him and know him, as he is not a part of her own being. She is part of a constant process, a process of becoming, of making. It is also a process of loss as well as she seems to lose her ability to define herself outside of her children and her own productions. Critic Constance Pierce writes, “that life *is* terrible in that it is fundamentally biology, with no

concern for our aloneness or anything else but keeping the pulse of nature going; and motherhood *is* the answer to that pulse. We must replace, the species must go on” (Pierce, 299). Within the frame of motherhood, Addie’s body and the children she produces are merely part of a process. Her body is not her own. Motherhood is not a joyful, unspoken bond but a dead link in a mechanized system of reproduction—much like the process of taking a photograph is a process of futile reproduction. Addie says “the shape of my body where I used to be a virgin is in the shape of a “(Faulkner, 1922). Her own body even expresses the emptiness of the act of giving birth. Motherhood needs no word because it does not mean anything; it has no significance. Vardaman’s mother may well be a fish and Jewel’s a horse. Darl has no mother.

For what she creates is not hers. Creation for Addie ends up in a lack of herself rather than a completed circle of identity and understanding around her creations and children. Sexuality is a double-edged sword: to give in to its force results in a fragmented self and to abstain from intercourse is a denial of a piece of the self. As Addie has children, she creates a past for herself and with her at all times is a sense of a past that is never gone and that is never fully present. She senses that with future generations, something is lost, that the present becomes the past as children grow and time makes its passing visible, as it does in the pages of a photo album. Addie worries about being forgotten and seeks to access memory and the past, like Agee and Darl, through the body. Before meeting Anse, Addie worked as a teacher and would beat her students. She says that she:

...would look forward to the times when they faulted, so I could whip them. When the switch fell I could feel it upon my flesh...I would think with each blow of the switch: Now you are aware of me! Now I am something in your secret and selfish life, who have marked your blood with my own for ever and ever. (Faulkner, 1920)

She wants to access or impress herself upon the memory of her students, to be a part of their private life and their past, by beating them, by inflicting and breaking their bodies. However, the body is the vehicle that is lost over time. The body decays and disintegrates back into the earth. As Addie's father points out to her, "the reason for living is getting ready to stay dead" (Faulkner, 1923); the reason for living is to become part of a lost past. The only way to ensure its perseverance is through the mechanically imagined system of reproduction, through something like a camera or a uterus.

Yet Addie, unlike Agee, does not turn to the camera to find resurrection and redemption. The image and the camera for Addie are merely empty spaces—another empty frame to pass through. The photograph does not redeem and does not give her meaning as it is only a means of perception. Her struggle is with the gap between words and meaning, between the represented and the real. Language, while still a problematic and restrictive form for Addie, gives her insight into the emptiness of her own body, her life, and the meaning of her death. According to Pierce, Addie's struggle with her identity is "about Being and the non-Being that occurs when people become conscious of being and when words try to give that consciousness shape" (294). The problem is that when Addie tries to shape herself and her identity, she realizes that "words are no good" (Faulkner, 1921). Addie's status as a mother leaves her drained of identity and wrapped up in the laws of the land and biology. When given a chance to speak though, words fail her and she cannot make herself known. Words do not hold enough meaning. Addie says:

I would think how words go straight up in a thin line, quick and harmless, and how terribly doing goes along the earth, clinging to it, so that after a while the two lines are too far apart for the same person to straddle from one to the other. (Faulkner, 1922)

There is a gap between meaning and the word itself, between the signified and the signifier. She grapples with this duality of meaning and it tears her apart. She is divided between the self she expresses on the page in words and the self she actually is in reality. In her expression in the novel, Addie performs a kind of inadvertent asexual reproduction. Birth, in the sense of a conscious expression of the self through words, results in divisions and a destruction of the individual as a fully realized being.

Her struggle, however, is not so distant from Barthes's own attempt to understand the way a photograph and camera are able to reproduce meaning and image. He writes:

It is as if the Photograph always carries its referent with itself, both affected by the same amorous or funeral immobility, at the very heart of the moving world: they are glued together, limb by limb, like the condemned man and the corpse in certain tortures; or even like those pairs of fish...which navigate in convoy, as though united by an eternal coitus. The Photograph belongs to that class of laminated objects whose two leaves cannot be separated without destroying them both: the windowpane and the landscape, and why not: Good and Evil, desire and its object: dualities we can conceive but not perceive...

(Barthes, 5-6)

The struggle of the image is the very same struggle Addie encounters with words. Both the image and the word result in a division of the self, a creation of a new entity somehow still connected to the original. Interestingly, Barthes, like Addie sees the struggle as one that smacks of sexuality, of "eternal coitus" and reproductive cycles. Yet Barthes, unlike Addie, sees this struggle as somehow necessary to the life of the image in that the "two leaves cannot be separated without destroying them both." Addie, though, is wrapped up in the confines of her

decaying body, framed by her coffin. She cannot extend beyond this frame, cannot see herself as a whole image, the cornerstone, the center around which her family revolves. Her body, as she sees it, is full of holes from which others emerge, whole and perfectly formed while leaving her own body a violated space.

She is always conscious of her body's position in the world and of its organic, mortal nature. Addie's chapter begins with her sexual awakening. She would: "go down the hill to the spring where I could be quiet and hate them. It would be quiet there then, with the water bubbling up and away and the sun slanting quiet in the trees and the quiet smelling of damp and rotting leaves and new earth" (Faulkner, 1920). In this moment, she resembles the Gudger family, who Agee sees as plantlike, sleeping forms, nature without consciousness, a space to be probed and filled. Addie is also at a moment where a kind of consciousness is awakened and develops an awareness of a space in her body that she sees as a void. At this natural juncture, between sleep and consciousness, the fertility of the natural world plays an interesting part. The spring also serves as a meeting point for life and for death with the rotting leaves combined with the new earth, just as a photograph serves as a place for the living to exist with dead images. This mixing of meaning can be related back to Addie's confusion with words. At this point, Addie remembers her father's taunting admonition that "the reason for living was to get ready to stay dead a long time" (Faulkner, 1920). Everywhere Addie looks, she sees death. She says that her father "planted" her and the use of this word suggests that she sees herself as an organic entity and subject to decay. At the same time, she is aware of the body and of sex and of reproduction—of her ability to create alongside destruction.

Though she is obsessed with blood, with the living and with "the terrible blood, the red bitter blood boiling through the land" (Faulkner, 1922), death ultimately consumes her. She is

resurrected in the text through the power of the word, through the power of representation. Pierce argues that as part of her attempt to conquer death, she has her affair with the minister Whitfield. He writes that “thus she chooses an adulterous relationship with a minister, throwing herself beyond redemption for one last duel with the word—in this case, The Word, in its highest morbidity (Pierce, 301).” Under this reading, Addie fights words, the restraints of language through action and through the body. With Whitfield, though, Addie is taking on the source of language. She takes on the very force of creation that causes the necessity of language. Her attempt fails and her label as a woman restrains her. She is pregnant with yet another child, another reminder of her biological place in the world. Whitfield’s chapter comes directly after Addie’s. In his chapter, Whitfield talks about making his confession and says, “I framed the words which I should use” (Faulkner, 1924). For Whitfield, the act of sin and the act of confession can be framed and contained by words. In this way, the sufferings and misgivings of the body can be understood. Literary critic Calvin Bedient writes that: “[*As I Lay Dying*] is to be ‘seen,’ not understood; to be experienced, not translated; felt, not analyzed. The malignity it portrays, both of the land and sky and of men is aesthetic. Here suffering is above all a spectacle” (96). Suffering is made visible in the bodies of the characters and can be represented physically. In this way, pain and its visible manifestations are more effective than words, as it can be seen, expressed, and understood. Pain, death, and suffering are all observable. Literary critic Gabriele Schwab has written on the grotesque nature of death as a spectacle in *As I Lay Dying*. She writes, “the grotesque body in this theater of cruelty appears as the effect of Faulkner’s attempt to create a poetic language capable of rendering an aesthetic experience of the unsublimated body” (211). Theatrical suffering and sin give Addie power since they give her a secret, and invisible life that cannot be violated, save by the truth of the photograph in the family album. Those who are aware

of Addie's transgression give the image meaning and would have her reproductive capabilities represent more than merely an empty space. Yet those who know, who tell the truth, are silenced as Darl is sent to the asylum and Addie to her grave. The bodies of the marginalized and the grotesque give the reproductive image its power and yet these are the figures society chooses to ignore.

Both Agee and Darl seek a kind of emptiness that comes with death, with suffering, with the bodily performance of decay. They want to empty the bodies of the female characters, to make them artifacts that can be reinvigorated. This gesture does have all the violence and invasiveness of rape, but it is a different kind of performance. In attempting to fill the female body, they hopelessly attempt resurrection and are left with only a flat image: an empty gaze on a page, a body in a coffin. Agee, however, chooses to end *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* with images. He writes:

The last words of this book have been spoken and these that follow are not words; they are only descriptions of two images...His mother sits in a hickory chair with her knees relaxed and her bare feet flat to the floor; her dress open and one broken breast exposed...His hands are blundering at her breast blindly as if themselves each were a new born creature, or as if they were sobbing, ecstatic with love...I see how against her body he is so many things in one, the child in the melodies of the womb, the Madonna's son, human divinity sunken from the cross at rest against his mother, and more beside, for the heart and leverage of that young body, gently, taken in all the pulse of his being, the penis is partly erected. (402)

Agee chooses to end his novel with words acting as images. The picture he shows his reader returns to Annie Mae Gudger's "broken breast," invoking the idea of the broken female body. Yet her son is full of life and sexuality, with his creature-like hands and his erect penis. Annie Mae becomes washed out, forgotten, as a result of the child's vitality. She is immobile and stationary. Barthes writes:

For the photograph's immobility is somehow the result of a perverse confusion between two concepts: the Real and the Live: by attesting that the object has been real, the photograph surreptitiously induces belief that it is alive, because of that delusion which makes us attribute to Reality an absolutely superior, somehow eternal value; but by shifting this reality to the past ('this-has-been'), the photograph suggests that it is already dead. (79)

Despite the vitality of the baby, death still resides in the image. Agee refers to the Christ-figure taken off the cross—a Christ that has not been resurrected, but a mortal and dead Christ. In choosing to make the last words in his book images, Agee seals the fate of these characters. He puts them in a portrait, captures them in a moment in time, yet knows that in doing so, he shifts them into the current of the past, engaging them in a tradition and imagery that makes them religious relics. The pieta image is not a remaking of imagery, but an echo of an old tradition.

Faulkner, on the other hand, does not seek to make his characters 'holy.' He gives Addie powers of resistance through her understanding of truth. She is certainly no Madonna. Annie Mae, however, is predominantly silent.¹² Arguably, Agee, because his work is a documentary, is

¹² William Stott references page 76 of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* and points out that Agee writes that Annie Mae Gudger said "He no longer cares for me, he just takes me when he wants me" (76). Stott writes that it is not possible that Annie Mae would have made such

worried he might objectify his subjects and portray them in the stereotypical image of the poor white that he ends up monumentalizing them instead. Looking at Annie Mae's photograph after reading Agee's words and with the final image of her with her son in a kind of pieta, it is hard to see her as anything other than a reincarnation of the Virgin Mary. Agee, in his attempt to liberate these people from the connotations of poverty, simply ends up reinforcing the romanticism about the poor white—that they are humble, archaic, and of the earth. Faulkner does not romanticize poverty. He does not offer his characters redemption or absolution from their social status yet sees in them as they are a way to ask questions about the meaning of life and existence. In *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, the existential ruminations are Agee's own, encountered through the bodies of the people whose lives he documents. He looks to them as saints whose bodies offer him salvation because they allow Agee to examine himself through the sacrifice of their own bodies to his project. Through Annie Mae, Agee finds himself reborn. Addie, however, acts as both camera and image and thus controls and projects herself in the text. As previously mentioned, she has the power of honesty yet is silenced and buried at the end of the novel. She is not monumentalized but fades, hidden away from the sight of man. Annie Mae's image endures through Agee's reproduction while Addie fades into the land.

a disclosure to Agee—especially with his tentative, invasive position as a spy in the household (304). Even when Annie Mae is credited with speech, it seems to be Agee's own voice and narrative channeled through her body.

Conclusion

Both authors mediate death photographically through the figure of the mother. This kind of mediation is not simply confined to these two works: Barthes himself wrote *Camera Obscura* after finding a photograph of his mother after her death. This imagining of death and the maternal body seems, then, to be a rather widespread phenomenon. The question is why, when faced with ideas of time, bodily decay, and death do men turn to photographs of the mother? Does the maternal body offer salvation through its reproductive capabilities? Critic Ruby Tapia writes, "...a long history both in the United States and globally of political image making that seeks to mark and protest death—along with its material mechanisms and social threats—through images of the maternal" (9). The maternal body somehow soothes death. Agee turns to Annie Mae for salvation in a time of national hardship. He erects the pieta at the end of the novel in order to demonstrate the power of the maternal body to endure. Faulkner's maternal body endures as well, but in a way that is far more haunting. Addie endures more like Gardener's photograph of the dead soldier in that she becomes a part of the eternal earth. Of course, it is important to ask if becoming part of the natural order is the ultimate monument—does Faulkner merely accomplish the same thing Agee does? Or does Faulkner leave his reader with an idea of impermanence as Addie fades away, leaving the reader with an empty doorframe and a pile of bones? Is the image of the mother meaningless? The fact that Faulkner's work raises these questions suggests that he does not have the same faith in the power of salvation of the maternal body that Agee does.

Both *As I Lay Dying* and *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* are filled with currents of stuff—whether it's the river in *As I Lay Dying* carrying away carcasses of mules, coffins, and wagons or Agee's collection of observations of clothing, food, and gravestones absorbed into the

flow of a narrative. The books are both, effectively, collections of debris, of rubble and ruin: burned barn frames and photographs of forgotten people. The question is, then, what does any of it mean? Why has it all been piled up and collected? Why is it frozen, preserved by the camera, by words, by the gaze? How are these fragments to be assembled?

Darl, at the end of the novel, goes insane. I believe he is driven to insanity from his collection of images, his fragmented viewpoint, his ability to reach beyond the tenuous boundaries of life into the realm of the dead via his photographic vision. When the image becomes real, he cannot distinguish the boundary between life and stilled life. As he is being carted away to the asylum, his final thoughts are of images of people and animals involved in a strange kind of copulation: “A nickel has a woman on one side and a buffalo on the other; two faces and no back. I dont know what that is. Darl had a little spy-glass he got in France at the war. In it it had a woman and a pig with two backs and no face. I know what that is” (Faulkner, 1953). To the reader, Darl’s departing picture seems nothing more than some cheesy, erotic souvenir—pure garbage. But for Darl, the act of looking, importantly, the act of looking through a lens results in an image of the erotic body. The body he sees is female and she has no face. The body formed by the combined forms of the faceless woman and the pig is monstrous and distorted. The social fear apparently mitigated by the body of the pure Southern female has been realized and represented through this image of bestiality. The traditional flow of lineage has been disturbed and interrupted—history has been shaken to the core. Darl’s image can possibly be read as a grotesque pieta: the whore with the beast rather than the Madonna with Christ. Faulkner uproots and unsettles the meaning of the pieta in the early Depression era. However, Agee, writing later, seems to want to return to the old, traditional language of images. Yet, are the

images Agee uses to sanctify the poor Southerner and their bodies all that different from Darl's pornographic garbage?

Agee, like Darl, finds himself in a kind of disturbed, apocalyptic landscape when driving through the South. 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 with light and lifted to the surface, the surfaces of its body and the exactitudes of those scars and lesions it had sustained in the course of its active life. But this was worse. For this was not the end of the world, it was contemporary, the summer of nineteen-thirty-six... Tomorrow of these millions each single, destroyed individual would resume the shape of his living just where he had left off; and there was nothing pleasing in the memory of that sure fact. (Agee, 346)

He turns to the body to symbolize a kind of collapse, just as Depression-era photographers used the wasted bodies of the American people to demonstrate problems in society, to show suffering, to show the trauma of a nation. Agee uses an image of a drowned body as well because in addition to being caught in the economic fall, these are people caught in the tumult of a current, of the flow of life, mixing with the bloated corpses of the drowned and images of women and pigs. However, what is most haunting about Agee's picture is the idea of the empty space of living: that somehow there is a lack of meaning to life, that it is just a process. And yet, shortly after presenting the reader with this landscape, Agee begins to imagine himself taking a girl to bed (Agee, 348-9). Despite his dismissal of the body and of life, he finds himself driven by a longing for the erotic body.

The body serves as a space that cannot be negated, that cannot be filled or satisfied. Photography makes this longing visible and often, at times, painful. Agee writes, “For one who sets himself to look at all earnestly, at all in purpose toward truth, into the living eyes of a human life: what is it he there beholds that so freezes and abashes his ambitious heart?” (91). To look at another person through an image is somewhat invasive and destructive. The body is somehow fragmented, torn apart, violated by the gaze as it is filled with the force of the look. As Agee puts it, “It is not going to be easy to look into their eyes” (169), not only because of the violent nature of the look but because to look is to realize a lack, to realize the incompleteness and pain of an individual. In other words, he fears what he has made. To look is, in a sense, to lose the façade of the connection between image and representation, between thought and deed, between word and meaning. Trachtenberg explains, “...one does not fall in love with public portraits” (*Reading American Photographs: Images as History, Matthew Brady to Walker Evans*, 32). In other words, people do not fall in love with monuments, with images created to stand for something in the public realm. Agee makes his people monuments and this is his failure. There can be no intimate bond, no authentic human connection, between his figures and the rest of the world.

Agee and Faulkner attempted to bridge this gap, to humanize the marginalized members of society in their own ways—Faulkner by emphasizing the emptiness between individuals and Agee by trying to fill it in. Barthes writes about the power of the photograph, saying:

I realized that there was a sort of link (or knot) between Photography, madness, and something whose name I did not know. I began calling it: the pangs of love... Yet it was not quite that... In the love stirred by Photography (by certain photographs), another music is heard, its name oddly old-fashioned: Pity... I passed beyond the unreality of the thing

represented, I entered crazily into the spectacle, into the image, taking into my arms what is dead, what is going to die...gone mad for Pity's sake. (116)

Is this what happens to Darl, what happens to Addie, what happens to Agee? Do they pass into a photographic performance, embracing the dead, the past for pity's sake? I ask these questions not necessarily to answer them, but rather to raise the point that the act of looking at an image is complicated, especially when those images are, like photographs, the only things we have to remember the past.

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