

Animal Magnetism: A Study of Cash Bundren in *As I Lay Dying* in Light of Perspectivism

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ABSTRACT. Since the advent of *As I Lay Dying*, approaches applied in its analysis vary radically. While brilliant research outcomes have been yielded successfully, and a considerable number of them focus on its modernistic characteristics, Cash Bundren's narrative especially, few literary critics and professionals have probed Cash's perspective from the vintage point of Nietzsche's theory of Perspectivism. Although Cash's narrative is tagged as Faulkner's "tour de force", which means in writing the work he has not changed a word of it and it undergoes little re-examination and has not suffered any editorial modification, and hailed one of his very best, generations of scholars and critics find it "subtly unreadable". This research believes that all this "unreadableness" is due to Faulkner's modernistic writing technique, and more importantly, with his philosophical thinking regarding Nietzsche's Perspectivism. Thus this research is to justify that Cash Bundren's perspective is Faulkner's literary expression of Nietzsche's critical thinking of Perspectivism. The research examines the burial of Addie Bundren in the novel from the perspective of Cash Bundren, the focal family member. The analysis over sense and force of Cash indicates that he has a unique sense of the mother's burial and his sense materializes under the influence of a peculiar force. The result of this research is that the narratives dedicated to Cash in *As I Lay Dying* is Faulkner's aesthetic articulation of his critical thinking of Perspectivism. This research is the very first endeavor to offer an insight into Cash Bundren in light of Nietzsche's Perspectivism.

KEYWORDS: *As I Lay Dying*; Cash Bundren; Nietzsche; Perspectivism; Sense; Force

1. Theoretical Framework

Nietzsche, the founding father of modern philosophy and literature, with his critical thinking of Perspectivism, not only dethroned the rationality-privileged mode of thinking long since Plato but also, more significantly, paved the way for high-modernism by encouraging his followers to reevaluate the existing paradigm of truth, to see truth as plural and fluid. And Faulkner, through his intimacy with Fyodor

Dostoevsky, should be regarded also as an major heir to the philosophy of Perspectivism.

1.1 Nietzsche and Perspectivism.

The concept of Perspectivism is coined by Nietzsche in developing the philosophical view that all ideations take place from particular perspectives, and it is the philosophical position that one's access to the world through perception, reason and experience is possible only through one's own perspective. This means that there are as many perspectives as judgments of truth or value can be made. This is often taken to imply that no way of seeing the world can be taken as definitely true, but does not necessarily entail that all perspectives are equally valid.

In *Will to Power*, the very essence of Perspectivism is presented in the following passage:

In so far as the word "knowledge" has any meaning, the world is knowable, but it is interpretable otherwise, it has no meaning behind it, it has countless meanings. —"Perspectivism" (Nietzsche 481).

It is in this vignette that the philosophy of Perspectivism is being introduced for the very first time. Here in contrast to metaphysical philosophy, the pathfinders of which seek to provide a universal and unified picture of knowledge, of reality, of truth, Nietzsche argues unflinchingly that all knowledge is bound to the particularity of one interpretation or another, of one perspective or another. Thus for Nietzsche, any perspective that claims to be timeless and universal condemns itself, for the world is such that it can always be understood differently.

Perspectivism rejects objective metaphysics as impossible, claiming that no evaluation of objectivity can transcend formations or subjective designations. Perspectivism claims that there are no objective facts, nor any knowledge of a thing-in-itself. Truth is separated from any particular vantage point, and so there are no ethical or epistemological absolutes. Rules are constantly reassessed according to the circumstances of individual perspectives. Truth is thus only created by integrating different vantage points together.

Thus Perspectivism is the critical way of thinking in which "a truth is something relative to a perspective and therefore reality is interpretable from many perspectives" (Toming 188), and more significantly, in his renunciation of totalitarianism (for instance, Christian moral tradition which denies life in the name of the absoluteness of an afterlife or Western rationalism which upholds truth with Platonic dialectical reasoning), he advocates that "[o]nly life experienced through multiple perspectives is authentic and joyful" (Toming 195), equating authenticity with and only with the idea of plurality.

Nietzsche's philosophy of Perspectivism is the joyful renouncement of any absolute truth or fact, and it puts into display miscellaneous interpretations of an event viewing from diverse angles. His interest lingers not on any perspective in particular or interpretation generated from that perspective, but rather on the larger

picture of all the concerning perspectives, all the interpretations, as a whole, as something extremely rich in its plurality and democracy of expression. So in Nietzsche's eyes, truth or fact is always fluid and plural judging from different perspectives. Here Nietzsche's philosophy coincides perfectly with Picasso's Cubist painting in that while Nietzsche strives to offer plural interpretations of a phenomenon Picasso's effort is to present the side-portrait and even back-portrait in coexistence with front-profile in one picture. It is in this way that Perspectivism resembles Cubism in Modernism, whose tenet is the simultaneous presentation of various angles in painting as well as writing.

What is also noticeable is Nietzsche's admiration for Fyodor Dostoevsky, whose titanic prestige as a trail-blazer of modernism and post-modernism dwarfs even the finest of the men of letters in both movements, and he called Dostoevsky after reading a French version of *Notes from the Underground* "the only psychologist from whom I have anything to learn". Here Nietzsche coincides with Dostoevsky in two aspects. They both are waging wars against the tyranny of reason. Perspectivism questions the hegemonic Platonic tradition of dialectical reasoning while Dostoevsky wrestles against the purely optimistic attitude towards reason and its grand narrative. Furthermore, both Nietzsche and Dostoevsky strongly favor plurality. Perspectivism celebrates its versatile interpretations of truth while Dostoevsky highlights the Fugue of human nature and upholds Dialogism against Monologism.

1.2 Kernel Concepts in Perspectivism

As primarily a set of critical thinking against truth, Perspectivism is fond of the idea of interpretation. In other words, what is claimed as facts are merely interpretations of those who deify them. Apart from the notion of interpretation, Perspectivism highlights the concept of sense and force, which as an organic unity, are the constituents of the act of interpretation.

1.2.1 Interpretation

Interpretation is at the heart of the philosophy of Perspectivism. According to Nietzsche, "there are no moral facts or phenomena, but only a moral interpretation of phenomena; there are no illusions of knowledge, but knowledge itself is an illusion" (550). For him, an absolute, all-covering truth simply does not exist. Instead, there are only interpretations of things and of phenomena generated from diverse perspectives. It is in this sense that Perspectivism is born revolving around the very act of interpretation. And his philosophy of Perspectivism is a total rejection of a point of view which is free from any perspective, free of any interpretation.

According to him, each interpretation is generated from a unique perspective, and there are as many interpretations as existing perspectives. Thus interpretation and Perspectivism should take this plurality into account as a thing or a phenomenon is always interpreted as sometimes this and sometimes that. As Gilles Deleuze, the

French philosopher and literary critic, who is also a protégée of Nietzsche, argues in his monumental work *Nietzsche and Philosophy* that “philosophy’s highest art [is] that of interpretation” (4). Here what Deleuze is saying is his open celebration of this essence of plurality in Perspectivism and more specifically in this act of interpretation.

In the same book Deleuze makes an analogy for the act of interpretation, which is weighing. He sees Nietzschean interpretation as meticulously delicate, offering further insight into interpretation, “To interpret is to determine the force which gives sense to a thing” (54). Here interpretation is defined as the weighing of the inter-relationship between sense and force, which are more crucial concepts pertinent to Perspectivism.

1.2.2 Sense and Force

According to Deleuze, Nietzsche’s greatest achievement is “the introduction of the concepts of sense and value into philosophy” (1). Here the “concept of sense” is Nietzsche’s art of interpretation, the weighing of force which renders sense to a phenomenon. Nietzsche in introducing sense and force into the realm of philosophy is actually presenting Perspectivism as an alternative to the metaphysical tradition of dialectical reasoning long since Plato. With the concept of sense and force, Perspectivism is a bold challenge to the traditional philosophy of binary opposition and a new critique with plurality as its cornerstone. Thus sense and value is, in Deleuze’s eyes, “Nietzsche’s most general project” (1) amidst all the grandeur and splendor he has ever presented us.

Sense is in no way the simple response to a thing, but rather it is more like the perception of it. According to Deleuze, sense is a plural notion as “[t]he same object, the same phenomenon, changes sense depending on the force which appropriates it” (3). However, sense itself is not identifiable if “we do not know the force which appropriates the thing, which exploits it, which takes possession of it or is expressed in it” (Deleuze 3). Thus sense and force should never be understood separately, they are, so to speak, an organic unity.

Force “takes possession of” a thing and therefore influences our expression of it and the sense we make out of this thing is consequently differentiated. In this way, sense is always already predefined by force. And Deleuze insightfully locates this predetermination in their relationship: “A thing has as many senses as there are forces capable of taking possession of it” (4). Accordingly, force is also “expressed” in a thing as we make sense out of it. In this way, force is what comes into being when sense is in articulation.

Briefly speaking, Perspectivism is the philosophy of viewing one object or phenomenon from plural perspectives, of making correlations between each sense and force from every unique perspective. Force influences and determines our sense of an object or a phenomenon, and sense in articulation presents force. Interpretation is the figuring out of force which gives sense to a thing. Each interpretation is generated from a unique perspective. And sense, force, interpretation, they are all

plural in essence.

2. Cash's Perspective of Simple-Mindedness

A living legacy of his mother's "terrible living" in which there is little vacancy for mere words, Cash, the eldest son, approaches the burial of his mother's corporeality as pure deeds. His sense of the trek the Bundrens take is essentially that of a piece of work to be done, which is most vividly pictured in his famous 13 reasons to bevel the coffin:

I made it on the bevel.

- 1) There is more surface for the nails to grip.
- 2) There is twice the gripping-surface to each seam.
- 3) The water will have to seep into it on a slant. Water moves easiest up and down or straight across.
- 4) In a house people are upright two-thirds of the time. So the seams and joints are made up-and-down. Because the stress is up-and-down.
- 5) In a bed where people lie down all the time, the joints and seams are made side-ways, because the stress is sideways.
- 6) Except.
- 7) A body is not square like a cross-tie.
- 8) Animal magnetism.
- 9) The Animal magnetism of a dead body makes the stress come slanting, so the seams and joints of a coffin are made on the bevel.
- 10) You can see by an old grave that the earth sinks down on the bevel.
- 11) While in a natural hole it sinks by the center, the stress being up-and-down.
- 12) So I made it on the bevel.
- 13) It makes a neater job (Faulkner 75).

Interestingly, what is quoted here is the whole content of the first chapter narrated by Cash. Here Cash is justifying himself, with the first twelve reasons, stating why he made the coffin on a bevel and at the same time explaining, in excessive technical details, the carpentry job he contemplates and works on to put the coffin on a bevel. But the thirteenth reason, which is Cash's conclusion to his self-justification, is what truly is worthy our attention, for it is in this single statement we understand that all Cash sweats into his meticulous sawing and wedging in the process of beveling is for one ultimate goal—to make a neater job. And we should also shed thoughts on the second and the third chapter narrated by Cash. In both of his interior monologues Cash does one thing in particular, which is to vent his worry about the coffin being unbalanced. Repeatedly interrupted by

Jewel, Cash declares in vain, “It won’t balance. If they want it to tote and ride on a balance, they will have—” (Faulkner 87). Here seen from the first three chapters contributed by Cash, we are well aware that Cash’s mind is fully occupied only by the condition of the coffin he made, either its beveling or its balancing, therefore his sense of Addie’s journey of burial is completely focusing on the carpentry work itself and on ascertaining that he has made it “a neater job”.

Indeed, his painstaking efforts to bevel and to balance the coffin he made does illustrate his perfectionism and dedication in the building of the coffin, and professionals tend to justify his coffin-making by arguing that the coffin becomes the token of his love and dedication to Addie and that his making of it is the rite through which “he returns her love in full measure in the way he can best by crafting for her a perfect coffin” (Kinney 174). And the very fact that Cash’s meticulousness in building that coffin is praised and corroborated by more than one witness seems to offer further credence to such an interpretation on Cash. Darl affirms that Cash is a good carpenter and describes the scene where Cash works on the coffin with “a rapt, dynamic immobility above his tireless elbow” (Faulkner 69). Vernon Tull, the neighbor, grudges that “[i]f Cash just works that careful on my barn” (Faulkner 28) and later on offers us a portrait of Cash filling up the holes on the coffin which goes like this “I have seen him spend a hour trimming out a wedge like it was glass he was working, when he could have reached around and picked up a dozen sticks and drove them into the joint and made it do” (Faulkner 79). However, my understanding is that, the fact that Cash completes his coffin-building with such seriousness and dutifulness, which is seldom seen even in the work of finest craftsmen, is the very indication of his incapacity to focus on more than one task at a time, as supposedly all his energies are already used up in the excessive details of his carpentry and his mind could dwell on nowhere else. It is not to be neglected that Cash has not for once, throughout all his action of beveling and balancing of the coffin, mentioned “Addie”, the name of his mother, or “ma” as the other kids in the family do, and when he has to address the coffin in which Addie lays dead (dying), he constantly uses the word “it”, not “her”, as a son would reasonably do. To Cash, Addie is an object, a “dead body” or grotesquely “animal magnetism”. Therefore, Cash, in whose eyes even the significance of the coffin annuls that of the deceased body of his mother, carries out one action at a time, and that action in particular is always related with detailed and concrete work. Drenched in sawdust and planks, Cash is the least emotionally affected among the five children confronting the death of their mother: Darl probes into the question of his own being and non-being and is finally locked away in an asylum; Jewel’s action is teeming with unpredictable hatred and rage; Dewey Dell is in the maelstrom of her uncertainties brought about both by her mother’s death and her pregnancy; Vardaman is beleaguered with confusion and loss. Cash alone is stable and could work out his carpentry whole-heartedly. Instead of honor, endurance and dignity, all of which Cleanth Brooks tags on him in his essay, Cash, being entirely absorbed in his meticulous beveling of the coffin, centers his mind on the coffin itself rather than on its inhabitant, to such a grotesque extent that “Cash’s obsession with coffin shows a concern with the specific totem than with Addie”, but more importantly it exposes in him “an involvement in craftsmanship so deep as to ignore or trivialize the question

of love and grief” (Kartiganer 28). So Cash’s sense of the journey, in its narration, displays a true narrowness of mind.

And it is this narrow-mindedness of his that limits Cash’s perception of the burial to the mechanical completion of his woodwork. Being a man “spiritually boxed in by numbered lists and exact measurements” (Alldredge 10), Cash’s simple-mindedness is the force with which he appropriates every single event he comes across during the forty-mile journey. Early in his childhood, his literal-mindedness is already framed. When Addie wishes that if she had some fertilizer, Cash “taken the bread-pan and brought it back from the barn full of dung” (Faulkner 11). At the Addie’s funeral, Cash could remember exactly how far he fell off the roof during roof-mending: “Twenty-eight foot, four and a half inches, about” (Faulkner 82). Despite the fact that one of his legs is broken because of this accident, Cash, being an extremely narrow-minded person, perceives this accident which limps him for the rest of his life still only as one piece of work concerning the details of carpentry. The moment he mumbles the exact height of his falling is the moment we realize that Cash’s mind functions exclusively on work and nothing else, not even his own broken leg, and certainly not the death of his own mother.

Another illustration of his simple-mindedness is his obsession with that set of tools of his. When Jewel catches up with the family the movement of his horse brings mud and dirt on Cash’s tools, Cash catches the first opportunity he could to clean the dirt with willows as he “breaks off a branch and scours at the stain with the wet leaves” (Faulkner 97). Later in the scene when the Bundrens are crossing the river, Cash is washed aside the bank with a new fracture on his limp leg. Startlingly the first thing Cash ventilates when he comes to himself is his anxiousness about the whereabouts of his set of tools. And he is pleased only when Jewel, Darl and Vernon Tull have secured each and every one of the pieces, namely, the square, the saw, the hammer, the chalk-line, the rule, the plane, and the saw-set. Again Cash’s mind is solely set on items relating to his woodwork and he appears to be completely immune to the huge pain of leg fracture. Here Cash displays something far exceeds endurance, persistence or code of honor, but an automaton-like numbness to even his well-being. He is mechanical to such an extent that he is stripped of basic human emotion.

Nothing bothers Cash as long as it is not work-related. When asked about whether he wants to slow the team to ease the pain in his leg Cash replies “Ain’t no time to hang back. It don’t bother none” (Faulkner 184). Here similar to Anse, Cash would not allow a delay or detour of the journey. Contrary to Anse, Cash’s mind is preoccupied not at all by his personal interests but only the completion of the work itself, which for him is the burial. When his leg is finally sawed off, and knowing he is doomed to be crippled for the rest of his life, there is no sign of agony or anxiety in him, as he lies on the bed in Dr. Peabody’s house in Jefferson, satisfied that the mission is accomplished. His simple-mindedness thus successfully nullifies any common sense a normal person possesses in him and establishes him as a robot whose perception of even misfortunes is exclusively work-related.

However, the most shockingly presented picture of Cash’s narrow-mindedness is

in the fourth chapter narrated by Cash, which is also his longest. In this chapter the Bundrens are conspiring against Darl and the decision is made which is to send Darl to an asylum in Jackson to avoid law suit from the Gillespies whose barn is set afire by him. Cash, though not totally without sympathy towards Darl, is also a silent accomplice. His curiously unemotional meditation on Darl's arson goes as follows:

But I don't reckon nothing excuses setting fire to a man's barn and endangering his stock and destroying his property. That's how I reckon a man is crazy....And I reckon they ain't nothing else to do with him but what most folks says is right (Faulkner 220).

Though acknowledging the bond between them, Cash still thinks that Darl should be punished, and his justification on Darl easily gives in because he is the arch upholder of the sacredness of men's property. Here the word "property" is the very center around which Cash's reasoning revolves. Not only is Cash a carpenter who himself builds property, but also he is the narrow-minded elder brother whose very basis of judging the sanity and justifiability of his younger brother is reduced to the damage done to a piece of property. Even in the occasion where his younger brother is endangered to be locked away in an asylum for the rest of his life, Cash's thought process is mechanically work-related, which is governed by his simple-mindedness. So right after he ascertains in his own logic Darl's culpability and insanity, Cash ponders upon "the olden teaching that says to drive the nails down and trim the edge well always like it was for your own use and comfort you were making it" (Faulkner 220).

No wonder when the law finally comes for Darl, Cash says to him "It'll be better for you" (Faulkner 225). This world in which they all inhabit is certainly a good place for Cash. Darl may or may not be insane, but Cash is too sane, as he is reduced to an automaton whose mind is bereft of emotional complexity of a normal human being. No wonder at the finale of *As I Lay Dying*, Cash, despite his locked away younger brother and his own sawed-off leg, cares only about that talking machine he craves, as Carolyn Norman Slaughter mercilessly points out, "His simple meager soul is pleased with the new Mrs. Bundren's graphophone" (30).

In conclusion, Cash's perspective is the perspective of robot-like simple-mindedness. The interpretation he made of the burial of his mother is governed by the force of simple-mindedness, which gives his sense of the journey as grotesquely mechanical as "to make a neater job".

3. Conclusion

This research has presented Cash Bundren's perspective on the event of Addie Bundren's death and burial. Cash, under his perspective, makes an interpretation of the event in which the force that appropriates the event determines his sense of it: Cash's is that of a task to get over with which is determined by simple-mindedness; As Nietzsche's Perspectivism upholds each version of truth in the eyes of every potential interpreter, Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* legalizes all its characters' sense of the burying journey of Addie Bundren. More significantly, Faulkner, in his

simultaneity of various narrative consciousnesses, further discloses “the absurd and the distorted in the supposedly normal” (Toming 235). While Nietzsche, in reevaluation of existing values, wages war against “the ‘slave mentality’ which is Philistine, resentful, uncreative” (Toming 195), Faulkner mercilessly thrashes the philistine personified by Cash in the old southern convention.

Therefore, this research concludes that Cash’ perspective in *As I Lay Dying* is Faulkner’s literary reflection of his philosophical stance upon the critical thinking of Perspectivism. As no perspective in *As I Lay Dying* is superior or inferior than any of the others, not even one that is as simple-minded and philistine as that of Cash’s.

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