

## The Flesh Made Word: *As I Lay Dying* and Being Incarnate

As a novel told through a series of interior monologues, the narrative structure of *As I Lay Dying* seems to underscore the alienation of human consciousness; the separateness of Self in its effort to assert isolated meaning upon an incoherent exterior world. Drawing upon Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of language as embodiment and the intercorporeality of being, I offer that the apparent alienation of characters in Faulkner's novel is deceptive, that their efforts to draw meaning from experience is reciprocal and interdependent, embodied through the perceptual experience of exterior "gestures" of other social subjects, to include the gesture of spoken language, human physical gesture, as well as the body's relationship with the natural world and its non-human inhabitants. While the reader is privileged to know the unspoken thoughts of each character, the characters themselves are limited to glancing impressions of exterior language, physical or spoken, consistently perceived as affirmations of meaning each separate self creates. In Faulkner's novel, each character "thinks" in relationship to his or her private physical world, but one that envelops the relationship of body to natural world and the gestural language of other bodies as expressed intent, even if the transfer of expressed intent is absurdly off mark. The dark humor of *As I Lay Dying* depends upon this misappropriation of meaning, especially when the mother's corpse emanates a non-verbal language of its own, through its odyssey, expressing its decay and humiliation to an envoy of buzzards that multiplies in mockery of the family funeral procession. While the idea of an inter-corpse-ality of being seems morbid, it extends Merleau-Ponty's concept of language as embodiment, humorously and ironically, even beyond the grave. What results in *As I Lay Dying* is a darkly comic suggestion that bodies of the dead reciprocate meaning as effectively (or as ineffectively) as bodies of living family members.

**Cheryl Emerson** began her studies in William Faulkner's fiction while a doctoral candidate at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. Her interest in Faulkner emerged from readings in Theater of the Absurd, especially the violence of humor and laughter in the absurd which resounds throughout 20<sup>th</sup> century writers of the American South. She has published essays on Henri Bergson and Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men*, the imagery of Ovid's *Metamorphosis* as present in Thomas Wolfe's *Look Homeward, Angel*, and presented conference papers on the aesthetics of modernism in Katherine Anne Porter's *Ship of Fools* as well as Porter's racial language in her short story collection *The Old Order*. Cheryl Emerson currently teaches literature and composition at University Christian High School, a private honors program operating in partnership with Lenoir-Rhyne University in Hickory, North Carolina.