Agency, Time, and "Dying" in Modernist Literature

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Writing in a moment fraught with change in temporal perception, William Faulkner and Ernest Hemingway respond to modernity's efforts to control and segment time. In the wake of World War I, these modernist authors categorize action as worthless and technology as no legitimate salve for feelings of meaninglessness. Through their portrayal of action against time as futile, Faulkner and Hemingway convey a bleak view of the world.

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Modernist literature, defined in part by the period when it was written, is largely concerned with matters of temporality. The intersection of changing perceptions of time due to technological advancement, and disenchantment after World War I, called human agency itself into question. This junction of advancement and depravity inspired modernist literature that critiqued the modern impulse to control time. In order to illuminate the futility of action taken against time, modernist writers Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner position their characters in opposition to the natural force of time. In *As I Lay Dying*, "The Killers," and "Indian Camp," Faulkner and Hemingway respond to the cultural chronemic sentiment by using time as a means to render action useless, ultimately asserting time as a constraint that remains supreme despite modernity's efforts to control it. In these narratives, plotting and narrative thwart the characters' efforts to master and resist the effects of time.

Public conceptions of time changed forever in 1833 when time zones and a standard method of telling time were established. Prior to this standardization, time was kept by local communities using sundials or well-maintained clocks in central locations. Time was essentially its own master, as it was defined by the position of the sun, varying from place to place. In the article "The Track to Modernity," Jack Beatty labels time in the United States before the standardization as a "temporal wilderness" beholden not to a widely adopted constraint but to a myriad of local times and the movement of the sun. Beatty explores the public reaction to this change, mentioning that publications at the time lamented that "the sun will rise and set by railroad time" (Beatty). Although exaggerated, the idea of the sun rising and setting according to the railroad time carries with it the implication that natural processes are now under the control of mankind. This reversal of roles made it so human invention dictated perception of time rather than natural processes shaping this perception. Through breakthroughs in transportation and technology, modernity offered the potential for greater agency over one's life through the ability to travel faster and subsequently, earn more time.

In Rebecca Solnit's article, "The Annihilation of Time and Space," she talks about the impact that new technologies, namely the photograph and means of transportation such as the railroad, had on perceptions of time. She writes that through motion picture technology, humans were able to master time. It was as though the first users of this technology had "grasped time itself, made it stand still, and then made it run again, over and over" (Solnit 5). The ability to control time through the use of technology opened up a new world "for science, for art, for entertainment, for consciousness, and an old world retreated farther" (Solnit 5). Solnit goes on to list further technological advancements that came into being during the late 1800s such as the telegraph, saying that these changes accomplished more than just greater connectivity across the

country, but changed the very experience of time. Before these advancements, human action in space and time was limited by nature's constraints. Solnit writes that "nature itself was the limit of speed: humans could only harness water, wind, birds and beasts" (Solnit 9). Through this increase in connectivity and mobility, action held a different kind of weight. If one chose to, he could accomplish more in a day than his father had before him, simply because he had faster tools and means of transportation at his disposal.

Despite advancement, using technology as a means to "control time" did not solve mankind's problems. The first World War brought with it death and destruction that was unparalleled, and the stain of the war tainted modernity and complicated views of modern agency. Fostered by modern innovations like aerial combat, motorized armor, and chemical warfare, a world of increased transience, efficiency, and action became one equipped with the ability to cause more suffering. In "Reframing the Narrative of a Global Conflict," his foreward to the edited collection *Proximity and Distance: Space, Time and World War I*, Bruno Cabanes writes that, "Associating modernity and mass destruction, the war brought this process [the acceleration of transport, communication, information] to its climax. Aeroplanes and zeppelins could target cities and turn the domestic sphere into a battleground" (Cabanes 1). The scale of the violence and its ability to encroach upon the domestic gave World War I an all encompassing quality that wars before it had not achieved. The war not only altered how those who were participating in it "experienced time and and space" but it demonstrated that "empires and nations could be demolished and raised up in the space of a few years" (Cabanes 10). The level of death and destruction that those who participated in the war experienced, and those who read about it in the papers felt from afar, shaped the sentiment of the collective. Modernity was not just a race to master time and space, but a perfect storm of conditions that prompted writers at the time to interrogate action, revealing its inherent meaninglessness.

In Sarah Cole's essay "Enchantment, Disenchantment, War, Literature" she cites a modern dichotomy of disenchantment and enchantment which carried "special urgency in the first decade of the twentieth century, in part because of the power of the first World War in shaping aesthetic consciousness" (Cole 1632). The war had a hand in shaping the art and literature that came after it, compelling artists and writers to deal not with abstractions and romantic notions, but instead to pull away the veil and reveal enchantment for what it was, an illusion. Cole discusses Max Weber, and his thought that a decrease in sacredness was a "product of industrial modernity" (Cole 1633). Technology and travel carry with them the ability to master time. However, they also have the power to disenchant through the realization that suffering is inevitable, and even worsened by modern advancement. It is within this volatile time of ever advancing invention and collective suffering that modernist writers like Faulkner and Hemingway found themselves faced with questions of time and agency. Pushing back against notions about time that formed in reaction to technological advancement, these writers demonstrated an ideological distancing from the promise of progress, demonstrating that action could not stop time's final consequence: death.

Anxiety surrounding time made its way into artistic and literary endeavors, becoming the focus of many modernist works. In *As I Lay Dying,* time exists as an ever present force that collides with the character's conflicting agendas throughout the novel to create the story's central conflict. The novel tells the tortured story of Addie Bundren's burial in a town called Jefferson, and the convoluted journey that the remaining members of the Bundren family take to get her body there. For much of the novel, time complicates Addie's burial and serves as a force that imposes constraints on the Bundren family's quest. Even before they set out towards Jefferson, the Bundren family begins to feel the anxiety brought on by time, and they engage in multiple conversations about whether or not Jewel and Darl have time to make "one more load" of lumber and be home before their mother dies. It is significant that their product is lumber, as it advances the idea that human action is positioned in opposition to time. By cutting down trees and selling them, Jewel and Darl are engaging in a physical representation of "mastering" natural time. As they discuss their journey, Anse says, "him and Darl went to make one more load. They thought there was time. That you would wait for them, that three dollars and all…" (Faulkner 46). In this quote, Anse communicates the power that time has to dictate the decisions that the Bundren family members are making. Because Addie is on her deathbed, the characters are limited in their ability to act by the looming sense that time is running out.

Time is both a force that applies pressure to the advancement of the plot and one that is felt as a tangible intrusion into the lives of the characters. This is most exemplified by Addie Bundren, who speaks about time as a force that violates her, intruding upon her personal freedom. Addie says, "My aloneness had

been violated and then made whole again by the violation: time, Anse, love, what you will, outside the circle" (Faulkner 164). In this statement, Addie lists the forces that are responsible for the destruction of her aloneness and its inherent freedom, time being one of them. In the end, time rendered her alone again in death. Time is also present in the physical descriptions of characters. Jewel's face is described as a "composite picture of all time since he was a child" (Faulkner 47). Later, Cash's movements, while sawing away at his mother's coffin, are aligned with the ticking of a clock or the scheduled constancy of a machine. Darl narrates, "again it moves up and down, in and out of that unhurried imperviousness as a piston moves in the oil; soaked scrawny, tireless, with the lean light body of a boy or an old man" (Faulkner 73). These quotes highlight the pervasiveness of time, as it exists not just as an external force but as a means to encapsulate and describe all a character was and all that they will be. Through this association, Faulkner aligns modern machinery with the passage of time, a nod to man's efforts to move time along on a human ordained schedule.

Clocks are omnipresent in the novel in many implied forms, most notably represented by natural processes that convey the passing of time. Armstid narrates, "Along toward nine oclock it begun to get hot. That was when I saw the first buzzard… just watching them, and them circling and circling for everybody in the county to see what was in my barn" (Faulkner 177). The presence of the buzzards are a reminder to the readers and characters alike that time is passing and physically manifesting in the form of Addie's decaying body. This reassertion of the power of time provokes anxiety in the reader, as the Bundrens can not seem to take action as Addie's decay progresses. Death itself is represented as a process synonymous with, and ruled by time. The image that is created of the birds circling the barn is reminiscent of the hands of a clock, but further, the image points to philosophical thinking on time. In the *Journal of Nietzche Studies,* "The Eternal Return as Crucial Test" by Eric Oger explains how Nietzche thought of the world as a "cycle" that "has infinitely repeated itself and plays its games in infinitum" (Oger 1). Reading Nietzche in tandem with *As I Lay Dying* aligns the circular flying pattern of the buzzards with a cyclical, inescapable conception of time. Time is a constraint on the Bundren family's journey, but it is not one that they can hope to control or circumvent. The hovering presence of the buzzards becomes a looming reminder of the presence of time and how little any action taken against Addie's decay matters. Through these examples, Faulkner positions time as a force that opposes, thwarts, and violates his characters, establishing it as the instrument through which characters are forced to confront the inevitability of death, and by extension the hollowness of their actions.

In *As I Lay Dying,* Faulkner explores action in relationship to time, ultimately deciding that exercising personal agency is futile. This reading is supported through Darl's character arc, as well as Faulkner's focus on Darl as a narrative voice equipped with greater levels of awareness. From the start of the novel, Darl is presented as a character who sees the world in a way that other characters do not. In "Tension between Darl and Jewel," Elizabeth Hayes writes about the importance of Darl's narrative perspective, saying that "Darl is the single most important character in *As I Lay Dying*…Sensitive, articulate and detached, Darl is the chief source of information about almost all personalities and relationships in the novel" (Hayes 50). In "Predestination and Freedom in *As I Lay Dying,"* Charles Palliser writes that Darl's "vision of human realities is totally deterministic and that this sets him apart from his fellows" (Palliser 558). Darl's belief that action is futile in the face of the final verdict of time is apparent in the way he views the journey to Jefferson. Pallister comments that Darl sees "the belief of his family and neighbors in freedom of will as an absurd delusion" (Pallister 558). Darl attempts to cut this absurd journey short, using an act of will to put an end to the burial quest. Pallister continues on to say that "the final irony is that when, in order to halt the grim funeral journey, he attempts to burn down the barn in which his mother's corpse lies, he is undertaking an initiative which he must know is doomed" (Pallister 559). In a particularly lucid chapter from Cash, Faulkner sheds light on Darl's motives saying that "when Darl seen that it looked like one of us would have to do something, I can almost believe he done right in a way" (Faulkner 223). Cash explains that while Jewel was "going against God" by saving his mom from the river, Darl is acting to try to put an end to the decay and finish the journey. Darl's attempt to stop time through the burning is both a recognition of time's ultimate decision and an acknowledgement that the act of journeying to Jefferson is absurd. His decision to burn the barn reveals this through his motives but also through the action's eventual consequence. He is eventually destroyed by his choice to act, further condemning action as an attempt to control time. He is labeled insane and in time sent to a mental institution for this initiative, "as with his deterministic fatalism and lack of belief in the efficacy of

action, he must have known he would be" (Pallister 573). This reading reinforces the assertion that Faulkner is exposing the futility of action against time in *As I Lay Dying*.

Not only is the ultimate powerlessness of action cemented by Darl's tragic ending, but it is shown through Jewel's attempts to work against time and own a horse of his own. Darl notes that Jewel is disappearing night after night, and assumes he leaves to sleep with a girl. Jewel returns every morning, gaunt and too lethargic to do his tasks around the farm. When Darl and Cash converse about Jewel's disappearance, Darl asks, "But why the lantern? And every night too. No wonder he's losing flesh. Are you going to say anything to him?" Cash figures that speaking to Jewel "wont do any good" and Darl follows with "What he's doing now wont do any good either" (Faulkner 124). At this point in Darl's memory of the situation, Darl and Cash do not realize that Jewel is leaving to clear land all night long so that he can buy himself a horse. Even so, the assessment that Jewel's actions "won't do any good" align with the sentiment that action itself is fruitless in the face of time and eventual death. The pointlessness of Jewel's agency is revealed when Anse sells Jewel's horse later in the novel. Despite working all night to create a surplus of time for himself, Jewel's willful actions are eventually rendered pointless.

Like Faulkner, Hemingway presents time as a looming presence that human agency is no match for. This is exemplified in "The Killers" and "Indian Camp," which both feature the protagonist Nick Adams. In "The Killers," Hemingway introduces Max and Al as a pair of ridiculous hitmen through their condescending dialogue in Henry's lunchroom. Upon entering the restaurant, the killers engage in confusing conversation with George the manager, Sam the cook, and Nick Adams. They employ several verbal bait and switch tactics with the intent to disorient and gain control over their captive audience. Their overuse of the sarcastic "bright boy" establishes that their performance aims to keep the upper hand over Nick Adams, George, and Sam, all of whom happen to be in the restaurant when the killers enter looking to find Ole Anderson and kill him. It is through their dialogue that the reader receives glimpses of their concerns, one of which being time. They are waiting for Ole Anderson to enter the lunchroom which he does most evenings at "6 o'clock." Time is one of the key players in this scene, as it is the reason that the killers have chosen to enter Henry's lunchroom when they did. In a story of sparse dialogue and few narrative interjections, the attention that is paid to the clock is worth noting. Hemingway writes, "'It's five o'clock.' 'The clock says twenty minutes past five,' the second man said. 'It's twenty minutes fast'" (Hemingway 279). Hemingway's addition of a clock to the scene adds an element of temporal awareness. He marks the passage of time throughout the interaction in the lunchroom through dialogue related to the clock, and the narrator's interjection, stating "Outside it was getting dark" (Hemingway 279) and "George looked up at the dock. It was a quarter past six" (Hemingway 284). The faulty clock communicates a feeling of a world off-kilter, but also reasserts the forces of time and death as superior to modernity's efforts to segment and control it. These brief mentions of clocks and the passing of time convey a sense of waiting and raise questions about what action will take place next.

Although the faulty clock seems to be ticking the time away, Nick Adams soon learns that his efforts to find Ole Anderson and warn him before he is found by the killers are meaningless. Infact, Anderson has decided not to act, instead rolling "over toward the wall" (Hemingway 287). Through this choice not to act, despite seemingly having enough time to run, Hemingway communicates the philosophy exemplified by Faulkner in *As I Lay Dying*. Anderson expresses the futility of action by stating "that won't do any good" after Nick suggests steps he could take to fix his situation. The line is reminiscent of Darl's prophetic "Won't do him any good either," and further aligns Ole's ethos with that of *As I Lay Dying*. In both stories, the sense that time and decay are unstoppable is pervasive.

This attitude towards action finds its place in other works by Hemingway, most notably "Indian Camp." In this short story, a much younger Nick Adams accompanies his father, who is a doctor, across a lake to help a Native American woman who has "been trying to have her baby for two days" (Hemingway 68). Time is an implied presence in the story from the very start and is arguably the reason why the central conflict exists in the first place. Because of this, the pressure of time looms in the background of the cabin while Nick helps his father deliver the woman's child. Hemingway's narrator states that Nick "held the basin for his father" and that "it all took a very long time" (Hemingway 68). While Nick's father races against time to deliver the baby, the woman's husband who had been lying in the top bunk of the bed while she was giving birth, killed himself by slitting his throat. The narrator notes how the man "lay with his face toward the wall. His throat had been cut from ear to ear" (Hemingway 69). Although action appears to have won its battle

against time through the successful birth of the baby and an intended end to the woman's suffering, the discovery of her dead husband reveals that time once again reigns superior in the form of death.

Writing in a moment fraught with change in temporal perception, Faulkner and Hemingway respond to modernity's efforts to control and segment time. In the wake of World War I, these modernist authors wrote with the intent to convey disenchantment, to categorize action as worthless and technology as no legitimate salve for feelings of meaninglessness. Even if the Bundren's had borrowed a car, or acted faster, Addie would still have been dead. In fact, "dying" was an ever present state, a predetermined future that had staying power in the present. The title *As I Lay Dying* best exemplifies this state, as the grammar itself suspends time and makes its presence known. As for Ole Anderson and the Native American man, their deaths were kept out of the reader's awareness. The husband's death is confirmed yet not witnessed in action, and Ole's anticipated death hangs over the end of the story, past its ending and into infinite time. By communicating a sense of death simultaneously in the present and the future, the reader feels that their fates have always been so. Through their portrayal of action against time as meaningless, Faulkner and Hemingway convey a bleak view of the world. Like Ole Anderson laying with "all of his clothes on facing the wall," a modernist response to modernity is best summed up by "the reason for living was to stay dead a long time" (Faulkner 161).

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