

BENJY'S MEMORY AND DESIRE: THE DEFAMILIARIZATION OF
TIME IN THE FIRST SECTION OF *THE SOUND AND THE FURY*

In his essay "Art as Technique" Victor Shklovsky states that "the technique of art is to make objects unfamiliar, to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception" (12). "Art removes objects from the automatism of perceptions in several ways" writes the Russian critic in reference to what he calls the process of "defamiliarization". From his perspective, all literature, as all art, seems to involve some kind of renewal of perception and in this sense, it always "defamiliarizes".

We cannot establish the coherence of the concept of defamiliarization, which is a "transitional self abolishing one" (Jameson 90). Nevertheless, the temptation is strong to delineate the type of defamiliarization presented by modernist literature in opposition to the defamiliarization manifested in the literature of the realist period. Whereas the former presents us with the laying bare of its own devices only to give the spectacle of the literary creation as a transformation of reality, the latter, by concealing its devices, attempts to give a faithful account of reality.

One of the main values of literature for the formalists lies precisely in its constant search for novelty and originality —its tendency to defamiliarize. In this respect, any literary convention establishes its own set of devices which after being repeated become traditional. Therefore, in the struggle for renewal, stereotyped devices are not only abandoned but attacked in order to deviate from the norm. The traditional becomes exhausted and what had been prohibited in the past becomes obligatory.

It is precisely from this position of awareness of what had constituted the literature of preceding times that we can understand the critics' common agreement on attributing to the modernist novel the quality of being experimental or innovative in form "exhibiting marked deviations from existing modes of discourse" (Lodge 481).

However, the quest of the modernists writers to defamiliarize involves not only a "deviation" but a redefinition of the very nature of literature in general and narrative in particular. This redefinition emerges from a new attitude of the artist towards reality. The modernist writer wants the reader to realize that nothing can ever be objectively described with implacable authority, only encompassed by the creative imagination of the author and the recreative imagination of the reader.

In a great deal of modernist novels the attention turns inward to the movements of the protagonists' minds and consequently the external world is presented as a fragmented perception through a series of overlapping interior impressions. In the majority of these novels, nothing actually happens in the traditional sense. As a result, the routine expectations of the readers

are shattered in the confrontation of a narrative of non-events. The tendency is to move away from representationalism and referentiality and emphasize not what is being told, but rather the process of telling in itself.

In modernist fiction it is the very concept of narrative itself that is being defamiliarized. The novel ceases to give a precise account of the world outside and offers instead a sense of reality always as it is perceived and filtered through subjective experience.

The work that has been chosen as a paradigm of the modernist novel, William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, offers an excellent example of the modernist experimentation with language. If in the authorial voice of the nineteenth century one notices a confident mastery of reality (the reader follows the rigorous order through which the scenes are structured and reported), in Faulkner's narrative the attention turns inward to the movements of the protagonist's mind.

In *The Sound and the Fury* Faulkner renounces the sort of complex ordering of data delivered by an over-viewing narrator and offers instead a fragmentation of the external world in a series of overlapping interior impressions. Therefore, Faulkner participates in the general modernist impulse to develop new narrative techniques in order to represent the subtle movements of inner states, and implicitly he suggests that consciousness itself is not an ultimate reality but a dubious operation performed on the stuff of experience in endlessly different ways by different minds.

Faulkner's conception of consciousness as the ultimate reality and his insistence on giving consciousness an elaborated poetic form leads to view his literary creation as the product of a modernist writer "par excellence". He not only subscribed to the interest of modern art in general with the conscious and unconscious workings of the human mind, but he expanded and elevated it in his works. His development of narrative, particularly his effort to make the novel an introspective artifact in the line of the works by Conrad, Joyce, James, Kafka, Proust, Woolf and others, carried modernist fiction along to one of its furthest reaches.

In *The Sound and the Fury* what we take to be "reality" or the "world" is eventually revealed as the product of imagination. Therefore, there is neither one single absolute truth to be revealed, nor one definite order to establish nor one individual language to be expressed. In the light of the dramatic changes in the modes of perceiving and understanding human experience, Faulkner's narrative subscribes to the belief that language had to be reinvented, since as we are reminded in his other novel, *As I Lay Dying*: "words are no good ... words don't even fit what they are trying to say at" (136).

The experimentation with language and the change in the modes of perception which the novel manifests, elicits another extremely modernist issue: the redefinition of the concept of time. In *The Sound and the Fury*, Faulkner has broken up the chronology of his story and scambled the pieces.

In Faulkner's novel, defamiliarization is present not only in Benjy's distorted perception which results in a distorted speech, but in the new understanding of the nature of narrative.

The previously referred to modernist redefinition of narrative is exemplified by a novel and in particular by an episode in which reality, more than reported, is evoked and desired. Benjy's language is not the language which refers to the factual and the material, but rather the language which expresses memory and desire.

As we are drifted into Benjy's stream of consciousness we are required to decipher his idiolect, a language consistently stripped to its barest essentials which becomes a discourse far removed from the formality of literary traditions of the habitual patterns of living speech. As readers, we are jolted into the uncomfortable awareness of a text that refuses to fit into prior reading experiences.

The separation of Benjy's mental world from reality seems to encourage us towards an explicit search for the permanent structures inherent in his mind in order to organize a reading which is apparently meaningless. We learn to disentangle Benjy's mass of thoughts and produce an organized structure which helps us to read the text as we differentiate categories of various physical perceptions—visual, auditory, tactile and smell sensations—and the corresponding mental association which they elicit.

In our approach, the episode stands as a microcosm of narrative in general, and likewise our reading exemplifies that quest for the grammar which sustains the narrative. When we read we reorganize a diversity of unities by reducing and regularizing them into definite categories. The process of reading *The Sound and the Fury*, and in a broader sense the modernist novel in general, involves the learning of a new sign system.

Everything in the first section hinges upon the brother-sister relation, a relation which becomes both thematic focus and structuring principle. Benjy forms the subject of the narration whereas the sister turns out to be its primary object. The former is present through his own voice; the latter is the absent / present figure ceaselessly evoked and invoked in his monologue. Andre Bleikasten has pointed out alluding to this principle which generates the narrative:

The brother-sister relation is just as central: it exemplifies the ambiguous relation of desire to its lost object, while functioning at the same time as a paradigm for most of the conflicts and the tension represented in the novel. (74)

The use of such a structuring principle, lack and desire (to use Freudian terms), awareness of loss and evocation of the past as a way to fulfil the desire and to palliate absence with remembered presence, provides Faulkner with an extraordinary opportunity to defamiliarize traditional temporal expectations. In Benjy's mind the past erupts into the present in a feverish shuttling back and forth between his memories. His kaleidoscopic mind oscillates between present and past and the only logic of his mental processes is that of association. As a result of such an oscillation the reader is obliged to confront the narrative as a ceaseless fragmentation.

With the representation of the idiot's consciousness, Faulkner violates traditional concepts of time strongly grounded on notions such as linearity and chronological order. Therefore, we are struck by continuous overlappings of present events and memories of past events since, through the persistence of recalled impressions, the present is constantly submerged into the past. By choosing a character who has no sense of time and whose only thought process is associative, Faulkner justifiably eschews the chronological ordering of the fictional material.

In *The Sound and the Fury*, although the main story line is a single one, it is nevertheless delivered to us by the juxtaposition of four different sections—four different types of narrative—with which the destruction of linear chronology is already initiated. Four different independent time periods which do not follow a logically ordered succession are linked together by mere juxtaposition—April seventh, 1928; June second, 1910; April sixth, 1928; April tenth 1928.

Juxtaposition is also Benjy's only means of connecting the different episodes of his life. In the first section, sensation imposes the order on his experiences since the impression received by any object, sound or incident may mechanically propel his mind towards some point in the past. As a result, the reader is constantly lost among Benjy's past memories: the night "Damuddy" died, the day he received a new name and the day of Caddy's wedding. Just some identifying motifs—Luster and the mention of his quarter, as well as Benjy's different nurses—relate us to back to the present or situate our perception at a definite point in the past.

Installed in the mind of the character from the first lines, we are required to follow the uninterrupted unfolding of his thoughts. Traditional temporal expectations, mainly based on chronological sequentiality, are therefore shattered since, as Bleikasten has pointed out, "the horizontal linearity of external chronology is replaced by a synchronic patterning of internal relationship" (87). In this sense, past and present mingle throughout the section, perceived as a superimposed continuity:

"Wait a minute." Luster said. "You snagged on that nail again. Can't you never crawl through here without snagging on that nail again."

Caddy uncaught me and we crawled through ... You don't want your hands frozen on Christmas do you.

"It's too cold there" Versh said (12).

In the above example, two physical sensations, crawling and coldness, link in the idiot's mind his present—April seventh, 1928—with two different moments of the past. Thus, getting snagged on a nail with Luster reminds him of a time, twenty six years earlier, when he was snagged on a nail while he was with Caddy. Likewise, the mention of the cold weather just before Christmas carries Benjy's memory to an earlier scene of the same day.

In *Narrative Discourse*, Gerard Genette states:

To study the temporal order of a narrative is to compare the order in which events or temporal sections are arranged in the narrative discourse with the order of succession these same events or temporal segments have in the story ... (35)

Genette's proposal becomes a hard task of inference and interpretation for the reader of *The Sound and the Fury*. The alternation of "anachronies" —"all forms of discordance between the two temporal orders of story and narrative" (Genette 40)— forms most of the first section which becomes precisely a chain of "analepsis" —"any evocation after the fact of an event which took place earlier than the point in the story where we are at a given moment" (Genette 40).

Benjy's recollections control the whole of the narrative which is presented as a vast and continuous movement of coming and going. In this sense, Genette's use of the term analepsis does not apply to Faulkner's distortion of chronology with total accuracy. When referring to analepsis, the critic assumes that this type of anachrony constitutes "with respect to the narrative into which it is inserted —onto which is grafted— a narrative that is temporally second, subordinate to the first ..." (48).

We wonder whether the so-called first narrative exists in Benjy's section, whether there is a dominant position from which the narrative shifts and to which it comes back.

The heading of the chapter —April seventh, 1928— seems to give us a sense of center which is nevertheless lost once the mechanism of memory and desire which articulates Benjy's mind begins to function. As Bleikasten suggests, in our reading we discover that "Benjy's present is in fact extremely thin ice, cracking at every step" (48). Therefore, most of the analepsis end on ellipsis and they illustrate what Genette calls "partial analepsis". They do not rejoin the first narrative but are offered consecutively, therefore accounting for our impossibility as readers to give prevalence to a definite stage in Benjy's mental journey, and similarly hinting at the non-prevalence of a single narrative in the design of the section as Faulkner's ultimate intention.

The play with displacement of time starts already at the beginning of the section when Benjy is still remembering an uncertain period of time before Christmas day, 1902. The mention of cold weather carries his memory back to an earlier scene of the same day in presence of Caddy, coldness being the recurrent motif —"Did you come to meet Caddy", she said rubbing my hands" (14). Then, the awareness of her absence brings him back to 1928 as Luster's intromission manifests —"*What are you moaning about, Luster said*" (14). However, this sense of present is only momentary, the memory of 1902 is recuperated again and occupies the next three pages.

The anachronism of Benjy's memory is not reduced to occasional interpolations of past events that he pictures. His whole narrating becomes a diffuse activity of remembering old sensations and experiencing new ones which never stop to propel his mind to the realm of the already happened as in a vicious circle. It seems as if we were being offered a new concept of

time, no longer the temporality to which the narrative refers to, but time as governing the narrative itself.

Our protagonist invokes not only past experiences as they were lived, but in a certain way, he lives in them again. The anachronism of the first section of *The Sound and the Fury* corresponds to the anachronism of Benjy's own existence and therefore it reaches an extent which goes beyond the mere recalling of remembered scenes. Interestingly enough, the idiot's chaotic mind does offer an arrangement of materials which the reader has to infer from his / her reading. Benjy's narrative is more than an unresolved puzzle but it can only provide us with its meaning if we learn to decipher the key to Benjy's own sense of arrangement.

The first section creates the illusion of a mind registering what happens and also recalling what happened without understanding the multiple connections between the events as a matter of temporal order. As Bleikasten points out:

He is unable to order his memories and perceptions in a consistent temporal perspective, his point of view is actually no point of view at all, and his telling of the Compson story is the very negation of narrative. (76)

Bleikasten refers to "negation of narrative" what we labeled as redefinition. In any case, both terms are grounded on the understanding of the novel as an example of Faulkner's use of defamiliarization; in the light of traditional expectations the reader is presented with a dramatic renewal of the concept of narrative order.

Benjy's mind is a kaleidoscope which contains simultaneously what would be canonically considered the present —April seventh 1928— as well as scenes from 1898 —"Damuddy's" death—, events from 1900 —the changing of his name—, 1902 —the Patterson episode—, the years between 1905 and 1910 —scenes mainly connected with Caddy— and episodes of 1910 —Benjy's castration and Quentin's death. From an early memory or a present impression, his mind slips imperceptibly to all the other episodes which have the same leitmotif as center. This interweaving of past and present images around a common topic is the only order which rules the narrative of the first section. Therefore, successive perceptions about physical sensations —the sensation of coldness or the recognition of determined smells, among the most recurrent ones— are offered entangled as if resembling a single occurrence. In the same vein, all the death scenes that are related to the family —Damuddy's death, the return of Quentin's body after his suicide at Cambridge, Mr. Compson's death and funeral, and also the death of "Nancy", the mare, and the death of Roskus — are seen in close conjunction.

Dilsey moaned, and when it got to the place I begun to cry ...

"Dogs are dead", Caddy said, "And when Nancy fell in the ditch Roskus shot her and the buzzards came and undressed her" ...

The bones rounded out of the ditch, were the dark vines were in the black ditch, into the moonlight ... and I could smell it ... But I could smell it ... A door opened and I could smell it more than ever, and a head came out. It wasn't father. Father was sick

there ... T. P. lay down in the ditch and I sat down, watching the buzzards ate Nancy
...
“Do you think buzzards are going to undress Damuddy” Caddy said, “You’re crazy”.
(37-40)

The establishment of a connection between the mentioned death episodes and the episode of Caddy’s wedding in Benjy’s mind — “I saw them. Then I saw Caddy, with flowers in her hair, and a long veil like shining wind. Caddy, Caddy” (2)— illustrates how he equates them in terms of loss, and at the same time, it stands as an excellent example of the metaphoric language which dominates the idiot’s tale. It is precisely Benjy’s metaphoric use of language which increases the difficulty in finding the order of the narrative. Such a sense of order is nevertheless present although in a new form, and consequently it requires a new sensibility to be perceived. As Bleikasten states:

Clearly then, the arrangement of narrative data, random though it may seem, does propose a logic and a purpose. Its disconcertment upon the reader is easy to account for: traditional fiction relies on syntagmatic (or metonymic development); here the ordering is paradigmatic (or metaphoric). In marked opposition to the literalness of its linguistic texture, the overall structure of Benjy’s discourse is therefore essentially symbolic, allowing thematic configuration to emerge much more forcibly than would have been possible within the sequential framework of conventional narration. (87-8)

Benjy’s section obliges us to reconsider the concept of narrative — “As narrative it lives by its relationship to the story that it recounts; as discourse it lives by its relationship to the narrating that utters it” (Genette 29). In *The Sound and the Fury* there is no other narrative than the narrating itself, and as a result telling and uttering are inextricably linked. The formalist division between story — “the temporal-causal sequence of narrated events— and plot — “the story as distorted in the process of telling”— loses its significance in this novel.

Therefore, we are not required to disentangle the story from the plot but rather to read the story about the decay of the Compson family as an utterance, the utterance of an idiot for whom time is not a continuation but an instant.

The first section of *The Sound and the Fury* stands as a splendid example of the new modernist novel which tends not only to the identification of story and plot as a single construct, but also to the blurring of boundaries between the traditionally distinct notions of narrative and narrating. For readers versed in the literary tradition of preceding generations estrangement effect or defamiliarization begins already with a narrative which refuses to assume the existence of any kind of “zero degree” — “conditional of temporal correspondence between narrative and story” (Genette 36)— and proposes instead as the only sense of chronology the temporal confusion of a character who may be said to live in a temporal limbo, between present and past.

Faulkner aims in *The Sound and the Fury* at a new reading which does not seek to explain the consonance of the narrative by attempting to order the temporal dissonance of the narrating.

In this respect the novel presents us with one of the main formal concerns of the modernist writers and demands also one of the most radical changes regarding the reader's attitude in the history of literature:

we must preserve the paradox of time from the leveling out brought about by reducing it to simple discordance. We ought to ask instead whether the plea for a radically unformed temporal experience is not in itself the product of a fascination for the unformed that is one of the features of modernity. (Ricoeur 72)

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