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William Faulkner and Poststructuralism: A Stylistic Exordium

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Abstract:

Rich linguistic complexity is the quintessence of Faulkner's fiction. The reader ultimately gets to understand that the medium gets more and more separated from the message. Clichéd concepts of medium and message are deconstructed resulting in a subversive understanding of the implied and received repertoire of meaning. Spelling out the objective of this reading of Faulkner's major fiction, this paper attempts to provide the theoretical framework to situate Faulkner in a poststructuralist matrix. The major theoreticians discussed in this connection are Jacques Derrida and Gilles Deleuze. The Derridean approach, while challenging the consequences of logocentrism, upholds the view that all structures of articulated significance—speaking, writing, rituals, economies, games—depend on the play of difference. Faulkner's fiction delivers the message through this play as the meaning emerges from an absence of a central significance. While Derrida defies the notions of logocentrism, Deleuze and Guattari analyze the metaphysics of desire via "becoming." In Faulkner's fiction, the resonance of these concepts is embedded and audible.

Keywords: dichotomy, medium, message, pharmakon, logocentrism, becoming, polyphony, polyvalency

"*How do I know that what you read was in the book?*"

(Thomas Sutpen in *Absalom, Absalom!*)

One recurrent concern in the Faulknerian canon is that of language, language with all its apparent power and connate lack of power. Language is analyzed time and again through the experiences and thought patterns of an entire cast of characters. The poststructuralist dilemma

expressing the alienation of signifier from the signified is one of the main questions posed: can language ever truly comment on anything outside of language? Does the word ever transcend the realm of language and affect the external world? Faulkner's fiction tackles these questions and provides multiple answers simultaneously, exemplifying the complexity of theme and treatment. His fiction rejects conventional dichotomies such as "white/black," rich/poor," "male/female," "master/slave" etc. as social and linguistic deceptions, and uncovers a reality where people merge across social boundaries. The poststructuralist discourses on language often remind us that oppositions are fixed by rhetorical strategies of antithesis or omission: that opposites not only are independent but often merge with each other.

Faulkner counters the rhetorical figures of language with literary devices of his own. He employs a style that unites or reverses apparent opposites and his plots frequently refuse to tie up the narrative threads and resist conventional endings. An analysis of Faulkner's narrative discourse from this angle shows that the novelist's linguistic and stylistic innovations profoundly impact both the content and form of his major novels, foregrounding the linguistic medium in the process.

The twin concepts of medium and message are widely debated in poststructuralist discourse. While structuralism upholds the importance of "structure," "text," and "reader," poststructuralism foregrounds and celebrates the apparent differences inherent in the system that inevitably dissipate the seeming definiteness of its structure and meaning into an indefinite array of multiplex, incompatible, eternal possibilities, thereby problematising the twin concerns: "medium" and "message." The seeming-scientific faith of the structuralists in the medium is squarely challenged by the poststructuralists whose stance is that systematic knowledge is rather an impossible task. Derrida argues that the structuralist project of presenting systematic knowledge of a given system is impossible, because there are always conflicts between what an author intends to say and what his/her text describes; the text moves dynamically beyond the intention of the author.

The futility of applying strictly binary categories to human affairs is the main thrust of Faulkner's fiction, which dramatises the problematics of division through sensitive white characters such as Quentin Compson (*The Sound and the Fury*), Darl and Addie (*As I Lay Dying*), and Ike McCaslin (*Go Down, Moses*). The narratives utter a truth of merging across social and linguistic boundaries that his contemporaries largely ignored. Faulkner himself set this

truth in an elusive, complex discourse of indirection, a literary disfigurement of divisive social figures. The four novels discussed in this dissertation; *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), *As I Lay Dying* (1930), *Light in August* (1932), and *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), self-consciously analyze the linguistic supports of an insensitive social system, examining those buried rhetorical ploys underlying the segregation of the races. Faulkner's novels in particular illustrate how the separating process in Yoknapatawpha County employs rhetorical strategies that facilitate racial segregation. These novels, acclaimed to be the best in Faulkner's oeuvre, lend themselves to a linguistic analysis which can reveal not a few underlying underpinnings of a stratified society. Commenting on Faulkner's fictional craft Gerard Genette makes the following observation:

> One of the newest and most fruitful directions that are now opening up for literary research ought to be the structural study of the "large unities" of discourse, beyond the framework—which linguistics in the strict sense cannot cross—of the sentence. . . . There would then be a linguistics of discourse that was a *translinguistics*, since the facts of language would be handled by it in great bulk, and often at one remove—to put it simply, a rhetoric, perhaps that "new rhetoric" which Francis Ponge once called for, and which we still lack. (10)

Faulkner's major novels benefit from the advantages of their locale, a region characterized by segregationist thinking of a kind that furnishes us with an extreme case of social classification. Yoknapatawpha's major classifications—"white/black," "poor/rich," "male/female"—depend on polar thinking. The narratives highlight the effects of these classifications on human sensibilities, white and black, rich and poor, male and female. The system of Southern apartheid wishes to freeze polar pairs into dominant/subordinate, master/slave terms, yet as Robert Penn Warren implies, there is a "concealed dialectic progression" (*William Faulkner: Three Decades of Criticism* 100) in Faulkner whereby the dominant term seems—in the manner of Hegel's master-slave relationship—to depend upon and often to merge with its polar opposite.

In the poststructuralist scenario, the flippant characteristic of language facilitates the text to transgress its apparent system of meaning. This is amply demonstrated in Derrida's reading of "Plato's Pharmacy" where he focuses on the word "pharmakon" whose meaning defers in an

endless chain of signifiers whereby constituting the text as unstable through its playful operation. Moreover, language assumes a significant role in the poststructuralist project of deconstruction insofar as it is pivotal to the Derridean project of deconstructing the Western logocentrism.

Derrida traces the moment when language began to receive attention in Western thinking as a historical event in *Writing and Difference* (1967):

> The [linguistic] substitute does not substitute itself for anything which has somehow existed before it. Henceforth, it was necessary to begin thinking that there was no center that the center could not be thought in the form of a present-being, that the center had no natural site, that it was not a fixed locus but a function, a sort of nonlocus in which an infinite number of sign-substitutions came into play. This was the moment when language invaded the universal problematic, the moment when, in the absence of a center or origin, everything became discourse. . . . (280)

Here Derrida reflects on the notions of language and text, as established in the early twentieth century from a different perspective. In this sense it can be argued that the twentieth century is framed by the literary announcement and then the theoretical recapitulation of the pivotal role of language in organized human activity. Language nonetheless emerges in a post-Saussurian world, as a 'new'—that is to say, non-ideational and ungenealogical-source and structuring principle for the productions of intellectual activity.

In his reading of William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, Donald M. Kartiganer argues that it is a superior text for it resists the conventional reading strategies that produce its meaning as already known:

> The nature of the superior text is to resist its readings: to complicate, at some crucial turn in the interpretive process, the categories and conventions that have formed a reader's bridge into that text . . . Inferior texts are written to cater to such readings [the readings that project a text through what is already known, preventing it from expanding beyond the conventional boundaries], good texts to undo them . . . *The Sound and the Fury* is a novel which carries its resistance to

the most extreme end this side of incoherence. Its principal object is that it *should not be read,* in the sense that it seeks to withstand from beginning to end every critical strategy. (*New Essays on The Sound and the Fury* 71-2)

Even though Kartiganer limits his discussion to *The Sound and the Fury*, Faulkner's other novels can also be said to be superior texts in that they register the moment when the familiar ways of reading are challenged. Such a moment seems to be achieved by the textual operation of seeking what is not, or cannot be, contained in the given system of meaning.

Faulkner's experimentations with language are attempts to reach beyond the given system of meaning. At the Nobel award ceremony in 1950, Gustaf Hellstrom of the Swedish Academy said, "Faulkner is the great experimentalist among twentieth-century novelists. . . . [This] desire to experiment is shown in his mastery, unrivalled among modern British and American novelists, of the richness of the English language, a richness derived from its different linguistic elements and the periodic changes in style. . ." (Hellstrom). Faulkner's experimentations with language resulted in the teeming complexities of his texts.

Another poststructuralist perspective on Faulkner's fiction based on the concept of 'becoming' by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari is also relevant in the context of reading Faulkner. As a philosophical idea 'becoming' is at odds with the Cartesian self, putting Faulkner's characters, who go through the severe experience of becoming-other, in a refreshingly new perspective. They are also becoming something other than what they are. Men are becoming-women, women also are becoming-women, white men are becoming-black, and heterosexuals are becoming-homosexuals. Their socio-cultural moorings render their unconscious more social than familial in its making. Faulkner's characters do not entirely liberate themselves from the social mores, in spite of their transitory departure from their Cartesian selves through becoming-other than who they are. However, the fictional mythos of Faulkner figures forth a language that often breaches the rules of major language, betrays cravings outlawed in society, and utters the words of minorities who cannot be heard.

The white male hero in Faulkner's fiction is often overwhelmed owing to the indeterminacy of his existence as he eventually makes out the contradiction within his Cartesian self. His self is often experienced as split and unstable. The protagonist invariably distrusts the continuity of his being, his thinking does not reassure himself of his survival, and his language

only frustrates his individuality. He realizes that his being is susceptible to alteration. His inner speech is not a mere statement of what is buried in his unconscious; his unconscious stops expressing its hidden material like a theatre and begins operating like a factory by producing a bastard language within language. According to Ronald Bogue, a distinguished Delueze scholar, "the unconscious is less a theatre than a factory" and conveys "a positive, dynamic sense of the cosmos without falling into religious or anthromorphic vitalism" (91-92). The unconscious as a "factory" means that the unconscious "produces" desire instead of "expressing" desire that is nothing more than a "lack" hidden from one's consciousness. Negation constitutes an important role in the process of assuring a Cartesian self. One is frequently expressed by what one is not too.

Deleuze and Guattari's views need not necessarily dispute the long tradition of the psychoanalytical approach, but seem to make a different though complementary point. Nevertheless, their perspective challenges the premises of psychoanalysis in order to probe the social nature of the unconscious largely neglected by its methodology. Here the Deleuzean concept of 'becoming' is not used primarily as an interpretative tool of the text, but to open it to manifold meanings as Faulkner's fiction always resists the absolution of any absolute conclusion.

The Sound and the Fury is a classic specimen in Faulkner's linguistic experimentations. Faulkner's experimentations with language are inextricably associated with his conviction that, maugre the claims of theories of literary representation; language cannot adequately represent its object, for there is no actual or true object to be represented. *The Sound and the Fury* supports this view by presenting Caddy, the object of her brothers' language, as no actual character. The very fact that *The Sound and the Fury* does not present Caddy as a character with a substantial and identical being demonstrates that Faulkner was concerned less with what is represented through language, than with how language embodies its object.

Faulkner's style is pure freedom of expression, ridding itself of referentiality. Indeed, Faulkner appears to hold that language does not simply represent or refer to its object, but engages more importantly in freedom of expression. And in order to enhance the expressive power of language, Faulkner lets the various elements of language such as rhetoric, word, grammar, and syntax, enter into play, producing certain effects of expression. The play of the various elements of language causes textual meaning to be constituted as indeterminate owing to

Faulkner's performative linguistic style, so that it erodes any sense that there is the truth to be revealed in the text. As a result, Faulkner's prose, which erodes the sense of the truth regarding storytelling, demands our attention to the play of language in the text.

Addie Bundren, the central character in *As I Lay Dying*, uses her single monologue to degrade language and claims that: "words are no good … words don't ever fit what they are trying to say at" (171). This statement is simply a description of the gap between signifier and signified. A word is an arbitrary stand-in for some thing or idea, but it can never truly encompass that thing or idea, even if more words are added to further describe something one cannot ever leap from the realm of language to the realm of reality.

In the novel Faulkner depicts the emptiness Addie Bundren experiences in her marital life by creating emptiness in the middle of the sentence. Addie says, "The shape of my body where I used to be a virgin is in the shape of a   and I couldn't think *Anse,* couldn't remember *Anse*" (173). In this way Faulkner uses various linguistic elements such as rhetoric, letter, word, grammar, syntactic structure, and punctuation to portray the states of mind of his characters.

For Addie a word can never convey the idea that it intends, words are arbitrary and meaningless, but so is life. In that sense words do reflect reality. Addie rejects language, but paradoxically this rejection is also accomplished by means of language which drives home the poststructuralist premise that human beings are actually created by language. Faulkner causes the becoming-other of language in *As I Lay Dying* through Addie's and Darl's agrammatical, asemantic, asyntactical, apertinent use of language. Addie's "foreign" language reveals her desire to merge with other beings, and Darl's interior language exemplifies Deleuze-Guattari's concept of schizophrenia in its positive sense. Faulkner catalyzes the unusual encounters between people who belong to a particular social stratum in this novel where the characters momentarily escape their identities in each encounter.

Light in August is a story about a white man's becoming-black despite his white upbringing and white mindset. Joe Christmas's failure in oedipal quests due to his racial indeterminacy shows that his unconscious is socially formed and "contaminated" with blackness. Christmas's experiences in an orphan asylum, with a foster family, and in his relationships with other people depict the chain of oedipal agonies he has undergone only to find he cannot become an apposite individual-subject in the racist society owing to his racial indeterminacy. Christmas's

belief that he might have some black blood makes it extremely difficult for him to be fully oedipalized in the racist society. Abjuring his whiteness, he suffers the experience of becoming-black, becoming-woman, and becoming-queer. The novel is a story about how a physically white man who has matured as a white man can feel as if he were black, despite his white upbringing, white looks, and white frame of mind. Thus, the novel *Light in August* turns out to be a story about Joe's becoming-other, becoming-minority.

In the novel, Faulkner portrays the system of consciousness, which he perceives as multi-layered according to the degree of self-awareness, by using double quotes, single quotes and italics. The linguistic examples from *Light in August* prove that in Faulkner, performativity enhances the graphic power of language. Drawing upon the graphic features of language, Faulkner expands its expressive boundaries. About the significance of Faulkner's use of the graphic features of language, Stephen M. Ross says that it causes "some change in the gestures of what Roman Ingarden called the 'verbal body' of the literary work; the shift to italics (for instance) seeks to encourage a change in texture, in the reader's perception of the events and the reader's sense of the discourse itself" (145-46).

Absalom, Absalom!, like its precursor, *Light in August*, comprehensively destabilizes the outside-inside equation that the devious signs of race and gender are believed to reinforce. The ninth published novel of the author, *Absalom, Absalom!* is perhaps the most complex of all his works. One day late in the course of the Civil War, a man called Henry Sutpen shoots a man named Charles Bon at the doors of the plantation developed by Henry's father, Thomas Sutpen. Henry had two sisters: a white sister Judith, and a black half-sister Clytie. Young Quentin Compson grows up hearing the story, and one day in September almost forty-five years later, he hears part of it directly from Rosa Coldfield. Later that night, he takes Rosa to the old plantation house, and there they discover an ailing Henry Sutpen, but before they can bring an ambulance, Clytie sets the house on fire. The next January, Rosa dies, and Quentin relates the Sutpen story to his Canadian roommate Shreve, in their dormitory at Harvard. While chapters one to five take place one evening in Jefferson in September 1909, chapters six to nine occur one evening in January 1910. Paradoxically enough, these narrative facts come nowhere near explaining why *Absalom, Absalom!* continues to both disturb and charm its readers at once even today.

The novel can rightly be described the text of southern society. Faulkner readily grasped at any chance for radical innovation in language, particularly in his novels between 1929

and 1940. The ideology of nous, administered by means of accurate repetition, can also be undone by repetition with a difference. Blacks, as the fulcrum around which social figures of division turn around, provide for Faulkner the appropriate motif for exposing the treacherous configuration of social narratives. The black could be the social parallel of differential repetition on the literary level, since the recurring exclusion of the black in Sutpen's story facilitates a seamless narrative to own up after a time its own inherent contradictions. Thus Faulkner's text undercuts the South's social codes, even while the rhetoric of race continues unchanged.

The stylistic strangeness of Faulkner's novels is not purely post-Joycean experimentalism, as often suggested, nor even the residue of his infatuation with Romanticism and French symbolism. Faulkner's narratives are accurate reconstructions and dismantling of linguistic and social classifications, proving that some extraordinary human beings struggle against overwhelming odds, to reverse a separation that rhetoric has tried to embalm into a permanent reality. In theoretical terms it can be argued that his novels exemplify the poststructuralist notion of text, the space of which is not governed by the system of binary oppositions.

Poststructuralists have revolutionized the discursive practice of Faulkner criticism, repeatedly finding gaps and absences where readers before had believed there to be only plenitude. But in so doing they have also created, perhaps inevitably, gaps and absences of their own; for the hermeneutic circle can never entirely be closed. This thesis attempts to investigate some of these new gaps and absences by showing that Faulkner's fiction is propelled by a commitment to the freely inaugural motions of language. In his comments about his writing and in the narrative strategies, configurations of plot, and crises of his novels, Faulkner displays a preoccupation with the way in which language produces idea, sense, meaning, and personality. By insisting that to begin a novel he "just began to write," Faulkner reflects an initial forgetfulness of the world to be represented, a loss redeemed only in the text's created world. It seems that we have analyzed the manifest content or surface of Faulkner's fiction to the point of exhaustion, and it is now time to turn our attention to the neglected, latent other side. In this thesis poststructuralist principles are not merely employed to arrive at a seamless elucidation of the select novels: these concepts are not intended to settle a text's meaning, rather they subject it to polyphony and polyvalency. More significantly, the reader should invariably keep in mind the

fact that Faulkner's fiction consistently resists and evades the attempt to render any reading a sense of completeness and finality.

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