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Teaching The Sound and the Fury in the Context of European Modernism

Philip M. Weinstein

Teaching a course on Proust, Joyce, and Faulkner every other year, I know I will be greeted by students frightened by the notorious “difficulty” of these three literary masters. So I begin by rehearsing the traditions of the nineteenth-century novel that modernism will so powerfully revise. Most of my students have read at least one of these earlier canonical texts (Pride and Prejudice, Great Expectations, The Mill on the Floss, Madame Bovary, Anna Karenina, The Portrait of a Lady, to name six), even though few have speculated on the formal and ideological tenets such texts share. Before we move on to the ferocious experimentation that fuels Ulysses and The Sound and the Fury, it makes sense to map the more familiar field of realism. (Good background reading to help students construct this map may be found in Elizabeth Ermath’s Realism and Consensus in the English Novel. Ermath analyzes sympathetically the shared values required for the realist text to speak with its characteristic authority.)

We examine four key components of realism: coherent characterization, developmental plots, a central narrative intelligence, and general readability. Characters in realist novels come to the reader properly introduced, carefully located in social space and genealogical time, and assembled by a cluster of summarized, compatible traits. Their minds are accessible in traditional language. The coherence of Elizabeth, Pip, Maggie, Emma, Anna, and Isabel is textually produced through a detailed repertory that orients the reader both to their internal resources and to their external conditions. The subsequent interplay between the characters’ resources and their social conditions unfolds as the realist plot. Although the verbs that pass this plot on are in the past tense, the reader’s overwhelming temporal experience is of a future being generated. Realist plots span many years, typically concluding with the maturation (or destruction) of the protagonist.

Because the realist writer charges a central narrative voice with the responsibility of organizing the novel’s materials, nuances of character and plot are faithfully communicated to the reader. The narrator of the realist text sifts, selects, makes transitions that—however confusing at first—promise to be richly intelligible. From start to finish we as readers are in the narrator’s hands, and the narrator’s combination of reliability and omniscience encourages us to align ourselves with the ongoing assessments. Like God in a religious scenario, like perspective in Western painting from the Renaissance through impressionism, the narrator is the principle that guarantees that we as readers are granted a privileged, noncontradictory relation to what we encounter. The realist text seems written for us. The linguistic procedures of the narrator are recognizable and trustworthy—a vocabulary we have learned and a syntax we have read before, in the service of a plot we are familiar with.
We spend several weeks rehearsing these realist procedures as background for the unconventionality of modernist procedures, confirming for the students that the reading habits they bring to the course are relevant, precisely, as learned orientations that will be deliberately attacked by modernist practice. In this way the students realize that their trouble with the texts is not personal but cultural. Their way of reading earlier texts has been taught within one cultural paradigm, and it will not work adequately for texts written within another cultural paradigm.

The critic whose work most dazzlingly opens up the concealed constructedness of realism—its status as a cultural paradigm rather than "the way things are"—is probably Roland Barthes. Both his S/Z and The Pleasure of the Text dissect the status quo inertia of the reader-friendly text (what Barthes calls the "readerly text"). Students may also consult Catherine Belsey's Critical Practice for a straightforward (if at times simplistic) poststructuralist analysis of realism's assumptions.

But the two thinkers most helpful in illuminating the cultural transition from realism to modernism are Nietzsche and Freud. Nietzsche's insistence that all seeing and knowing is perspectival reminds students that even a voice as generally authoritative as a typical nineteenth-century narrator's actually embodies a limited point of view. Instructors might ask their students to consider, for example, this passage from Nietzsche's On the Genealogy of Morals:

Henceforth, my dear philosophers, let us be on guard against the dangerous old conceptual fiction that posited a "pure, will-less, painless, timeless knowing subject"; let us guard against the snares of such concepts as "pure reason," "absolute spirituality," "knowledge in itself": these always demand that we should think of an eye that is completely unthinkable, an eye turned in no particular direction, in which the active and interpreting forces, through which alone seeing becomes seeing something, are supposed to be lacking; these always demand of the eye an absurdity and a nonsense. There is only a perspective seeing, only a perspective "knowing": and the more affects we allow to speak about one thing, the more eyes, different eyes, we can use to observe one thing, the more complete will our "concept" of this thing, our "objectivity," be. (119)

It would be hard to find a more pertinent philosophical rationale for Faulkner's reliance on such aggressively perspectival narrators as Benjy and Quentin and Jason. More, when Nietzsche claims "I'm afraid we are not rid of God because we still have faith in grammar" (Twilight of the Idols 483), he draws an explicit analogy between the orderliness of a grammatically coherent narrative and the legitimacy of a divinely sanctioned cosmos.

Along the same lines, Freud's model of consciousness as a battleground for conflicting impulses prepares students for the jaggedness of Faulknerian
stream of consciousness in the first two sections of *The Sound and the Fury*. The Freudian model's refusal of future-oriented time, its insistence on returning to the still-entrappping entanglements of the past, serves as a paradigm for the modernist text's refusal of the developmental plot of realism. "There was no hope for him this time," the first story of Joyce's *Dubliners* begins (9). That text joins Faulkner's texts in proposing a modernist interrogation of the labyrinths of the past rather than a realist exploration of the projects of the future.

My students enter *The Sound and the Fury* by way of Proust's "Combray" and Joyce's *Dubliners*. The Proustian text features a narrator (Marcel) lacking both plans for a future and a grasp on the past. The stories of *Dubliners*, even more tellingly, go nowhere, and my students gradually understand that its embattled protagonists are as much imprisoned by their clichéd dreams of escape as they are by their daily routines. Rather than rehearse his culture's feasible projects, Joyce dissects his culture's paralysis—its ways of unintentionally training its adherents to fail through what they aspire to as much as through what they submit to. In this he perfectly prepares a reading of *The Sound and the Fury*. There, too, the stories that the Old South licenses are already foredoomed. Different though the brothers may be, Benjy, Quentin, and Jason share an incapacity either to activate the South's older convictions or to make good on its shabby substitutions for them. No one in that text manages to fulfill a culturally approved project. Failure, Faulkner never tires of repeating, is the ground note of *The Sound and the Fury*. (An exploration of the cunning uses to which he puts failure in the novel may be found in my *Faulkner's Subject* 156–62.)

In Benjy and Quentin character emerges as a mosaic made up of echoes and insistences. Rather than use the lucid coherence of realistic characterization, Faulkner chooses to represent Quentin's consciousness as follows:

> Because it means less to women, Father said. He said it was men invented virginity not women. Father said it's like death: only a state in which the others are left and I said, But to believe it doesn't matter and he said, That's what's so sad about anything: not only virginity and I said, Why couldn't it have been me and not her who is unvirgin and he said, That's why that's sad too; nothing is even worth the changing of it, and Shreve said if he's got better sense than to chase after the little dirty sluts and I said Did you ever have a sister? Did you? Did you? (78)

Quentin's head is filled to bursting with such contradictory utterances, here of his father and his roommate, elsewhere of his mother, his sister, Dalton Ames, Herbert Head, and others. Instead of being a coherent self-with-purposes summarized by a trustworthy narrator, the character of Quentin is produced as the repository of cryptic thoughts that moment by moment assault his mind. His life endures a day, not a lifetime. Of course, Faulkner did not invent Quentin out of whole cloth. Joyce's Stephen Dedalus, alien in his own culture,
too self-conscious to adopt its licensed roles, is already there, waiting for Faulkner to rewrite him. Even more, in *Ulysses* Faulkner found to hand not only the character of Stephen but also the most powerful mode of producing him: stream of consciousness. Stephen in Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, still invested in the developmental plot (becoming an artist), appears to the reader as a figure of increasingly coherent views and desires, whereas Stephen in *Ulysses*—no longer going anywhere, explored by the text during a single day (6 June 1904)—is an inexhaustible field of competing thoughts, feelings, sensations. The reader witnesses here, as with Faulkner’s Quentin, not the strategic behavior of an individual pursuing his goals against the stable backdrop of a larger culture but the dizzying encounter of cultural assertions pulsating microcosmically within a single mind.

Joyce’s *Ulysses* served *The Sound and the Fury* in other ways as well, and my students discover these connections during their reading of both texts. Refusing to make peace with its reader, to settle into a sustained contract about how it should be read, *Ulysses* revises its procedures with each new section. Its “verbal, situational, and narrative texture is too polytropic [full of turns] for our customary inertia,” as Fritz Senn puts it (41). Likewise, Faulkner changes the readerly contract of *The Sound and the Fury* with each new chapter, reminding the reader that all seeing and knowing is perspectival and refusing to offer any narrator’s overview that might reconcile, godlike, the competing biases. As with Braque’s or Picasso’s cubism, in which a reassuringly unified perspective on the object disappears (leaving the disconcerted viewer with simultaneous and incompatible facets of the “same” object), so Caddy appears as Benjy’s mother, Quentin’s sister-lover, Jason’s sworn enemy—each time shaped to the insistent optic of the male viewing her. There are only Caddys in *The Sound and the Fury*, no Caddy.

Technically, Joyce more than any other modernist writer made possible Faulkner’s breakthrough in *The Sound and the Fury*. Faulkner’s fourth novel and first thoroughly modernist one. Faulkner can emerge as Faulkner only through the detour of Joyce. Before (as in *Flags in the Dust*), he is still—on balance—a restless regionalist, inserted by his procedures even more than by his themes into the character and plot conventions of twentieth-century American realism and naturalism. (For a range of accounts of Faulkner’s development into his modernist phase, students might consult Stonum; Kreiswirth; Bleikasten, *Failure* 1–37; and Matthews, *Play* 3–33.) Joyce enables not only *The Sound and the Fury* but also Faulkner’s modernist masterpieces that follow: *As I Lay Dying* (1930), *Light in August* (1932), and *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936). Joyce enables these achievements, but this is only to say that through them Faulkner becomes Faulkner. Their urgency, obsession with race, and Gothic intensity keep these texts from ever being mistaken for Joyce’s.

The light Proust sheds on *The Sound and the Fury* is metaphysical, not technical. *Remembrance of Things Past* (1913–27) is modernism’s supreme interrogation of time, revealing patiently time’s cunning, its ways of fracturing
identity into time-entrapped, contingent selves. Proust's novel keeps proposing that over the years we enact different selves, each cued to a forgotten time and place. Marcel's goal is to redeem this unacknowledged multiplicity of selves by unearthing, through involuntary memory and relentless self-analysis, the ignored continuities of subjective desire. Such a multiplicity of selves is what the developmental novel of realism systematically obscures in its insistence on social surfaces: on a common vocabulary, a cultural space shared with others, an accumulating selfhood that adopts social goals as it matures over time. Faulknerian time, in contrast, is very close to Proustian lost time, without Proust's visionary goal of recovering it. Quentin's horrified "temporary" (177)—his anguish that time crushes all values, eats away all commitments—echoes Marcel's thoroughly modernist recognition that time shatters human identity into uncohering fragments.

Indeed, Quentin's suicide receives its fullest gloss in Proust's analysis of the inhuman dynamic of time. Uncannily resembling Quentin in his anguish at the emotional infidelities enforced by time, Marcel speculates on the strangeness with which we outlive ourselves as we abandon earlier relationships and take on new ones:

And our dread of a future in which we must forgo the sight of faces and the sound of voices which we love and from which today we derive our dearest joy, this dread, far from being dissipated, is intensified, if to the pain of such a privation we feel that there will be added what seems to us now in anticipation more painful still: not to feel it as a pain at all—to remain indifferent; for then our old self would have changed... so that it would be in a real sense the death of the self, a death followed, it is true, by resurrection, but in a different self, to the love of which the elements of the old self that are condemned to die cannot bring themselves to aspire. (1: 721–22)

That inhuman dynamic certainly governs the wasteland of Faulkner's text, but it would be an error to see such cultural futility as metaphysically sanctioned (despite Mr. Compson's claim that "no battle is ever won" and that "victory is an illusion of philosophers and fools" [76]). Rather, the resources of a specific culture at a specific moment (the American South of the early twentieth century) have given out, and *The Sound and the Fury* articulates this exhaustion with stunning intelligence: Benjy's idiocy, Quentin's suicide, Jason's self-destroying meanness, both parents' parental incapacity, the daughter and granddaughter's flight from the South. Like Joyce's Ireland and Proust's France, Faulkner's South is incapable of enculturating its young. It will take a later generation of writers and readers (the postmodernists) to discern in what ways this supposedly objective revelation—the modernist attempt at Olympian detachment—is itself steeped in cultural assumptions. (For a shrewdly postmodernist critique of Faulknerian modernism, see Moreland.)
Yet I try to keep the current critical distance from modernism from blinding my students to modernism's remarkable vitality as a set of ideological convictions and aesthetic practices. By refusing the narrative premise of linear time (a liberal commitment to the protagonist's unfolding projects), Faulkner achieves cultural diagnoses of rare power. The two swing scenes, one involving Caddy and Dalton Ames and the other Miss Quentin and the man with the red tie (simultaneous in Benjy's mind but twenty years apart in clock time), are unimaginable in realism, yet they reveal—in small—the cheapening and toughening of an entire culture's sexual attitudes. Likewise, through Benjy's conjoined flashbacks, Faulkner telescopes Damuddy's funeral (1898) with Caddy's wedding (1910), fusing into one imagistic cluster the discovery of death, the advent of sexuality (Caddy's muddy drawers), the defection of the mother (one dead, the other fleeing in marriage), and the larger sense that, for this would-be incestuous family, marriage and funeral are interchangeable rituals of depletion and betrayal.

Realism—faithful to the discrete unfoldings of time—is incapable of such poetic condensation. More, realism refuses to entrust to the relation between reader and text its most precious transactions. Still committed to articulating its insights through the vehicle of plot, realism generates its essential meanings through characters and events. What is achieved in that way is what counts. Modernism, by contrast, visits an often unredeemable social scene yet reserves its finest utopian energies for rewriting the contract between reader and text, permitting (as in the Faulknerian sequences mentioned above) extraordinary recognitions to which the characters themselves remain blind. We as readers must labor hard to put such modernist texts together. In doing so we achieve the coherent vision of social interconnectedness—what in Absalom, Absalom! Faulkner calls the "might-have-been" (115)—so painfully lacking at the level of plot and characterization.

Moreover, this vision—precisely because it is forged through the writer's reconfigured relation with the reader, a relation partially freed from complicity with cultural norms as these are embodied in conventional practice—invites my students to do what realism rarely solicits: to glimpse their own insertion within their culture's most intricate arrangements. Relying less on the verisimilitude (the givenness) of the stories that fiction relates, modernism inquires into the array of reasons why a culture tells the stories it tells. The Sound and the Fury doesn't just tell the story of Caddy. It shows what is at stake when the Caddy stories of the Compson brothers reveal not Caddy's recognizable picture in the mirror but the constructedness of the mirror itself—indeed, of the overarching patriarchal culture—that keeps insisting on such pictures. By the end of the course, most of my students realize that, for writers to diagnose critically the obviousness of their culture's representations, an unobvious (and at first incoherent) formal procedure may be most effective. They recognize that the difficulty of The Sound and the Fury is inseparable from its achievement.