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A Theory of Reading in Practice

Be very careful in this conversation of Jacques and his master if you don't want to take the true for the false, and the false for the true. There now! You've been warned and I wash my hands of the affair.

DENIS DIDEROT

I see only too well in novels that it is me who pays, and gives force of credence and of 'life' to words, most of which cost their author *nothing* – (I am speaking of the best novels; 75 per cent of sentences are changeable *ad libitum* as are, moreover, perceptions in 'life' – *current perceptions*.)

PAUL VALÉRY

'When Miss Emily Grierson died, our whole town went to her funeral: the men through a sort of respectful affection for a fallen monument, the women mostly out of curiosity to see the inside of her house, which no one save an old manservant – a combined gardener and cook – had seen in at least ten years . . .'¹ William Faulkner's story begins like any story or novel, in conformity with the rules of the genre. It presents a protagonist, Miss Emily Grierson, who is discreetly designated as an eminent personage; walk-on parts, divided by gender and characterized according to stereotype (the conformity of the men, the curiosity of the women); a narrator who accepts the customary conventions of the genre and who is discreetly identified with the group ('we found', 'we said', 'our town'); and also

a whole set of cues, especially temporal ones ('in at least ten years'), which introduce an air of the unexpected.

To present Emily, a glorious vestige of a vanished past ('fallen monument'), Faulkner piles up details that are apparently innocuous but designed to trigger, like so many springs, the presuppositions of common sense, the very ones that ordinary novelists usually mobilize, almost without realizing it, to produce an effect of the real. He draws, for example, on the idea of nobility – and everything it implies, such as the famous 'noblesse oblige', explicitly invoked in the text – to evoke the image of a venerable and very dignified old lady, the last survivor of a ruined great family and symbol of past traditions, and to arouse all the anticipations that are contained in such a social essence.

The idea of nobility, a favourable prejudice which is socially instituted (and hence endowed with all the force of the social), functions as a principle of the construction of social reality, a principle tacitly accepted as much by the narrator and his characters as by the reader; and it simultaneously functions as a source of anticipations that are ordinarily grounded in facts, since nobility has the status of an essence which precedes and produces existence, opening or excluding by definition a range of possibles. The power of presupposition is so strong, and the hypotheses of the practical induction of the habitus so robust, that they resist what is self-evident: "I want arsenic." The druggist looked down at her. She looked back at him, erect, her face like a strained flag. "Why, of course," the druggist said. "If that's what you want." The meaning of the words and actions is predetermined by the social image of the person who produces them and, in the case of a person 'above all suspicion', the very idea of murder is excluded.

The anticipations of common sense are stronger than the evidence of the facts; the official truth ('Like when she bought the rat poison, the arsenic'; 'there was written on the box, under the skull and bones, "For Rats"') is more credible than an ostentatious admission, crazed or cynical ("I want some poison," she said to the druggist'). And the same goes for all the suspicious signs the author proffers – the 'smell', Emily's madness in saying that 'her father was not dead', etc. – which are systematically ignored, or repressed, by Emily's fellow citizens as well as by the reader ('We did not say she was crazy then. We believed she had to do that. We remembered all the young men her father had driven away, and we knew that with nothing left, she would have to cling to that which had robbed her, as people will'). And just as it is only after Emily's death, that is to say forty years 'after the event', that the inhabitants of Jefferson discover that Emily

has poisoned her lover and kept his body in the house for all those years, so it is only on the last page of the story that readers discover their blunder.

A reflecting story

However, all this would be no more than the well-crafted plot of a realist narrative if it did not appear retrospectively that Faulkner, by a skilful manipulation of chronology, has constructed his tale as a trap enlisting the assumptions of ordinary existence and the conventions of the novelistic genre to encourage an expectation throughout the story of a *plausible meaning* which will find itself brutally belied at the end. Faulkner in effect stages a double abuse of confidence. First there is the deception using Emily when she plays on the more or less imaginary representation of the aristocracy ('We had often thought of them as a tableau'), and the consensus on the meaning of the world that arises from the tacit agreement of the habitus, in order to deceive the druggist and all her fellow citizens, especially the men, who are more predisposed than the women, with their gossip, to be favourably prejudiced towards the official, public truth. Then there is the author's deception of readers by using everything they tacitly concede in the 'reading contract' to direct their attention towards misleading clues and false trails and to make them overlook the clues, particularly as regards chronology, which he unnoticeably plants in the course of the tale, like an honest author of crime novels, and which only a methodical reading like that of Menakhem Perry² can pick up and organize.³

In fact, Faulkner covertly breaks this 'reading contract' (if indeed one is justified in speaking of a 'contract' to describe the naive trust that readers place in their reading and the abandoned way they throw themselves into it, along with all their common-sense assumptions). To achieve this breach, he uses procedures which are very similar to those of a detective novel, like the scattering of clues designed to pass unnoticed at first. But far from using these ordinary procedures to allow the reader retrospectively to retrace an apparently extraordinary dénouement back into the logic of the ordinary world, he uses them to encourage the most ordinary expectations all the better to disappoint them and expose them by an ending which is really extraordinary – so unexpected, in any case, that it invites a rereading or, at the very least, a sort of mental recapitulation which obliges the reader to discover, if only in a confused way, the mystification of which he has been the victim, and the accomplice. The reader that 'A

rose for Emily' tacitly asks for is really this extra-ordinary reader, the 'arch-reader', as some used to say (without ever questioning the social conditions of possibility of this curious figure), or, better still, the *meta-reader* who will know how to read not only the narrative, quite simply, but the ordinary reading of the narrative, the presuppositions engaged by readers in both their ordinary experience of time and action, and in their experience of reading a 'realist' or mimetic fiction which purports to express the reality of the ordinary world and the ordinary experience of that world.

'A rose for Emily' is a reflexive story, a reflecting story which encloses in its very structure the program (in the computer sense) for a reflection on the novel and on naive reading. In the fashion of an experimental text or device, it calls for repeated reading, but also the divided reading which is needed to combine the impressions of the first naive reading, and the revelations it arouses, with the second reading, the retroactive illumination that the knowledge of the ending (acquired at the end of the first reading) casts on to the text, and especially on to the presuppositions of a naively 'novelistic' reading. Thus, caught in this sort of trap – a veritable provocation to a truly paradoxical *allogoxia* since it results from the natural application of the presuppositions of the *doxa* – the reader is forced to acknowledge openly everything he customarily and unwittingly grants to authors – who are just as unaware of what they are demanding of the reader.

Bringing into play the whole range of presuppositions tacitly engaged in ordinary experience of the world and in ordinary experience of reading, Faulkner brings to the fore a whole set of traits which misdirect the attention of a reader to another meaning, while concealing the true structure, especially in its temporal dimension. By jumbling up the chronological order, he pushes the reader into anticipations which will eventually be deceived. Meanwhile he gives the reader – in a knowingly orchestrated disorder, generally out of phase – temporal markers which might enable the reader to rescue the narrative from pure discontinuity, and so to grasp, through the real order of events, meanings and links of causality and intention which would otherwise only appear retrospectively, based on the final revelation.

To produce this effect, he first plays on the assumptions and procedures of novelistic writing and reading. Like a novelist who pretends to believe what he relates and who asks the reader to read his narrative while feigning to forget that it is a fiction, Faulkner accredits his apparent tale by a constant use of 'we' or of impersonal, unanimous and anonymous expressions like 'the ladies said . . .'; he thus presents himself as a spokesperson for a group whose members

grant each other what each of them unknowingly takes for granted, the non-thetic theses which constitute the common vision of the world. Thus, for example, although he duly mentions Emily's bizarre behaviour, he relies on the usual picture of nobility to suggest that it can be imputed not to madness, but to a stance of aristocratic *gandeur* and pride. By asking the reader to read his narrative according to the accepted convention, as a fictitious true story, Faulkner authorizes and encourages that reader to bring assumptions into the reading that are usually engaged in life and everyday vision, such as the prejudice which means that more credit will be given to the view which is masculine, official and respectful of conventions and proprieties, and less to the view of women, who are sociologically inclined to question official (meaning masculine) certainties, and who will be proved right by the final discovery.⁴

But he also brings to the very writing of the tale his practical mastery of the presuppositions of ordinary writing and reading (such as the fact that one reads a book by going from the front to the back) which are meant to pass unnoticed, as well as his practical knowledge of the gap between the naive reading – submissive, hurried and distracted – which does not bother to reconstruct the overall structure of times and places, and the 'scholastic' reading of the professional reader, which might proceed by doubling back and, by re-establishing the true chronology of events, blow apart the whole construction insidiously suggested to the naive reader. The visible proof of this dual mastery is furnished by all the phrases like 'she looked' and 'her eyes looked' which recall the narrator's point of view and which will retrospectively appear as underlying the ignorance of Emily's fellow citizens as to the truth of the character and her actions. This reflexive writing therefore calls for a reflexive reading which, in contrast to the rereading of a crime mystery whose solution is now known, makes for a discovery not only of a set of misleading clues but of a *self-deception* into which the trusting reader has been led, as well as of the devices and effects, especially those linked to the time structure of the story and its reading, through which the novelist has skilfully awakened the social assumptions underlying the naive experience of the world and time.

Time of reading and reading of time

Looking at this short story alone, it is not certain that one could share Sartre's view of 'Faulkner's temporality' as he described it in a celebrated article.⁵ Undoubtedly because his work as a novelist led

(or forced) him to pay close attention to the relationship between the time of practice and narrative time, Faulkner adopted the tactic of making a visible break with the traditional conception of the novel and with a naively chronological representation of the experience of time: 'When you read *The Sound and the Fury*,' writes Sartre, 'you are first struck by the oddities of the technique. Why has Faulkner broken up the time of his story and jumbled up the pieces? Why is the first window that opens onto this narrative world the mind of an idiot? The reader is tempted to look for landmarks and to reconstruct the chronology for himself.' But perhaps that is precisely what the author wants to make readers do: take on the effort of identification and reconstruction that is indispensable for 'finding their way' and in doing so discover how much they lose when they find their way too easily, as in novels organized according to current conventions (especially as regards the temporal structure of the narrative), that is, respecting the truth of the ordinary experience of time, and the experience of the ordinary reading of the telling of that experience.

Similar to works of kinetic art which demand the active collaboration of the spectator in order to take on an existence, Faulkner's novels are also veritable machines for exploring time which, far from offering a ready-made theory of temporality which only needs to be made explicit, instead oblige readers to *make* this theory for *themselves*; they make it from material supplied by the narrative about the temporal experience of characters and, more importantly, from reflections on their own temporal experiences as acting agents and as readers, reflections which are aroused by the questioning of their *reading routines*. Indeed, like the experimental interruptions of doxic 'sleep' sometimes induced by ethnomethodologists – when, for example, they suggest to a student whose mother asks him to fetch milk from the kitchen that he respond 'But where's the kitchen?' – Faulkner's narratives denounce the tacit agreements on which common sense is based – for example, the agreement that unites the traditional novelist with his or her reader. They call into question the shared *doxa* which is the basis of doxic experience of the world and of the novelistic representation of that world.

In consciously taking on the task, quite extraordinary in its apparent mundaneness, of *recounting a story*, meaning placing himself in the distanced and neutralized relation to practice and its specific logic that is implied by the social act of narration, Faulkner was led to inscribe into the very structure of his stories a very profound inquiry into the experience we have of temporality, both in our lives and in the narration of our lives or those of other people. This inquiry, and the beginnings of an answer he brings to it through

a writer's particular methods, are an invitation to *produce* a theory of temporal experience which is not, strictly speaking, that of Faulkner, nor the one Sartre attributes to Faulkner.

This theory cannot be constructed without repudiating and overcoming the spontaneous philosophy of time shown most typically in the novelistic representation, its biographical variant especially. This spontaneous philosophy of action, and of the narration of action, on which the 'pre-Faulknerian' novelist (and also, often enough, the historian) depends in the writing of a story – and which finds its natural extension in the philosophy of temporal consciousness, Husserl's or Sartre's – prevents access to genuine knowledge of the structure of practice. The production of time that occurs in and through practice has nothing to do with an experience (in the sense of *Erlebnis*) of time, even if it presupposes an experience (in the sense of *Erfahrung*) or, as Searle says,⁶ a set of *background assumptions* (Faulkner gives us many examples of these, whether those underlying the hypotheses of Emily's fellow citizens as to the meaning of her relationship with Homer Barron and their prediction of the future of this liaison, or those underlying their unanimous, peremptory judgments: 'So, the next day, we *all* said, "She is going to kill herself", and *we* said that it would be the best thing. When she had first begun to be seen with Homer Barron, *we* had said, "She will marry him." Then *we* said . . .').

Agents temporalize themselves in the very act by which they transcend the immediate present towards the future implicated in the past of which their habitus is the product; they produce time in the practical anticipation of a still-to-come [*à-venir*] which is at the same time the practical actualization of the past. Thus one can reject the metaphysical representation of time as a reality in itself, exterior and anterior to practice, without accepting a philosophy of consciousness which, with Husserl, is associated with the (central) idea of *temporalization*. Temporalization is neither the constitutive activity of a transcendental consciousness torn out of the world, as Husserl would have it, nor even that of a *Dasein* engaged in the world, as with Heidegger, but that of a habitus orchestrated with other habituses (in opposition to Husserl's idea of transcendental intersubjectivity). This practical relation to the world and to time which is common to a set of agents, who bring the same assumptions into the construction of the meaning of the world in which they are immersed, is the basis of the experience of that world as a commonsense world. The habitus, as a practical sense, which is the product of the incorporation of structures of the social world – and, in particular, its immanent tendencies and its temporal rhythms – engenders assumptions and

anticipations which, ordinarily being confirmed by the course of events, ground a relation of immediate familiarity or ontological complicity with the familiar world, a complicity totally irreducible to the relation between a subject and an object.

In short, the habitus is the basis of the social structuration of temporal existence, of all the anticipations and the presuppositions through which we practically construct the sense of the world – its signification, but also, inseparably, its orientation towards the still-to-come. This is what Faulkner obliges us to discover by methodically disconcerting the sense of the social game that we apply as much in our experience of the world as in the naive reading of the naive telling of that experience. This sense of the game is also a sense of the history of the game, that is, of the still-to-come which it reads directly into the present state of the game and which it helps to make happen by orienting itself in relation to it, without having to place it explicitly in a conscious project, and hence to constitute it as a contingent *future*.