

## Narrative Device in Faulkner's "A Justice"<sup>1</sup> Valérie BADA

"A Justice" is a deceptively simple "tall tale" which presents a sample of Faulkner's favourite situations, themes and motifs: ambition, ruthless-ness, class distinction and property. Faulkner's control of the point of view also prefigures the narrative technique in *Absalom, Absalom!*: Quentin Compson is listener, framing narrator and central consciousness of a story he does not experience directly. Thus perspective and theme, telling and tale go hand in hand and their interaction makes up the very core of the story.

The narration constitutes a kind of *mise en abyme*: it presents Quentin Compson's remembering of Sam Fathers' telling of Herman Baskett's recollection of Sam's mixed origin. The short story is divided into five parts headed by Roman numerals. Quentin establishes the frame in a introductory section in which he tells us about his Saturday visits as a twelve-year-old to a farm belonging to his grandfather, Jason Compson II. While Caddy and Jason go fishing in the creek, Quentin listens to Sam Fathers, an Afro-Indian carpenter approaching his one hundredth year, who tells him how he came to be named "Had-Two-Fathers." The second, third and fourth parts constitute Sam's recollection of Herman Baskett's tale. His telling includes the account of the Chickasaw warrior Ikkemotubbé's rise to power in ante bellum Mississippi. Ikkemotubbé (alias David Callicoat, alias "De l'Homme" anglicized into Doom, The Man) propelled himself to the position of head of the tribe by poisoning his uncle and his heir and by terrorizing his People. The epic plot centers on the one-year-long towing and pushing of a wrecked steam-boat from the river twelve miles overland to the Indian plantation, whereas the comic side of the tale resides in Crawfish-ford's (Sam's father) attempts to obtain the married African slave he desires. His sexual drive even leads him to murder three white men to whom the black woman had been given in exchange for the wrecked steamboat. When

<sup>1</sup> William Faulkner, "A Justice," in *The Portable Faulkner*, edited by Malcom Cowley (1946; New York: Viking Press), pp. 3-20. All page references will be to this edition and given in the text.

a child of a strangely un-negroid color is born to the slave, the husband complains to Doom and demands "justice."

The fifth part of the story alternates Sam's ending his tale with his father and Herman Basket being forced by Doom to build a fence around the "Negro cabin," and "Grandfather Compson" calling Quentin to go home. The story ends with an older Quentin commenting upon his memory of the tale.

The comic dimension of the tale centers on sexual misconduct. Crawfish is a typical talltallish character. His naive insights, even his foolishness show him as the "trickster tricked." When he is confronted with a delicate situation or choice, Sam ironically adds "Pappy thought" (this expression appears four times in his tale), but the result of his "thinking" is always limited. This kind of humor belongs to folk comedy: it resembles the yarns spun around campfires, soaked with a bawdy, sometimes cruel masculine humor. The theme and narrative technique of "A Justice" stand in this tradition of 19th-century American southern and western story-telling, whose main representatives are Mark Twain and the anonymous frontier tall tale tellers.

In a fully developed written tall tale, the writer describes a framing scene in which he is himself present and then introduces a character who tells the fabulous yarn. The writer thus pretends to be part of the audience, claiming that his only role has been to record the teller's story in the teller's own words... But if the reader examines the story more closely, he invariably finds that the real focus of the writer's attention is the psychology of the teller himself, which proves to be far more complex than was first evident. The tall yarn in the story may or may not have been about the teller, he is nonetheless always the main character of the story as a whole... It is the teller who is the manipulator of appearances and the creator of myth.<sup>2</sup>

Faulkner often adapts the tall tale narrative structure, the quadruple bond, first teller/writer—2nd teller—tale—listener, to his own "cosmos" by pervading it with typically Faulknerian psychological, narrative and stylistic sophistications. In "A Justice" he creates four intricate narrative levels: the internal narrative, the events involving Crawfish and Doom as recalled much later by Herman Basket and told to Sam Fathers "when he was big enough to hear talk" (p. 5); Sam's indirect experience of the events and the way his memory reconstructs them decades later; thirdly Quentin, the last recipient of the tale, at an age (p. 12) when he was too young to understand its full and frightening scope, hence recreating young Sam's conditions of listening; and finally the older and more mature Quentin recounting this experience and trying to grasp its whole

dimension. The articulation of the narrative levels is complex and implicitly reveals deeper psychological layers in the framing consciousness of the story, Quentin Compson. His voice opens and closes the text; but the shift of style between the two intrusions betrays the presence of two different Quentins, the older being endowed with a fuller awareness and maturity. Quentin's voice in the introductory section is expressed in the simplified language of a twelve-year-old boy:

Until Grandfather Compson died, we would go out to the farm every Saturday afternoon. We would leave home right after dinner in the surrey, I in front with Roskus, and Grandfather and Candace (Caddy, we called her) and Jason in the back. Grandfather and Roskus would talk, with the horses going fast, because it was the best team in the country. (p. 3)

As the story opens, the past has already totally engulfed him. Quentin is not simply telling a story but actually *reliving* it. This double perspective is asserted in the merging of two different narrative devices: the use of a childlike style and the maintenance of the oral style of the yarn teller:

He (Sam Fathers) lived with the Negroes and they—the white people; the Negroes called him blue-gum—called him a Negro. But he wasn't a Negro. That's what I'm going to tell about. (p. 3)

Quentin asserts himself as the ultimate narrator of the tale. The disruption of the syntax, the basic child style, the address to a potential listener and repetitions create the deceptive effect of a faithful reconstruction of a moment of the past, aiming at the listener/reader's suspension of disbelief. Quentin's basic skill as a natural born "raconteur" lies in his mastery of sequence and in the use of repetition to sustain the listener's attention.

Then he would stop working and he would fill his pipe—he made them himself, out of a creek clay with a reed stem—and he would tell me about the old days. He talked like a nigger—that is, he said his words like niggers do, but he didn't say the same words—and his hair was nigger hair. (p. 4)

Quentin "freezes" his visual memory of Sam filling his pipe, inserts a long description of Sam's appearance and attitude, then backtracks to the arrested picture of Sam preparing himself to spin his yarn.

So I would give him the tobacco and he would stop work and sit down and fill his pipe and talk to me.

"The niggers," he said, "They call me Uncle Blue-Gum. And the white folks, they call me Sam Fathers."

"Isn't that your name?" I said.

"No. Not in the old days, I remember." (p. 4)

The effect of mimesis is reinforced through this repetitive dramatization of the narrational elements given in Quentin's introductory section.

Sam Fathers is introduced as the main protagonist of Quentin's "immediate past," his youth, and at the same time as the narrator of a "distant past,"<sup>3</sup> Doom's story and his naming.

"Had-Two-Fathers?" I said "That's not a name. That's not anything."  
"It was my name once. Listen." (p. 5)

Quentin is confined to a listening role, virtually silent while Sam talks at great length. The irony is inherent in the childish perspective: his innocent lack of understanding prevents his recollection of the tale from being sustained by any kind of moral code. Quentin reconstructs Sam's tale as he remembers listening to it. Vernacular realism, repetitions inherent in the oral tradition, flashbacks and anticipations characterize Sam's style. His vocabulary and images like "new man" for a baby or the personification of the steamboat that "died" then "walked" again, belong to the Indian culture, but his intonations are typically Afro-American. The accumulation of expressions like "Herman Basket said" and "Herman Basket told" (they appear more than seventy times) introducing the third narrative voice, illustrates Sam's very basic level of linguistic ability. On the other hand, the way he masters the chronology of his telling, the repetitions enhancing important events, the underlying irony and wit and his skill in dramatizing his memories show him to be a natural born story teller.

His articulation of sequences in Part II is particularly significant. Sam Fathers reproduces Herman Basket's telling of Doom's rise to Manship. He "pretends to be part of the audience" and apparently records "the teller's story in the teller's own words": "This is how Herman Basket told it when I was big enough to hear talk" (p. 5). He starts his chronology of events with Doom coming off the steamboat with six black slaves after seven years of absence. The description of Doom's ambition to become The Man leads to a flashback seven years earlier, erupting from the image of Doom's devilish eyes and digressing on the depth of his ruthlessness. Sam's use of repetition results from his being led adrift from his telling by associations of images.

But Herman Basket said they didn't hear from Doom at all until he had been gone seven years. Then one day Herman Basket and my pappy got a written stick from Doom to meet him at the Big River. Because the steamboat didn't come up our river anymore then. (p. 6)

There follow three recollections which move each time deeper into the past (a kind of "Chinese box" technique recounting Doom's desire to own a steamboat) and which emerge from the image of the steam-

boat and disrupt the narrative chronological order. After this parenthesis, Sam comes back to his main telling and repeats the opening of his tale:

"So after seven years he sent them the written stick and Herman Basket and pappy took the wagon and went to meet Doom at the Big River, and Doom got off the steamboat with six black people." (p. 7)

The telling thus embodies the narrator's reminiscence of the scene as a repetitive re-enactment in strong visual terms. This "re-memberment" of dismembered memories acquires another critical dimension through Quentin's conclusive voice when he loops the loop of the narration after Sam has completed his story of murder, sexual jealousy and exploitation.

We went on, in that strange, faintly sinister suspension of twilight in which I believed that I could still see Sam Fathers back there, sitting on his wooden block, definite, immobile and complete, like something looked upon after a long time in a preservative bath in a museum. That was it. I was just twelve then, and I would have to wait until I had passed on, through and beyond the suspension of twilight. Then I knew that I would know. But then Sam Fathers would be dead. (p. 20)

Quentin's handling of Sam Fathers' material is a demonstration of the process through which any story is developed by its author from a few facts and mental pictures. The style of Quentin's older voice is kinetic. His imagination moves like a camera doing a tracking out on Sam sitting on a block, then a sudden pause, freezing the picture in arrested motion. The congealed picture of Sam sitting on a block in the "suspension of twilight" epitomizes Faulkner's conception of time as "frozen motion:"

(He) seems to arrest the motion at the very heart of things; moments erupt and freeze, then fade, recede, and diminish, still motionless.<sup>4</sup>

But through the reminiscence of consecutive tellings, the motion is revived, the past recreated to inform the present. As Wilson Harris points out about Faulkner's *Intruder in the Dust*,

... images... cease to be passive or submerged; instead each image is an apparent catalyst of discovery, it acts upon the falling or ascending weight of a subtle imagination immersed in what it appears to describe.<sup>5</sup>

The image of Sam in the twilight, "definite, immobile and complete," seems to have set Quentin's recollection process in motion. The static picture of Sam sitting on his wooden block is reactivated through Quentin's reminiscence and attempt to comprehend what was obscure in the past.

<sup>4</sup> J.P. Sartre, p. 227

<sup>5</sup> W. Harris, *The Womb of Space: The Cross-Cultural Imagination*, London, Greenwood Press, 1983, p. 5.

Each image, therefore, confesses to textures which make paradoxically real a universe ceaselessly subject to qualities of alteration within creator and created, a universe that can never be taken for granted as dead matter.<sup>6</sup>

Quentin describes Sam as if he was a relic preserved in formulin. This vestige of the past is revived through the telling process. The "living fossil" is rediscovered through

the peculiar reality of language (which) provides a medium to see in consciousness the "free" motion and to hear with consciousness the "silent" flood of sound by a continuous inward revisionary and momentous logic of potent explosive images evoked in the mind.<sup>7</sup>

Quentin's passive participation as listener in no way interferes with his active effort to interpret what has become his psychological heritage. Quentin's position vis-à-vis Sam's telling is not one of a mesmerized listener, and in this role his consciousness permeates the story's total discourse. His conclusive erupting voice marks the whole tale as colored by his active re-listening. It is obviously not the voice of a young adolescent and the strongly visual and metaphorical style reminds us of the 19-year-old Quentin of *Absalom, Absalom!* His hyperbolic comment inserted into the matrix of realistic colloquialism creates an effect of controlled dissonance. The eruption of Quentin's lyrical voice, endowed with penetration and eloquence, injects a pervasive subjectivity, abstraction and an extended imagery into colloquial speech and unfolds the presentness of the past. The highly elaborate imagery, the cumulative quality of the sentences, their fluid and hypnotic rhythm sustained through the adjectival insistence contrast with the direct and simple style of Sam's and young Quentin's telling. It implies a "polyphony of meaning" (Bakhtin) revealing the multiple dimensions of experience in that "suspension" which allows reflection. Quentin's penetrative intrusive voice not only fractures the narrative tone of the story, but this hovering of active imagination also conveys a continuity of phenomenal and psychic experience: Sam is now described as "definite, immobile and complete," whereas the meaning of his tale has been mysterious, complex and incomplete to young Quentin. His interest in Sam's tale and his motivations for telling it again are ambiguous. It is tempting to link the Quentin of "A Justice" with his "avatars" in *Absalom, Absalom!* and *The Sound and the Fury*. One may see in Ikkemotubbe's ambition a prefiguration of Thomas Sutpen's legend. In this perspective, *Absalom, Absalom!* appears as a palimpsest of "A Justice." Both Doom and Sutpen

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>7</sup> Wilson Harris, *Tradition, the Writer and Society. Critical Essays*, London, New Beacon, 1967, p. 23.

have a "grand design": the Indian chief yearns to possess a steamboat and a Mansion. He says to Herman Basket:

"From now on, my name is not Ikkemotubbe. It's David Callicoat. And some day I'm going to own a steamboat too." (pp. 6-7)

His design is also obsessive:

Herman Basket told how Doom had been talking about the steamboat ever since he became Man, and about how the House was not big enough. (p. 10)

Just as Sutpen wants to build a dynasty and achieve power, fortune and social prestige, Ikkemotubbe, significantly called Doom, forsakes his Indian identity, takes over white practices like owning a plantation and African slaves, and in so doing adopts the perverted values that will cause Sutpen's fall.

In this perspective, the "dead" steamboat appears as the symbol of a decaying white civilization penetrating into Indian culture. Sutpen buys from Ikkemotubbe the land that will become Sutpen's Hundred, a land already "doomed" by slavery and ambition. Quentin Compson is the ultimate receiver and narrator of both "ghost stories." He himself unwillingly belongs to their cursed lineage, since his great-grandfather, Jason Lycurgus, bought Sam's mother and Sutpen's only friend was General Compson, Quentin's grandfather.

Too young to deserve to be a ghost, but nevertheless having to be one for all that, since he was born and bred in the Deep South.<sup>8</sup>

Quentin Compson is cursed through some cause antecedent to his own existence. He appears as the victim of a larger fatality. Ikkemotubbe, Sutpen and Quentin represent three "doomed" generations scripted in a vast tragedy, that of the Deep South itself. In Doom's as in Sutpen's legend, the hearer-teller relationship motivates the bequeathing of a heritage from one generation to the next, so that Ikkemotubbe's and Sutpen's fates become parts of Quentin's doomed and destructive legacy, all receding into the "continuum of time." This sense of decline is epitomized in Quentin's allusion to the "strange and faintly sinister suspension of twilight." Sunset symbolizes the end of a cycle and the promise of dawn, of renewal. It is a "frozen moment" between light and darkness, a "suspended instant" before entering another world.

Quentin must leave the age of innocence and be initiated into the tensions, perversions and passions of the adult world in order to understand the full implications of Sam's tale.

Quentin's style and imagery prefigures the tortured narrator of *The Sound and the Fury*, a Quentin whose passing "on and through and

<sup>8</sup> William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), New York, Vintage International, 1990, p. 4.

beyond the suspension of twilight" turns out to be fatal. He never matures beyond the idealism of adolescence and the clash between reality and the perfection of his absolutes causes the disintegration of his mind. In this perspective, it is probably significant that Quentin Compson, a character later to be destroyed by his sister's sexual freedom, his possessive love for her clashing with his puritan sense of honor, should be the narrator of a story whose humor centers on sexual misconduct. Quentin's world of innocence and honor begins to crumble when the soiled seat of Caddy's "muddy drawers" is exposed to her brothers and the slaves in the twilight<sup>9</sup> of a blossoming peartree. Moreover, the discussion on virginity, Southern women, honor, incest and suicide that Quentin has with his father also takes place in the twilight on the front gallery of the Compson House. Twilight is also associated with Quentin's suicide. As though he had already reached the threshold of death, Quentin feels the burden of time getting lighter:

I could see the twilight again, that quality of light as if time really had stopped for a while, with the sun hanging just under the horizon.<sup>10</sup>

Twilight is thus associated with loss and death. It never bears the seeds of renewal. Past and present are "suspended" and the future eradicated. In this perspective, we may say that the frightful implications of Doom's legend as understood by a more mature Quentin won't enrich his present but rather lead to his psychic breakdown. The revelation of meaning will turn out to be a psychological apocalypse.

The contrasting voices framing the story reveal a conflict between youth and maturity, innocence and awareness of perversion as the thematic heart of the short-story. Its meaning depends indeed on that space between the adult's and the child's levels of understanding and on their dependence upon each other.

Bakhtin's distinction between monologic and dialogic narrative provides a convenient theory for the process enacted in "A Justice." At the beginning Quentin consciously adopts the persona of himself as a child with its naivety and limited understanding. The eruption of Quentin's "other" voice at the end reveals the process through which he tries to reconstruct perfectly a moment out of the past which he can use to inform his present. A splitting of the individual psyche occurs in the form of an implicit dialogue between two different Quentins. His narrative becomes "warped" or "bent" by the presence of another facet of the self. The older Quentin webs a dialogical relationship with his former

<sup>9</sup> *Twilight* was the original title of the story that grew into *The Sound and the Fury*.

<sup>10</sup> William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury* (1931), London, Picador Classics, 1989, p. 146 (italics mine).

self and the story enters another "sphere of existence": "two voices collide within it," the discourse becomes intrinsically "double-voiced" and "receives an author, that is a creator of the given utterance whose position it expresses."<sup>11</sup> "A Justice" exhumes the past from Quentin's unconscious through echoes of Sam's talk within his memory and their impact on his new awareness forms the very core of the short story. This doubling of internal voices in dialogue with each other and with other "external" voices (Sam's and Herman's) reflects the same belief in the inherently dialogical nature of human consciousness (and unconscious) that Bakhtin attributes to Dostoevsky:

The very being of man (both external and internal) is the deepest communion. To be means to communicate. Absolute death (non-being) is the state of being unheard, unrecognized, unremembered (Ippoliti). To be means to be for another, and through the other, for oneself.

A person has no internal sovereign territory, he is wholly and always on the boundary; looking inside himself, he looks into the eyes of another or with the eyes of another.<sup>12</sup>

In this dialectical perspective, "A Justice" dramatizes the effects of time on perception as epitomized in two very different Quentins and thereby indirectly points to the basic epistemological problem underlying the formation and de-formation of the text. Because the reader is at several removes from the events of the narrative, he questions the possibility of getting back into the past in any kind of authoritative way. The emergence of Quentin's older voice that has been silenced throughout the story imposes an order that discounts the conditions and shatters the context that originally prevailed. The story that first seemed to be a truthful representation of the past appears in a much more ambiguous light, in a kind of "twilight." Since Quentin is revealed as the ultimate filtering consciousness of the story, the listener/reader of the tale questions the validity of the narrative process itself. In *Absalom, Absalom!* Faulkner provides the essential metaphor for this kind of narrative structure: a pebble sinking in the water and spreading ripples on the surface.

"Yes," Quentin said. "The two children" thinking Yes. *Maybe we are both Father. Maybe nothing ever happens once and is finished. Maybe happen is never once but like ripples maybe on water after the pebble sinks, the ripples moving on, spreading, the pool attached by a narrow umbilical water-cord to the next pool which the first pool feeds, has fed, did feed, let this second pool contain a different temperature of water, a different molecularity of having seen, felt, remembered,*

<sup>11</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1984), University of Minnesota Press, 1993, p. 184.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

reflect in a different tone the infinite unchanging sky, it doesn't matter: that pebble's watery echo whose fall it did not even see moves across its surface too at the original ripple-space, to the old ineradicable rhythm thinking Yes, we are both Father.

*Or maybe Father and I are both Shreve, maybe it took Father and me both to make Shreve or Shreve and me both to make Father or maybe Thomas Sutpen to make all of us. (Absalom, Absalom!, 210)*

Applied to "A Justice," the concentric rings in the water represent Quentin's "informants" and their sources beyond them. Like a pebble dropped in the water, any human act (including, significantly, the act of speech) sends out ripples across the stream of individual existence, and beyond, to lives in other generations in "an ineradicable rhythm." "Ripples" of voices emerge from the past as recollected by the narrators, each one endowed with a "different molecularity of having seen, felt, remembered" and "feeding" the tale with their own perception. Doom's murderous ambition and Crawfish's just as murderous desire for the slave represent the initial stone whose sinking into the past begins the concentric everwidening ripples across the surface of Yoknapatawpha's time, scattering Herman Basket, Sam Fathers, then Quentin Compson as actors and storytellers in ever shallower waves, always receding from "historical truth."<sup>13</sup> This process implies the apocryphal nature of the tale, passed down through the years by word of mouth.

Beyond psychological reasons, Quentin's obsession with the past may derive from the pure *jouissance* of storytelling. There is indeed an implicit strong narrative drive, an underlying fascination with telling. The delight that the three narrators and, of course Faulkner, take in spinning the yarn pervades the whole text.

In the light of Bakhtin's theory, story telling acquires an existential dimension. It establishes an essential even vital communication not only between tellers/writers and listeners/readers, but also between the different selves of a single person, and it preserves human lives from total oblivion.

At once a traditional tall tale, a dark "comedy of psyche" (W. Harris) and a tragedy of inheritance, "A Justice" offers complex layers of fiction. Echoes of voices multiply in the polyphony of changing perspectives and perceptions. Out of "the ragtags and bob-ends of old tales and talking," Faulkner creates a "drama of living consciousness" (W. Harris), setting the three narrators' voices in a complex dialogue that ultimately focuses

<sup>13</sup> The oral tradition distorts stories and turns them into legends just as Faulkner introduces variations on the same tale. In *The Old People* (published in *Go Down Moses*, 1942), Ikkemotubbe appears as Sam Fathers' father. Moreover, Doom's uncle is not murdered, but he abdicates in favor of his nephew.

on a question about the truth of the irretrievable past and the art of telling a story, implicitly of writing fiction.

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