Revue el hikma des études philosophiques
Issn : 2353-0499 Eissn:2602-5264

Volume: 10 / N°: 01(2022), p 1622-1635

Nietzsche's Dionysian Perspectivism in William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*

Ahmed Rezzoug*[1]

English Department, University of Algiers 2 (Algeria), ahmed.rezzoug@univ-alger2.dz

Received: 22/12/2021 Accepted: 27/12/2021 Published: 23/01/2022

Abstract:

The human mind has always been an objection of fascination for both novelists and philosophers. How will the novelist converge and convey the human mind? This present paper is precisely interested in William Faulkner's depiction of the human mind through the literary use of philosophical perspectivism. Friedrich Nietzsche's perspectivism will provide us with the necessary framework to decipher the perspectivist essence of Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury.*

Keywords: Faulkner; Nietzsche; Perspectivism; Narrative; Dionysian.

Résume:

L'esprit humain a toujours été objet d'une fascination par les romanciers et philosophes. De quelle manière peut un écrivain dépeindre l'esprit ? Cet article cherche à démontrer que l'esprit humain, tel peint par William Faulkner, est le résultat de l'utilisation littéraire du perspectivisme philosophique. La conceptualisation philosophique de Friedrich Nietzsche au sujet du perspectivisme sera l'outil utilisé pour l'analyse du roman The Sound and the Fury (le bruit et la fureur.) par Faulkner.

***Corresponding author**.

Nietzsche's Dionysian Perspectivism in William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*

Introduction

Literature has its own ways of focusing on the activity of the mind. It is not for nothing that William Faulkner's most famous book is entitled *The Sound and the Fury*, for it represents the noise that exists inside our brains. Faulkner's strenuous prose is such that it is able to tap in into that noise and renders it on text. To be sure, the rendering process gives life to something that is extremely arduous to process for most readers. Filled with fragmentary narration, jumbled chronology, relentless back and forths between past and present, intense interior monologues, *The Sound and the Fury* signals the birth and explosion of Faulkner as a modernist writer. Such a fractured narrative prose begs the question: Why rely on a disjointed prose to tell a story?

Faulkner himself never received a proper education. Indeed, he never went to college, but was a highly well-read individual. There is a plethora of literature that has studied his work in various lenses and approaches. There is no surprise there, because his work is a minefield of philosophical ideas. As of late, however, Faulkner receives very little attention. The first reason has already been hinted to, and that is the toughness most (if not all) first readers experience when picking up his novels. The second reason has to do with the spirit of the age — our *zeitgeist*. Race and gender studies are two of the most prominent current schools of criticism. Needless to say, Faulkner, being a critic of his own era as well as being part of it, might not come out on the right side of these issues. He will not, in other words, pass the ideological litmus test in ways some would want him to. In this light, this paper is interested with the latter contemporary distaste for Faulkner: his form.

This study aims to show how Faulkner's fractured narrative prose makes use of philosophical perspectivism, that of Nietzsche's more particularly. There is no original evidence of

Faulkner having read the German philosopher, but his work seems staggeringly influenced, directly or indirectly, by Nietzsche's ideas. There has been a wide variety of readings concerning Faulkner. Some of these include nihilist, religious, deconstructionist, and formalist readings to name a few. Formalists are also interested with form but their interest is limited to a close, internal reading of the text that deliberately ignores external factors. This is where this paper steps in. Indeed, there is a remarkably limited number of Nietzschean readings when it comes to Faulkner, which is surprising. Indeed, those initiated with both authors will notice that Faulkner shelters many of Nietzsche's ideas. This paper endeavors to explore one of those, namely Dionysian perspectivism. In so doing, it will clarify Faulkner's deliberate fragmentary narrative style.

1. Nietzsche's Perspectivism

Perspectivism, the idea that we should always take different view of things, is part of Friedrich Nietzsche's experimental method. There is a sense in which taking multiple views when looking at one thing is when truth can emerge. It is, first and foremost, a critique of the idea that there is an objective way in which we can understand our world. Indeed, perspectivism holds the idea that there is no such thing as a panoptic view or a God's eye view. Instead, we have perspectives which enable us to circle around the things we so seek to understand better.

Nietzsche certainly did not coin the term nor was he the first thinker to delve into the possibilities of perspectivism. He is, however, the first modern philosopher to truly expand on perspectivism and adopt it as one of his key tenets of his philosophy. In this sense, what definition do we lend to the concept? Perspectivism is "the view that all truth is truth from or within a particular perspective." (Blackburn, 2010: 344). In other words, whatever one holds as indisputably true only holds true to themselves. What one considers as true lends itself to elements

such as "the nature of our sensory apparatus, or it may be thought to be bound by culture, history, language, class, or gender." (Blackburn, 2010: 345). And since perspectives are diverse, they are as well "different families of truths." (Blackburn, 2010: 345).

Truth, as Nietzsche sees it, is a means rather than an end. The idea of truth lends itself to a sense of absolutism. If one gets some kind of truth, that is to say 'truth' as something immovable and indisputable, then in some ways it creates the sort of absolutism that perspectivism seeks to move away from. What we do have, however, is a sort of interpretive truth — a disputable one that stems from the process of interpretation. In other words, interpretations "actually leave open the question of whether there is or might be some "truth in itself." (Solomon, 2003: 48) And nowhere is this truer than in reading texts, for every reading brings forth an interpretation along.

Perspectivism runs in two different current, both internally and externally. Externally, it takes its form in scientific realism, which is "the belief that science accurately depicts how the world is." (Staloff, 1998: 9). Nietzsche, in high disapproval, believes that science only provides us with just another perspective. Certainly, it is one that anyone may adhere to, but it should not be done so because it "corresponds" (Staloff, 1998: 10) to the world, but because it provides us with an extremely useful "perspectival apparatus." (Nietzsche, 1882: 88). In other words, the scientific perspective helps us understand and control nature, as it were. For Nietzsche, it is important that such perspective should not override the bigger factor at play, the "sentient" (Nietzsche, 1882: 97) human beings. As such, we have a series of drives and instinct which make up for most of our decision making and behaviorisms in life. In this sense, science, reason and common sense "are just masks that we throw on

reality so that we could manipulate it." (Staloff, 1998: 9)

Externally, perspectivism undermines the realism of not science but that of the self. If science is a "mask" as Darren Staloff suggests, then the external perspectivist current touches upon the masks we, as individuals, wear in our daily lives. It may happen in a myriad of ways: faking a smile, a sentiment, a compliment; or taking a stern face against children who may have done something you forbade them from doing. We put these masks on for a few moments, and there is this common belief that if we ever take these masks off, we would have our true selves. In assuming these masks, we, consciously or unconsciously, open up our record to more perspectives. In some sense, perspectives surrounding our own lives become perquisites and of paramount importance to avoid a stoic and stagnant lifestyle. Perspectives, in other words, provide us with a sort of flux — one that keeps our progression moving onward. In short, a perspective can only believable not if it corresponds to reality, but rather "if it empowers us in our coping with it." (Staloff, 1998: 10). In this sense, all of our concepts represent perspectives which we impose on experience to create a more suitable world for us.

Nietzsche's set of works is largely drenched in perspectivism. As early as his first book, The *Birth of Tragedy*, published in 1872, he already advances a perspectivist view of tragedy and life itself in general. In his first book, Nietzsche advances that the Greek view of tragedy was possible because two different strands of thought and feeling came together in a remarkable way: The Apollonian and the Dionysian. Based on the two Greek deities, these two stands carried antagonistic instincts. On the one hand, there was the Apollonian way to seeing life and tragedy, of seeing beauty and idealizing what one sees. The Apollonian current also stands for self-control, reason and moderation. On the other, the more musical side of things,

the Dionysian, urges to respond in as lively a way as possible. This current is imbued with a chaotic and reckless energy. When the Greeks had merged the two, as Nietzsche claims they did, there came out of it a sense of merging two different ways of looking at the external world.

2. Dionysian Perspectivism in Faulkner's *The Sound and The Fury*

William Faulkner's work has always had an existentialist hint. Never receiving a proper education, Faulkner was nonetheless a remarkably well read person. While there is no clear evidence that he may have read Nietzsche, his novels tell the tale of the German's potential influence on his work. Nietzsche, as shown earlier, has a deep sense of how perspectives constitute the bulk of our existence. In life, like in fiction, he shows how there are different currents, often antagonistic, merge with each other. Often overlooked or unarticulated, the Dionysian spirit lives in all of us, and in all of our pages. As enunciated by Nietzsche, the Dionysian unravels our second (if not most important) perspective about life. In other words, more than simple thematic notations, the Apollonian and Dionysian are fundamentally perspectival in essence. *The Sound and the Fury*, published in 1929, will be this paper's glance at Faulkner's perspectivist stroke.

The Sound and the Fury breaks all the conventions of traditional narrative that we are accustomed to in the nineteenth century or prior. It has no omniscient voice, but simply voices in the plural, and all of these voices tell us that there is no single right take on events. In a perspectival way, it plunges us into the interior where there is no objective, panoptic view of the world, as Nietzsche explains.

> Let us be on our guard against the dangerous old conceptual fiction that posits a 'pure, will-less, painless,

> timeless knowing subject'; let us guard against the snares of such contradictory 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 direc- tion, 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 emotions 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." (Nietzsche, 1989: 119)

In affirming that there is "only perspective seeing" and "perspective knowing," we find ourselves circling around things having different takes and vantage points. It is something that is also true of life. Indeed, if we were to ask people about their take on a single event, we would receive different commentaries. *The Sound and the Fury* has something of that perspectival variety. Faulkner drenches us into mainly four perspectives, all of which surround the Compson family, and each perspective is going to be hectic. The first is told by the Idiot, Benjy. Quentin, the troubled and bruised Compson, narrates us his mind in the second section. Jason, the pragmatist Compson, is the mind we read in the third section. The fourth section, interestingly enough, does away with the interior monologue perspectives of the first three and switches to a third perspective person which gives us a wider view. All perspectives come together to give us a past and present that is jumbled on the pages just as things are jumbled in the human brain, because our minds only rarely follow a linear sequence. And so, the plot never goes forward.

Needless to say, such a discursive way of writing narrative fiction comes with its challenges. As early as first two pages, we already have a flavor of how elliptic this narrative is going to be. Here is, for an instance, the first occurrence where chronology gets chaotic.

> We went along the fence and came to the garden fence, where our shadows were. My shadow was higher than Luster's on the fence. We came to the broken place and went through it.
>
> "Wait a minute." Luster said. "You snagged on that nail again. Cant you never crawl through here without snagging on that nail."
>
> Caddy uncaught me and we crawled through. Uncle Maury said to not let anybody see us, so we better stoop over, Caddy said. Stoop over, Benjy. Like this, see. We stooped over and crossed the garden, where the flowers rasped and rattled against us. The ground was hard. We climbed the fence, where the pigs were grunting and snuffing. I expect they're sorry because one of them got killed today, Caddy said. The ground was hard, churned and knotted.
>
> Keep your hands in your pockets, Caddy said. Or they'll get froze. You dont want your hands froze on Christmas, do you. (Faulkner, 1995: 2)

It has only been two pages in the novel, and one can already sense a deep level of confusion. The book opens with a scene around some sort of pasture with a fence, and we hear about people "hitting," (Faulkner, 1995: 1) and then the scene gets cut radically (we, as readers, only get aware of this much later on) to a different setting in time. In one instant we are following Benjy (the idiot) and Luster (a black servant for the Compsons), and the next one we find ourselves in the past in a

radical fashion. And it is the first instance where "nothing is arrested or over, that there is only flux and motion, an endless shuttling fromone tenement to another." (Weinstein, 1993: 148). This "flux" in which there is a restless back and forth nearly exhausts our mind when first reading it. It is a flux full of confusion, disorder and unclarity. It is nearly impossible to make sense of what the eye reads at first glance, because there is no narration device of any sort to help us decipher what is being thrown at us. There is no omniscient narrator, time or place indications, and no sense of linearity. Instead, we find ourselves from the very first page we read in a place that feels strange and quite impenetrable. An irresistible readerly impulse is to try and straighten out Faulkner's Dionysian perspective, to take his jumbled chronology and 'fix' it. Yet, reading Faulkner by taking the confusion aspect out of it and 'show' the story in a more linear sequence is, as one critic puts it, "like taking the whole eggs out of the omelet." (cited in Polk, 1993: 54). In other words, it defeats the whole purpose of Faulknarian prose. The key to read *The Sound and the Fury* is to roll with the Dionysian punches, to take the jumbled prose as it is: whole — see it for what it is and then process it. If not, then one falls to the pitfall of 'straightening out' Faulkner, and that would be a highly reductive approach as Donlad M. Kartiganer points out in his *Faulkner's Invention of the Novel.*

> The process of familiarization discloses a structure of oppression. The strategies prepare a system of signs, a critical language, through which the text assumes meaning. This meaning, however, has been largely predetermined by the strategies. Reading thus necessarily projects a text known primarily through what is already known, preventing it from expanding beyond the boundaries of the approach adopted at the outset. (1993: 71).

Nietzsche's Dionysian Perspectivism in William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*

Faulkner understands narration as Nietzsche understands storytelling, that sensory experience needs to be deeply touched and challenged. "Such prose, oddly blinkered, is trouble for most readers." (Weinstein, 2011: 65.) Often seen as a master of high modernism, Faulkner actually cares very little about 'techniques.' Instead, just like Nietzsche, he writes about the human psyche. Faulkner sees not a 'stream of consciousness,' but a mind of consciousness. And the mind must be extended to Dionysian narrative prowess. By presenting things to us without the labels we ordinarily are accustomed to, Faulkner shows a Dionysian picture of a fractured mind and fractured world. Equally true, the same world proves to be shockingly confusing, unlabeled, and sensorial — one that is prior to our narrow tags.

> Its [*The Sound and the Fury*] principal object is that it should not be read, in the sense that it seeks to withstand from beginning to end every critical strategy. To put this in a more positive way, The Sound and the Fury fiercely celebrates invention, the freedom of a prose that communicates yet will not be controlled into what normally passes fora stable set of meanings. (Kartiganer, 1993: 72)

Faulkner's confusion drives us to think deeper as to what we are supposed to do with material that is out of the scope of our tags and material we cannot possibly comprehend rationally. It presses us hard, and we, as readers, have to respond to it in some fashion. We may not comprehend the Dionysian confusion at first glance, but one does feel its cogency because one ingests it. Is there a need to understand the affective logic behind the confusion? Not necessarily. But we are meant to respond to the power and coherence behind it even though we may not know the reasons behind it. Dionysus enlightens us that not every

motion of life will be inherently coherent, that sometimes we have to dive "into the wreck" to find light. (Nietzsche, 1871: 80). Confusion and doubt, in other words, are perspectivist perquisites to truly live life. And this is precisely the Faulknarian formula: to give us the effects of a life, immerse us with and in it, and then later give us the Apollonian causes that produce it. And it is often how our lives work, too, that we find out causes afterwards when doing our backtracking. Only then we will reach a conclusion, but we usually start with Dionysian emotions and feelings — just the way Faulkner starts.

> There is a kind of astounding primitive purity in Faulkner's work, a grasp of life that is most elemental of what experience might feel like before the codes, labels of culture and thinking come to us. This, too, might be an illusion of life prior to culture, to the grids and frames by which we organize things. A capacity to see and believe what was not yet patterned, organized and codified the way adult life is. Faulkner, then, makes demands on us, he obliges us to take a look at perception in a way we are rarely able to do for ourselves. (Weinstein, 1993: 64).

"The primitive purity" is the Dionysian outburst that finds itself in Faulkner's form. An outburst that delves that delves into fractured consciousness, interior monologues, in recording the feelings of characters in crisis who are out of sync with their environment, with themselves, and who are alienated out of their own minds and bodies. There is a deep notion of trauma in Faulkner, in the sense that the individual is traumatized by the very experience of being alive; that life and air assault us, and that we are not equipped to make our way through life. There is a profound sense of the damaged and incapacitated psyche in Faulkner and it finds way in the way things are presented to us.

The effect is that of an equivalence always awry, like

> a slant rhyme grinding with tension, or a fugue in which an identical melody is being played in major and minor keys. Freedom and entrapment, obsessive reminiscence and defiance of all norms, despair and exhilaration, employ the same words to totally different ends. The novel reads as a narrative always beginning, opening to new configurations of meaning, and a narrative turning perpetually backward, looking to the past to conclude the process of meaning. (Polk, 1993: 73)

Despair, as Noel Polk points out above, is often part of the reading process of *The Sound and the Fury.* In what may seem as oxymoronic, it is a despair that could still be exhilarating. It is true, what we are reading at first glance is not rationalistic. For a lack of better term, it simply does not make sense to the reader. But this sense of confusion, doubt, and despair is all so necessary to the "process of meaning." (Nietzsche, 1975: 73) Nietzsche tells us that we, as human beings, as well as readers, have been all too accustomed to this rationalistic (Apollonian) instinct which seeks to pattern and clarify everything we deal with, but one must come to terms with the fact that not everything is neat or endowed with crystal clear clarity. The human mind is "tumultuous, frail, and can be deeply archaic." (Nietzsche, 1975: 75). One of Faulkner's aims, then, is to paint that "archaic" mind through a convulsive, perspectivist type of narrative.

Conclusion

Analyzing William Faulkner's breakthrough novel from a Nietzschean lens demonstrates how *The Sound and the Fury's* distinct narrative style showcases philosophical perspectivism. Faulkner offers us a violent manifesto of other ways to telling a story. More than a simple literary technique, perspectivism for Faulkner is what enables him as a writer to paint the most vivid picture of the human mind and psyche. This paper endeavored to bring an answer to the question it advanced, that is why Faulkner's prose is so disjointed. In brief, it is because the human mind is just as so.

Our minds are prone to various moods and thoughts and they do not always come to us in a neat fashion. Instead, our minds are malleable and fluid. Just like Faulkner's prose, we are prey to disorder and random emotional outbursts. We, as human beings, are drenched into various perspectives and lenses. We imagine and re-imagine scenarios all the time. We find ourselves daydreaming and mentally travelling back to the past. And the catalysts for these could be various: a scent, a picture, a painting, a word or noise.

A contextual reading of most modernist texts often leads up to the same premise: they correspond to the fragmented time in which they were composed. Faulkner, through the use of Dionysian perspectivism, seems to annihilate this proposition. The mind has always been fragmented, tells us *The Sound and the Fury.* It has always been a palette subject to different currents, and Faulkner's intentional use of cryptic and confusing style is merely but an attempt in reflecting those currents and vantage points.

***Bibliography List*:**

Blackburn, S. (1996). *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Faulkner, W. (1929). *The Sound and the Fury.* London: Vintage. 1995

Kartiganer, D. M. (1979). *The Fragile Thread : The Meaning of Form in Faulkner's Novels.* University of Massachusetts Press.

Kartiganer, D. M. (1993). *Faulkner's Invention of the Novel.* Cambridge University Press.

Nietzsche, F. (1872). *The Birth of Tragedy.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Nietzsche, F. (1882). *The Gay Science.* London: Vintage. 1974

Nietzsche, F. (1989). *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo.* New York : Random House.

Polk, N. (1993). *New Essays On The Sound and the Fury.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Solomon, R. C. (2003). *Living With Nietzsche.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Staloff, D. (1998). *Nietzsche's Perspectivism and Critique of Philosophy*. TGC.

Weinstein, A. (1993). *Nobody's Home: Speech, Self, and Place in American Fiction.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Weinstein, A. (2011). *Morning, Noon, and Night: Finding the Meaning of Life's Stages.* New York: Random House.