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Blurred Action, Blurred Narration: Three Scenes Of Hurry From William Faulkner

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In one of his most often quoted interviews, William Faulkner said, "Life is motion and motion is concerned with what makes man move—which is ambition, power, pleasure" (qtd. in Cowley 138). We may take this to mean that for Faulkner lack of motion had a purely negative connotation. His texts do not, however, present such a simple, straightforward picture. In certain action scenes where his characters are in a hurry, and thus in motion, life nevertheless comes to a standstill. Although they possess the "ambition" or "power" necessary for motion, these characters are often partially or temporarily immobile. Moreover, in such "scenes of hurry," as I propose to label them, the characters' ties with their reality are also severed. The action of the characters appears to be blurred, and the setting and atmosphere of these scenes of "hurry" dissolve into almost surreal nightmarish environments. The narrators of such scenes, in spite of their ostensible efforts to be clear, on the contrary grow obscure in their narration. I discuss in this article three scenes of hurry, from *Light in August* (1932), *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), and *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), in order to examine respectively instances of lack of motion, shift from a realistic to a surreal setting, and obscurity of narration in Faulkner's fiction. I argue that such "blurred" narration produces unreliable narrators, a major aspect of Faulknerian fiction.

Light in August

In Light in August, Joe Christmas goes through a series of fast actions, on the night he attacks McEachern, in his urge to leave the dance hall, reach home to get money, and finally go to Bobbie's house. After Joe takes the money from where it is hidden, he leaves the house, riding McEachern's "now spent old horse" (Faulkner, *Light in August* 196). The horse is too tired to move as fast as Joe would have it:

> Though the horse was still going through the motion of galloping, it was not moving much faster than a man could walk. The stick too rose and fell with the same spent and terrific slowness. ... It—the horse and the

rider—had a strange, dreamy effect, like a moving picture in slow motion as it galloped steady and flagging up the street. (Faulkner, *Light in August* 196)

The resemblance of the horse and its rider to a slow motion picture prepares the reader for the next description, which brings all action to a standstill. The narrator suggests that the horse and the rider "might have been an equestrian statue strayed from its pedestal and come to rest in an attitude of ultimate exhaustion." The horse stops in spite of Joe's effort "to drag it into motion by main strength." Due to the late hour, the street is deserted and filled with moon shadows that reinforce the dreamy quality of the scene. The horse and Joe face each other, in total solitude and stillness, "their heads quite near, as if carved in an attitude of listening or of prayer or of consultation" (Faulkner, *Light in August* 197).

The image of a man on his galloping horse often appears in Faulkner in relation to figures such as Thomas Sutpen or Hightower's grandfather. Although this image denotes power in such characters, Joe's galloping horse is as slow as a walking man. Joe's willpower and determination to reach Bobbie only bring him to a standstill. The horse and Joe are thus in what must be called a "motionless action," and are analogous to the figures on John Keats's Grecian urn. However, this still moment does not last long:

Then Joe raised the stick and fell to beating the horse about its motionless head. He beat it steadily until the stick broke. ... But perhaps he realised that he was inflicting no pain, or perhaps his arm grew tired at last, because he threw the stick away and turned, whirled, already in full stride. (Faulkner, *Light in August* 197)

The narrator's speculations about why Joe may have stopped beating the horse are typical of Faulkner's style in *Light in August*. The narrator's powers are limited, and the insights he provides about the unspoken motivations, thoughts and feelings of the characters often do not go beyond speculation. Between Joe's departure from McEachern's house and his encounter with Bobbie, the narrator uses the word "perhaps" ten times in describing Joe's experiences. The dubious tone of the narration adds to the tension of the events, as the narrator does not let any one speculation gain precedence over the others.

Joe finally reaches Bobbie's house but the uncertainties continue. To illustrate, before Joe enters the house, the narrator has several suggestions concerning what he may have on his mind:

Perhaps he could see already the waitress, in a dark dress for travelling, with her hat on and her bag packed, waiting. (How they were to go anywhere, by what means depart, likely he had never thought.) And perhaps Max and Mame too, likely undressed—Max coatless or maybe even in his undershirt, and Mame in the light blue kimono—the two of them bustling about in that loud, cheerful, seeing-someone-off way. (Faulkner, *Light in August* 198)

The detailed descriptions of what Bobbie or the others may be wearing make these speculations convincingly probable since one assumes that such a detailed depiction is only possible as the product of a well-organized thinking process. The parenthetical information about what "likely he [Joe] had never thought" also implies that the rest probably *had* been thought. Yet, just as the speculations become credible for the reader, the narrator makes further comments within the same paragraph that suggest ideas contrary to these speculations.

But actually he was not thinking at all, since he had never told the waitress to get ready to leave at all. Perhaps he had believed that he had told her, or that she should know, since his recent doings and his future plans must have seemed to him simple enough for anyone to understand. Perhaps he even believed that he had told her he was going home in order to get money when she got into the car. (Faulkner, *Light in August* 198)

In the first sentence the narrator undoes the effect of the previous suggestions by directly stating that they are completely rootless since Joe had not been thinking at all. Immediately following that statement are two more "perhaps" sentences, which once again builds up an assumption that may justify all of those speculations. The paragraph therefore sets up a vicious circle: if indeed Joe had made himself believe that the waitress knew what his plans were, then one should also admit that Joe could have thought about how the waitress and her friends would be expecting his arrival.

When Joe finally enters the house, the narrator does not give direct information about Joe's thoughts or reactions to what he sees in the house. He may or may not have seen the luggage and the bags; if he has, he may have been surprised by their number or may have thought about the difficulty of carrying them all by himself (Faulkner, *Light in August* 200). Just as Joe's mind becomes an incomprehensible and blurred entity, his actions become difficult to visualize too: "Joe was already moving toward the door which he knew, very nearly running again, if he had actually stopped" (Faulkner, *Light in August* 199). Similarly, it is not clear how he notices "the blonde [sic] woman" either:

Joe had not looked at anything. Because he suddenly saw the blonde woman standing in the hall at the rear. He had not seen her emerge into the hall at all, yet it was empty when he entered. (Faulkner, *Light in August*200)

The obscurity of Joe's experience increases, and so does the blurring effect of the narration. As he enters Bobbie's room, Joe as an individual is not a complete entity but rather two separate identities: "He opened the door. He was running now; that is, as a man might run far ahead of himself and his knowing in the act of stopping stock still" (Faulkner, Light in August 200). Although it is not quite clear why or how that split identity occurs, it is clear that one part of Joe runs ahead of the other, leaving his "knowing" or consciousness behind. After the "moving

picture in slow motion" and the "equestrian statue" characteristics that involve deterioration of motion, Joe's hurry is finalized by a partial paralysis of his mind which remains behind his physical movements.

The Sound and the Fury

In *The Sound and the Fury*, Jason sees Quentin and "the red tie" in a car and chases them (Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury* 297-302)—with an instance of the split between the physical and the mental similar to that of Joe's occurring. Jason's rage and self-indulgent tone dominate throughout his section of the novel. The scene starts with "a ford coming helling" towards Jason, and in spite of its incredible speed, the car comes to a sudden standstill before it manoeuvres back (Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury* 297). At the moment of that sudden halt, the car is both moving and motionless (Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury* 144-145). Recognizing the driver and his companion, Jason is driven nearly insane and chases them without realizing the significance of his own actions or thinking about his headache (Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury* 297). His actions are not preceded or accompanied by a conscious decision process. Although his physical self ordinarily imposes its presence on his consciousness during his headaches, that too is left behind. It is as though Jason leaves his body and his mind at the point of the encounter, and moves forward as the pure embodiment of his feelings, i.e., rage and hate for his niece and "the red tie."

Once Jason locates the Ford, and parks his car to find the couple, his headache and his mind have already caught up with his rage; and they slow him down:

> And now I'd have to go way around and cross a plowed field, the only one I had seen since I left town, with every step like somebody was walking behind me, hitting me on the head with a club. ... I went along it for a while, but it got thicker, and all the time Earl probably telephoning home about where I was and getting Mother all upset again. (Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury* 299-300)

As opposed to Quentin's shadow, Jason feels his own pain as an unwelcome companion. His speculations about Earl indicate that accompanying the physical discomfort is the mental anguish, both of which try to prevent him from pursuing the targets of his rage.

The fact that this scene is narrated in the first person may promise a more factual and therefore dependable narrative as opposed to the speculative third person narrator previously seen in the *Light in August*scene. However, that expectation is hardly fulfilled due to the nature and the conditions of this particular first person narrator. Jason is not only blocked by the rage and headache which prevent him from perceiving and reporting clearly, but also blinded by the sun in his eyes, deafened by the ringing in his ears, and slowed down by the "beggar lice and twigs

and stuff all over me, inside my clothes and shoes and all" (Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury* 300). As his headache worsens, he loses his sense of direction as well as his sense of reality:

I didn't have any idea where the car was now. I couldn't think about anything except my head, and I'd just stand in one place and sort of wonder if I had really seen a ford even, and I didn't even care much whether I had or not. (Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury* 300-301)

When it comes to relating the facts of the action, Jason, in his rage and physical pain, is as unreliable as the narrator in *Light in August*. Jason also lacks the quality of keeping himself limited to the narration of the main action; his narration contains numerous digressions on topics such as the state of the local roads, the effects of "blood" in people's actions, and the laziness of the inhabitants of that area (Faulkner,*The Sound and the Fury* 297-298). Although his bitter and emotional tone differs from the more distanced third person narrator of *Light in August*, both narrators fail to give an accurate and dependable account of the actions which they report.

Absalom, Absalom!

In *Absalom, Absalom!* as Miss Rosa conveys the story of her encounter with Clytie after Charles Bon's murder (Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* 136-142), we have the same stylistic features of scenes of hurry and thus another unreliable first person narrator in Miss Rosa. She does not follow a chronological order as she narrates the events of that afternoon and shifts between the past, the actions of that afternoon, and the future. Her narrative is further marked with her hatred of Sutpen and his "blood," as well as her fear of and repulsion from Clytie and her "negro blood."

Miss Rosa and Clytie meet in the almost empty Sutpen's Hundred, which has a "thunderous silence." Clytie is "rocklike and firm and antedating time and house and doom and all" as opposed to Miss Rosa who knows very little and sees even less after "running out of the bright afternoon" into this almost timeless dark hallway (Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* 136). Clytie's presence stops part of Miss Rosa as another part of her goes on:

The face stopping me dead (not my body: it still advanced, ran on: but I, myself, that deep existence which we lead, to which the movement of the limbs is but a clumsy and belated accompaniment. (Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* 137)

Once again, the hurried action of the character has split her identity into its physical and non-physical elements. As Miss Rosa explains, those two components need to be stopped by different agents: "and I (my body) not stopping yet (yes, it

needed the hand, the touch, for that)" (Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* 138). However, even that explanation is not altogether correct and accurate, either, since when Clytie eventually touches Miss Rosa, the latter is not sure whether she has stopped or not:

> Then she touched me, and then I did stop dead. Possibly even then my body did not stop, since I seemed to be aware of it thrusting blindly still against the solid yet imponderable weight ... of that will to bar me from the stairs. ... I do not know. I know only that my entire being seemed to run at blind full tilt into something monstrous and immobile, with a shocking impact too soon and too quick to be mere amazement and outrage at that black arresting and untimorous hand on my white woman's flesh. (Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* 139)

Thus, as Miss Rosa tries to modify her narration, she ironically renders even more obscure the action she narrates. She then describes the encounter with Clytie in terms that may be compared, as I observed above in the case of the "equestrian statue" in *Light in August*, (Note 1) with the Grecian urn metaphor:

> We just stood there—I motionless in the attitude and action of running, she rigid in that furious immobility, the two of us joined by that hand and arm which held us, like a fierce rigid umbilical cord, twin sistered to the fell darkness which had produced her. (Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* 140)

In a hurry, Miss Rosa has run to come to a standstill, to find herself in "that dream-state in which you run without moving" (Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* 142). Just as the action she narrates, her reliability too is blurred and faded, enveloping facts as well as the reflections of her unclear state of mind and feelings.

Reality and unreality go hand in hand while motion is accompanied by lack of motion for the characters discussed above, as they move about in a hurried manner, seeming to chase someone or being chased themselves. They "move" in an effort to fulfil their desires, only to be stopped by forces outside their powers. The "scenes of hurry" in which they "act" lead merely to "blurred" action that can only be conveyed by "blurred" narration. As such, these scenes are indicative of Faulkner's masterful handling of narrators. In the depiction of their mixed feelings and motives as characters, and their dubious intentions as story-tellers, they are some of the most haunting unreliable narrators in twentieth-century modernist literature.

Notes

1

Another instance of the use of the Grecian urn metaphor is the fish swimming against the current in Quentin's section in *The Sound and the Fury*.

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