

|              |   |
|--------------|---|
| Title        | Benjy Compson and the Crisis of Articulation :<br>Two Post-Modern Readings of The Sound and the<br>Fury |
| Author(s)    | Oshio, Keiko  |
| Citation     | Osaka Literary Review. 27 P.98-P.108  |
| Issue Date   | 1988-12-20  |
| Text Version | publisher   |
| URL          | <a href="https://doi.org/10.18910/25513">https://doi.org/10.18910/25513</a>                             |
| DOI          | 10.18910/25513  |
| rights       |   |
| Note         |   |

*Osaka University Knowledge Archive : OUKA*

<https://ir.library.osaka-u.ac.jp/>

Osaka University

## Benjy Compson and the Crisis of Articulation: Two Post-Modern Readings of *The Sound and the Fury*

Keiko Oshio

William Faulkner, despite the virtuosity of the things he can do with language, often cultivates the characters' silences and troubles of expression in his fiction. Especially, Benjamin Compson — the idiot in *The Sound and the Fury* — is one of the most paradoxical as well as the most frequently discussed figures of them all; since this speechless, aphasiac man's unheard, inner discourse is the first of the four individual narratives which constitute Faulkner's earliest fictional masterpiece.<sup>1)</sup>

Two important works of criticism on Faulkner's fiction deal with this peculiar silence in Benjy Compson: One of them is André Bleikasten's *The Most Splendid Failure* (1976), which is solely on *The Sound and the Fury*, while the other, John T. Matthews' *The Play of Faulkner's Language* (1982), focuses on four major pieces of his fiction including the first masterpiece.<sup>2)</sup> Precedingly, the scholars on *The Sound and the fury* have recognized mostly the negative features in this character. Except for the few who have remarked on the use of the Christ symbolism in the description of him, they have enumerated Benjy's moral, intellectual, and emotional deficiencies as the causes of his entrapment and suffering, or simply negated the existence of his consciousness and treated his discourse as the mere objective "camera-mind records" of the events in the Compson chronicle.<sup>3)</sup> Contrary to those previous critics on Benjy Compson, Bleikasten and Matthews interpret the character's troubled state with his language as synecdochal of the entire novel's state of articulation, while at the same time they also discover in his figure a symbol of the novel's potentiality for textual productivity.

The two critics' analyses of Faulkner's fiction are based on the following premises that are deduced from the tenets shared among the Post-Modern theorists on language: that is, 1) In spite of the previously-held belief in the presence of such ideas as God, substance, truth, essence, or

man as the referred centers in the structures of Western thought, modern society is a world where “the event of ‘decentering’” (Matthews, 23) – the losses of those present-beings and of the centered structures – takes place, and Faulkner’s works somehow register this loss within their structures. 2) As Jacques Derrida writes in his essay on Claude Lévi-Strauss, everything becomes “discourse” – a system of signifiers “in which the central signified, the original or transcendental signified, is never absolutely present outside a system of differences” – in the event of this decentering; accordingly, not only Faulkner’s fiction or literature as a whole, but the entire orders of society and men themselves within them are revealed to be no longer the solid entities, but the mere constituents and constructs of those systems of difference and deferment which are similar in function to language.<sup>4)</sup>

In both of those works of criticism, even though the critics refer and allude to Derrida’s works as *Of Grammatology* or “Structure, Sign, and Play,” their interests lie in formulating a theory of Faulkner’s novels as forms of individual articulation within their decentered, language-oriented conceptualization of modern society; and they regard *The Sound and the Fury* as the inaugurating piece which enabled the novelist to practice his own idiosyncratic manner of articulation for the first time.<sup>5)</sup> Given the above premises on Faulkner’s fiction, however, the two critics can not so easily ascribe the novel’s resource of productivity to the actual author’s imagination or creativity, nor can they propose the unity or the autonomy of the novel’s text so as to ground its unencumbered freedom or originality in articulation. Instead, the critics employ the term, ‘writing’, in their attempts at creating their own, more impersonal, language-oriented theories of Faulkner’s fiction; yet the precariousness of the novel’s state of articulation is kept unresolved even in them. Subsequently, therefore, I shall examine each of the two critics’ theories of Faulkner’s fiction with his use of the term, ‘writing’, and see how it is reflected in his interpretation of Benjy’s silence.

## I

Working with the assumption that the novel is no longer a solid entity

nor a finished product by Faulkner the individualized novelist, but a piece of textuality which is somehow held and structured within a larger weave or movement of signifiers, in Matthews' *The Play* on Bleikasten's *Failure*, each of the critics tries to build his theory on Faulkner's fiction on a difference he establishes within the decentering system of signifiers.

In Bleikasten's *Failure*, the difference is established between the ordinary and the literary uses of language. In this work, Faulkner's 'writing' of *The Sound and the Fury* is described as his initiatory experience in the field of "Literature", which exists as an independent order of discourse equipped with its own autonomous mechanism of text production:

*The Sound and the Fury* marks Faulkner's definitive encounter with Literature, his final entry into what might be called its infinite text, a space in which novels are endlessly born out of novels. With *Sartoris* he had discovered that his experience as a Southerner could be used for literary purposes; with *The Sound and the Fury* he came to realize that, far from being the mere expression or reflections of prior experience, *writing* could be in itself an experience in the fullest sense (Bleikasten, 45: the italic mine).

Such an assertion of the autonomy of the field of literature seems to create an inconsistency in Bleikasten's understanding of Faulkner's fiction, when the critic also claims he would refer back to the novelist's "psycho-biographical" background for a further verification of his reading of the novel (Bleikasten, 53). And yet, the contradiction is necessary for the critic's theory on the novel's articulation, because he must at once set up the order of literary language as a self-sustaining, self-governing system of signifiers, and posit the existence of yet another, separate system in which the novelist's self is constituted, as the former's context and the cause of its suppressed origin of creativity.

In the *Failure*, Bleikasten's most immediate, though scarcely acknowledged frame of reference is Jacques Lacan's theory on a child's acquisition of the power of discourse. In his essays in *Écrits* and in elsewhere, Lacan often alludes to Sigmund Freud's description of his grandson's *fort-da* game, and views it as an exemplary instance of that acquisition:

These are the moments of occultation which Freud, in a flash of genius, revealed to us so that we might recognize in them that the moment in which desire becomes human is also that in which the child is born into language.

We can now grasp in this the fact that in this moment the subject is not simply mastering his privation by assuming it, but that here he is raising his desire to a second power. For his action destroys the object that it causes to appear and disappear in the anticipating *provocation* of its absence and its presence. His action thus negatives the field of forces of desire in order to become its own object to itself. And this object, being immediately embodied in the symbolic dyad of two elementary exclamations, announces in the subject the diachronic integration of the dichotomy of the phonemes, whose synchronic structure existing language offers to his assimilation, moreover, the child begins to become engaged in the system of the concrete discourse of the environment, by reproducing more or less approximately in his *Fort!* and in his *Da!* the vocables that he receives from it.<sup>6)</sup>

In Lacan's essays, there is always a distinction between 'language' and 'discourse' — one as a transpersonal, already existent, social order of signifiers, and the other as an individual, personal occasion of utterance by a subject structured by that 'language' —; and here, the child's acquisition of the latter is explicated as a result of the process of his initiation to the former. According to Lacan, the process is preceded by the child's experience of "his privation" — in this case, his original condition of destitution as a human child taken over by the experience of the disappearance or loss of his mother as his primary object of identification —, and motivated by his consequent desire to make up for those destitution and loss, using some substitute symbols representing his mother's absence and presence. The actual process of the initiation occurs as the assimilation of a part of this original desire to 'language', but the resultant acquisition is a kind of loss at the same time, because the process entails the division of the child's self or his primary desire into a part which is well-assimilated to the conscious use of language, and the other, unconscious and unassimilated part that can manifest itself only through the lapses born in an individual 'discourse'.<sup>7)</sup>

Likewise, in Bleikasten's *Failure*, the critic adopts a similar distinction

between 'language' and 'discourse', and treats Faulkner's 'writing' as a kind of 'discourse' generated in the field of literary language. On the occasion of his composition of *The Sound and the Fury*, the novelist's mastery of 'writing' is therefore predicated by his own personal experiences of lack and loss — i.e., "the imaginary *lack*' of his sister and 'an actual *loss*' of his infant daughter (Bleikasten, 52: the italics in the original) —; then, it is in order to make up for those losses the novelist tries to bring to life the image he has seen of "the beautiful and tragic little girl" through his 'writing'.<sup>8</sup>) Only, the desire which originates the novelist's act of 'writing' is considered to be a displaced, fetishistic desire of the novelist, who has already become a constituted subject within the other, primary order of signifiers called 'language'. The assimilation of the novelist's desire is a partial one:

Whether the blame falls on the artist or on his medium, language, everything happens as though the writing process could never be completed, as though it could only be the gauging of a lack. Creation then ceases to be a triumphant gesture of assertion, it resigns itself to be the record of its errors, trials and defeats, the chronicle of its successive miscarriages, the inscription of the very impossibility from which it springs (Bleikasten, 50).

Just as the Lacanian 'discourse' can only partly embody the speaking child's original desire, but defers its completion endlessly and forever, Faulkner's 'writing' fails to match the novelist's 'dream of perfection' (Bleikasten, 50), which is namely the desire to make his 'writing' compensate for his original losses totally.

On the other hand, since the desire which inaugurates Faulkner's act of 'writing' is also a desire for a fetish and "substitute" (Bleikasten, 50), its narcissism turns the novel and its character-narrators into the reflexive mirrors of the original act of 'writing'. Particularly, the figure of Benjy Compson, with his dumbness and open, though silent manifestations of his incestuous desire for his sister, Caddy, is taken to be a representation of both the resource and the failed state of the entire novel's articulation. As Matthews later comes to summarize in *The Play*, in Bleikasten's *Failure*, Benjy's phrase in his discourse, "trying to say" (Faulkner, 64), is identified

as the novel's common motto for all the characters' and their creator's efforts of articulation that are predestined to end in their respective failures (Matthews, 71n; Bleikasten, 83–84); and his difficulty with language is interpreted as repeating the novelist's incapacity to make his 'writing' substitute wholly for his primary losses experienced in the other, primary order of ordinary language. Moreover, when Bleikasten in the *Failure*, depicts Benjamin as the character who is constantly trying "to break through various barriers" in the story, he is treated as a synecdoche of the novel's unconscious desire, which has once been a part of the novelist's creative urge, but is now dully suppressed or manifests its existence only through those characters' or the text's silences created in the novelist's 'writing'.

## II

Although Bleikasten in the *Failure* thus argues that Benjy's silence symbolizes the ultimate inarticulateness of the novel's original desire and the novelist's "failure" (Bleikasten, 48+) of articulation, Matthews in his reading of the novel in *The Play* tries to re-evaluate it as the novelist's strategy to free the movement of the novel's textual productivity. In *The Play*, Matthews' analysis of *The Sound and the Fury* is posited as a deconstructive re-reading of Bleikasten's work, and the critic seeks to dissolve the hierarchical structure Bleikasten has built between the two separate orders of discourse, by making literary texts to contain both the novelist's existence and his unconscious desires within themselves. Nonetheless, like in the case of Bleikasten's *Failure*, Matthews' understanding of *The Sound and the Fury* also relies on a fixed difference he establishes in the decentering system of signifiers, though here the difference is found within the novel's text itself.

The difference is brought forth by the critic's contradictory uses of the term, 'writing'. In *The Play*, unlike in Bleikasten's *Failure*, the term designates a state of textuality governed by the movement of *différance*, and the critic at first seems to assert that the movement governs the novel's text entirely, and contains the novelist's subjectivity as a whole:

*The Sound and the Fury* figures decisively in Faulkner's career for many reasons, one of which is its liberating recognitions of the properties of fictional language .... In their various approaches to language Faulkner's early works explore how the writer embodies himself in his art, how objects of representation acquire presence through the mediation of language, how *writing* implicates the writer in an economy of losses (the loss of the original idea or of completed meaning, for example), and how the truth of a story emerges from the play of its language (Matthews, 18: the italic mine).

And yet, despite the apparent inclusiveness and monolithism of the movement of *différance* as 'writing', Matthews also analyzes that Faulkner's texts are always caught in the states of "tensions" (Matthews, 23) between their own opposing impulses against each other, and his description of the two impulses suggests that the movement of 'writing' exists in those texts only as their specified element of creativity.

Actually, in *The Play*, the term, 'writing', indicates both each of the novels' texts and its element of creativity, since Faulkner's texts in Matthews' reading reflect at once the state of the "fictional language" and that of the mind of the novelist caught within its movement of *différance*, and that the latter of those states is considered to become a divided one between its own awareness of the condition of "the absolute 'difference' of articulation"(Matthews, 103) and necessary, illusory belief in its existence as a conscious and autonomous agent of creation. On describing this divided quality in the text of *The Sound and the Fury*, Matthews borrows the definition of his two impulses from Derrida's distinction between the contrary attitudes toward the event of decentering:

Derrida has noticed that the opposing attitudes toward "the lost or impossible presence of the absent origin" are "the saddened, negative, nostalgic, guilty Rousseauistic side of the thinking of play" and "the Nietzschean affirmation, that is the joyous affirmation of the play of the world and of the innocence of becoming, the affirmation of a world of signs without fault, without truth" (Matthews, 36).<sup>9</sup>

In Matthews' reading, the two impulses manifest themselves in the novel's text as its overt movement of "a nostalgia" (Matthews, 23) found in the characters' desires to retrieve the lost presence of the central

character, Caddy, and its half-concealed movement of 'play' which tries to proceed along with the movement of *différance* inherent in the properties of the fictional language. Though, apparently taking after Derrida's advocacy in "Structure, Sign, and Play", Matthews in his reading insists that the novel's resource of creativity lies in its latter "impulse to play" (Matthews, 24) and identifies it as the novel's specified element of "writing", he describes those impulses in such a way as to indicate they form the novel's two separate strata of movements within itself.

In Matthews' theory of Faulkner's fiction, therefore, the text's element of creativity, 'writing', exists as its Other and unconscious, so the novelist's task lies in recognizing and liberating its movement in his composition. In *The Play*, Matthews likens the novelist's acquisition of this particular manner of articulation to a Lacanian subject's experience of psychoanalysis, out of which the subject emerges with a knowledge of the intrastructurality of his own being, and a capacity to formulate a proper discourse on the state of his unconscious.<sup>10)</sup> Similarly Faulkner's acquisition of his own idiosyncratic manner of articulation takes place as the double processes of the recognition and the mastery, and, as Matthews argues in the previously quoted passage, the first of them begins in his early works before *The Sound and the Fury*; still, it is with Benjy's discourse and through the "rhetoric of silence" (Matthews, 74) in his fourth novel Faulkner truly arrives at the mastery of his manner of articulation.

The novel's "rhetoric of silence" is achieved through the effacement of the narrator's as well as his characters' conscious and willful voices of narration. Comparing the novel's technique of the stream of consciousness to Gerard Genette's *Discours immediate*, Matthews argues that the technique is employed so as to secure the "space of writing" in the text of this novel "outside the boundaries of [the] personal presence or presumed consciousness" (Matthews, 74) of its narrator-author or of one of its characters. Given the critic's assumption that the novel's text is governed by its conscious and unconscious elements of textuality, however, the novel's free and productive movement of *différance* can preserve itself only in so far as there exists another, nostalgic movement toward the lost center or origin of articulation, while at the same time it also fears its own

extinction by this contrary movement of “a nostalgia”. Consequently, in *The Play*, the novel’s text is delineated as veering away from its two kinds of deaths as a piece of ‘writing’ — that is, one in which the novel’s unconscious totally erases its conscious power of vocality, or the other when the conscious narration takes over and suppresses the text’s unconscious movement of productivity.

In *The Play*, those limit and possibility Matthews confers on the novel’s manner of articulation seem to surface themselves in the interpretation of Benjy Compson. Namely, on the one hand, despite the character’s own troubles of existence and articulation in the story, Benjy’s gestures as well as his monologue are viewed as the novel’s most successful instances of ‘writing’; for, deprived of either voice or any normal kind of consciousness, Benjy in his monologue and gestures continuously gropes after the most immediate, substitute objects of desire, and his blind, uncomprehending satisfaction with those substitutes is seen as his identification with the novel’s textual movement of *différance*. On the other hand, such an innocence as Benjy’s, and “the most natural, primitive activity of articulation” (Matthews, 77) or the pure forms of ‘writing’ this character performs with his dumb gestures and monologue in the story, are also the symbols of what the novel’s text is most afraid of realizing — the pure state of silence or unvocality which would be achieved if it even succeeded in its complete dissolution into the unconscious.

So far, I have examined the two critics’ readings of *The Sound and the Fury* as their attempts at formulating a theory of Faulkner’s fiction as a form of articulation within a decentered system of signifiers, and shown how each theory is built on one fixed difference each critic establishes within that system, and how each critic, by so doing, contradicts his own logic and their original premises on Faulkner’s fiction in his theorization. The facts of those contradictions do not exhaust the problems in Matthews’ and Bleikasten’s readings of this novel. Since the critics’ preliminary assumptions on the state of the novel’s text do not allow them to maintain the existence of any hierarchical structure either in the novel’s text or within a larger system of signifiers except for the ones they secretly resort to for their theories on the novel’s textual articulation, they cannot adopt

any referential theory for their actual interpretations of Benjy's figure. So they emphasize the reflexive, narcissistic quality of the novel's text and interpret the character as the symbol of the novel's manner of articulation.

Contrary to the two critics' assertion that the novel's text holds a narcissistic, self-reflectional relationship to this character, the novel's use of the mirror motif invites the reader to imagine as yet another relationship between Faulkner's writing and Benjy's narcissism. Benjy is a man who has failed to grown out of 'the mirror phase' of his childhood, and who is unable to comprehend the difference between his Imaginary identity he has acquired in his childhood and his actual, growing and aging self which is caught in its peculiarly sexual, adult-like desire for his sister. In the Benjy section of this novel, his narcissistic confusion becomes manifest as his apparent incapacity to differentiate an object from its reflection in a mirror, and the novel describes him sitting in his favorite place in the library, between the burning fireplace and the door-size mirror, where he can safely delude himself into believing there is no practical difference between the reflection of the fire in front of him and its actual warmth coming from behind (Faulkner, 74). And yet, Benjy's narcissism shall not be taken as the novel's own. In *The Sound and the Fury*, the novelist's dexterity with language forever separates the novel's text from this aphasic character, and, as the story makes him burn his hand with the ember he fearlessly touches in his incomprehension (Faulkner 72), the Benjy section of this novel must be read as a careful study of narcissism rather than a work of narcissism itself.

#### NOTES

- 1) William Faulkner *The Sound and the Fury* (NY: Random House, 1929): Subsequent page references are cited in parentheses in the text.
- 2) André Bleikasten, *The Most Splendid Failure: Faulkner's The Sound and the Fury* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1976); John T. Matthews, *The Play of Faulkner's Language* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1982): For both works, subsequent page references are cited in parentheses in the text.
- 3) Michael Millgate, *The Achievement of William Faulkner* (Lincoln: Nebraska UP, 1978), 91: Of those who discuss about the use of the Christ symbolism,

- see especially, Hyatt H. Waggoner, *William Faulkner: From Jefferson to the World* (Lexington: Kentucky UP, 1959), 44–46, together with his notes, 269–270.
- 4) Jacques Derrida, “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences”, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1978), 280.
  - 5) Both Bleikasten and Matthews claim their readings are influenced by *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1974), while Matthews’ central frame of reference is apparently “Structure, Sign, and Play”.
  - 6) Jacques Lacan, “The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis”, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (NY: Norton, 1977), 103. Freud’s description of the *fort-da* game is from “Beyond the Pleasure Principle”, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. XVIII, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), 14–15: “This good little body, however, had an occasional habit of taking any small objects he could get hold of and throwing them away from him into a corner, under the bed, and so on, so that hunting for his toys and picking them up was often quite a business. As he did this he gave vent to a loud, long-drawn out ‘o-o-o-o’, accompanied by an expression of interest and satisfaction. His mother and the writer of the present account were agreed in thinking that this was not a mere interjection but repressed the German word “fort” [‘gone’] ... What he did was to hold the reel by the string and very skilfully throw it over the edge of his curtained cot, so that it disappeared into it, at the same time uttering his expressive ‘o-o-o-o’. He then pulled the reel out of the cot again by the string and hailed its reappearance with a joyful ‘da’ [‘there’]. This then was the complete game – disappearance and return” (The ellipsis mine).
  - 7) See Lacan, “The Function and Field”, 43; see also, “The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious”, *Écrits*, 299.
  - 8) William Faulkner, “William Faulkner: An Introduction for *The Sound and the Fury*”, ed. James B. Meriwether, *The Southern Review*, 8 (October, 1972). 710: Cited by Bleikasten, 214.
  - 9) Derrida, “Structure, Sign, and Play”, 292.
  - 10) In *Écrits*, Lacan explicates the analysand’s experience in two different manners: first of all, it is a process from *méconnaissance* to *connaissance*, or miscognition to recognition, and secondly, it is the acquisition of a ‘full speech’ as an adequate account of one’s own once-repressed personal history: See “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience”, 6–7, or “The Function and the Field”, 46–47+.