

## **The Sound of a Lot of Furious Crying: Moving Past the Present in *The Sound and the Fury* and Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49***

It is fitting to discuss the recollection of the past in an age advancing to an unknown futurity and whose memories are increasingly banished to the realm of the nostalgic or, even worse, obsolete. Thomas Pynchon and William Faulkner, in wildly contrasting ways, explore the means by which we, as individuals and communities, remember, recycle, and renovate the past. Retrospection is an inevitability in their works, for the past is inescapable and defines, if not dominates, the present.

Pynchon maintains an optimistic, Ovidian view of the past - we recycle our cultural memories into another, perhaps better, form. The resulting disordered array of culture, one as much filled in by the glut of contemporary television channels as by 17th-century revenge dramas, is organized by some supervisory principle. Much as the postal system orders geography into specific postal codes and zones, Maxwell's Demon in *The Crying of Lot 49* "connects the world of thermodynamics to the world of information flow" (106); it applies a controlled, scientific objective to the sprawling, aesthetic subjective.

But Pynchon's culture is not one haunted by the ghosts, except for the ghosts in *Hamlet* and *Scooby-Doo*. Faulkner's landscape is tortured by the tragedy of the South. In his view, the land is cursed because of two of the white man's presumptions: that he could own other men, and that he could own the land. Focusing on the microcosm of the fallen Compson family, Faulkner details the extent to which various family members are saddled by past loss and how they confront their searing memories. In what has canonized *The Sound and the Fury*, Faulkner recreates the temporal confusion of the Compsons in the narrative, as well, through a non-sequential chronology and through sentences that combine past, present, and future tenses. Despite the occupational differences between the two authors, they share a surprising wealth of concerns, namely in the ordering of chaos. Pynchon's order, however, remains a fruitful one of universality and coherence, while Faulkner contends that there is no real possible way to order memory, that each event is singular (indeed, he wanted the different times of the novel printed in corresponding colors), and that loss permeates the present despite attempts at reassessment or separation of the past.

The first sentence of *The Crying of Lot 49* introduces "Mrs Oedipa Maas" (9). Her name immediately and forcefully conjures up for the reader all the cultural baggage associated with the name Oedipa. It is, of course, the Latinized feminine of Oedipus, the tragic Greek hero who was fated to murder his father and sleep with his mother. Yet the female version of Oedipus is not Oedipa, but Electra. The obvious Freudian associations dare the reader into a (most likely pointless) psychoanalytic reading. Her name is not so much about psychological complexes as about language, and how language can act for the character. Oedipa also has "pa" within the name, but that is directly followed by the "Ma" in Maas. Furthermore, the initials of "Mrs Oedipa Mass" spell out "MOM." Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, her husband's nickname for her is "Oed," or the abbreviations of the Oxford English Dictionary. This is what Oedipa is, a dictionary of various

etymologies whose roots we uncover. Postmodernism often does away with traditional characterization at the expense of names because of all the name can offer us through its etymological past. There is nothing sinister about this recycling; it is simply a mode of cultural awareness, a way to recycle the chaotic past into some sort of organized present.

Names in Faulkner carry with them the literal and figurative pronunciations of their forebears. Consider the following exchange in Benjy's memory:

Your name is Benjy, Caddy said. Do you hear. Benjy. Benjy.  
Dont tell him that, Mother said. Bring him here.  
Caddy lifted me up under the arms.  
Get up, Mau - I mean Benjy, she said. (39)

Benjy was named Maury, after his uncle but, as Faulkner tells us in the index, "when at last even his mother realised what he was and insisted weeping that his name must be changed, was rechristened Benjamin" (213). Rechristening is a euphemistic term for what many of the Compsons try for in vain, the purging of their dark past in hopes for a second chance at baptism. But he is no longer even Benjamin; that seems too adult a name for his childlike status. This is not the only instance of a disastrous choice of names. Caddy names her daughter after her brother, Quentin. Jason, tormented by both his sister, for her escape and promiscuity, and by his brother, for his escape to Harvard and the ensuing financial detriment to the family (and preventing Jason from attending college), treats the female Caddy as her mother's daughter, with cruelty and barbarity. Making up for the losses extracted from him by her mother and by Quentin, he creates a loss for her by bilking her of the money her mother sends her (a tangible inheritance) and forbidding any contact between the two (a more emotional inheritance). Unlike in Pynchon, the name in Faulkner is burdened, not burnished, by memorial associations.

Nevertheless, these associations are ubiquitous in TCL49, with high and low cultural artifacts meshing together in a grand equation of cultural consciousness. For Pynchon, the collective cultural memory recognizes little difference between a museum of abstract, intellectual art and the stored experience of a concrete, dirty mattress. All gets conflated to one, as with one of the many catalogs of seemingly disparate items in the book:

...clipped coupons promising savings of 5 or 10 cents, trading stamps, pink flyers advertising specials at the markets, butts, tooth-shy combs, help-wanted ads, Yellow Pages torn from the phone book, rags of old underwear or dresses that were period costumes...all the bits and pieces coated uniformly, like a salad of despair, in a gray dressing of ash, condensed exhaust, dust, body wastes... (14)

What a clipped coupon and a deteriorating piece of underwear have in common is that they are both refuse, that they are both "coated uniformly" with the markers of decay, that their shared heritage is one of waste. In fact, the acronym W.A.S.T.E. courses through the novel, and not only for the effect of mystery. The acronym gives new meaning to a word (in this case, it stands for "We Await Silent Tristero's Empire"), infusing its letters with rich language while simultaneously obscuring its past incarnations as a single word. Similar meanings are grafted onto Mucho's radio station, KCUF (a curse reversed), and to

the C.I.A. (not for Central Intelligence Agency, but for *Conjuración de los Insurgents Anarquistas*). Indeed, the term "anarchist miracle" refers to a chaotic dance does not burst into collisions but that "some unthinkable order" pervades "of music, many rhythms, all keys at once, a choreography in which each couple meshed easy, predetermined" (131). Maxwell's Demon assigns order to the seemingly untamable, giving random pieces of information spatial organization, just as the postal system supervises the geographic sprawl of society. This organization, culling from the past to produce a new, ordered present, lends an optimistic air to cultural recycling, as exemplified by the tasty dandelion wine and its graver roots: "...You see, in spring, when the dandelions begin to bloom again, the wine goes through a fermentation. As if they remembered" (98). Oedipa denies this meaning, but Pynchon implies that the world does function in this way, taking the scraps of refuse and reformulating them as something utile, even consumable.

The cultural residue in Faulkner is of a far more pessimistic nature. Taken in conjunction with T.S. Eliot's "The Wasteland," *The Sound and the Fury* critiques the sterility of a non-ritualized modern society. Eliot's poem demonstrates a fear of rain, of a fertile land in which "April is the cruellest month" and "Winter kept us warm." The desiccated landscape provides a retreat for the individual against the march of time (since fertility and seasonal rituals are abolished) and has settled over the South:

The day dawned bleak and chill, a moving wall of gray light out of the northeast which, instead of dissolving into moisture, seemed to disintegrate into minute and venomous particles, like dust that, when Dilsey opened the door of the cabin and emerged, needled laterally into her flesh, precipitating not so much a moisture as a substance partaking of the quality of thin, not quite congealed oil. (165)

Only Dilsey's outsider status (from the Compson family, at least), the quality that will make her and the other blacks "endure," as Faulkner writes in the Appendix, turns the dust of death into a somewhat liquid state. The novel's many losses - of family members, of innocence, of money, of land, of manhood (Benjy's castration) - turn into one overpowering symptom of sterility, of a land stuck in the past and unwilling to engage the future. Even the title comes from a line in "Macbeth," pointing not only to the novel's tragic structure but to its associations with the high culture of the past (ironically, ambition, that most future-oriented of drives, is the major theme of Shakespeare's play).

With this harmful past to work from, it is no wonder that the Compson family has such trouble mining any good from its memory banks. Each of the three brothers' narratives negotiates in a different, and equally destructive, manner with the past. Benjy's narrative blends all times together in a disordered, fragmented style. Unable to distinguish between times, Benjy is reduced to, as much as his retarded development limits him to, a child-like state of perception. What is the cause and what is the effect is negligible - seeing the world in a temporal blur is akin to seeing it as an infant. Quentin, on the other hand, more logically perceives the past - but to an extreme. He is mired in the past, consumed with Caddy's loss of virginity, with the pasture that was sold to send him to Harvard, with his uncaring father, and with the minute clicking away of his watch's hands. This Hamlet-like absorption in the past sends him to his suicide, through which he continually steps in his

own deathly shadow. The losses of the past negate any sort of future for him, and prove as unsuccessful a strategy as Benjy's time warp. Finally, Jason proceeds through life as if the past were nonexistent. However, he, too, cannot escape memory, and must face the legacies of both Quentin and Caddy in the 17-year-old Caddy. That he tries to shackle her promiscuity also suggests his aversion to a fertile future, and squeezes Jason into the condensed middle of the present, an unbearable one which cannot help but notice the fading past and deteriorating future. The Compson family ultimately stands as a microcosm of ante-bellum South, showcasing the various approaches Southerners used for their own tragic, enduring history.

The individual in *TCL49* also sifts through his cultural stock, but for better use. Characters act in way they "doubtless learned from watching the TV" (108). Similarly, they react emotionally to popular culture as they would to other humans:

But Roseman had also spent a sleepless night, brooding over the Perry Mason television program the evening before, which his wife was fond of but toward which Roseman cherished a fierce ambivalence, wanting at once to be a successful trial lawyer like Perry Mason and, since this was impossible, to destroy Perry Mason by undermining him. (18)

As with star-struck fans who confuse actors with their screen personae, Roseman, and the rest of media-saturated America, receives its reality from culture, and not only from the contemporary culture of "Perry Mason," but from the cultural pastiche behind the show: previous lawyer shows, previous legal plays and movies (the "quality of mercy" scene from "Merchant of Venice," for instance, as much as "12 Angry Men") and the legal system itself, from our society to the Greeks. Perry Mason is not simply Perry Mason; he is a mongrel blend of Portia, Henry Fonda, and Hammurabi. The individual is swallowed up in the whole, as with the group therapy sessions to which Oedipa travels in a car pool. Encountering collective pain in a collective transport, the element becomes the whole, just as Benjy, Quentin, and Jason become the Compson family, which, in turn, becomes the South.

The structure of each book mirrors its approach to the past. A typical Faulknerian word is "undishonored," used in the phrase "as yet undishonored." He also writes sentences such as "She did not yet know she was a woman." In both cases, there is negation ("undis"/"did not...know") that precludes knowledge in the present and only allows it in future retrospection. It is the same principle behind having Benjy sparsely relate in the opening scene "They were hitting," having the word "caddie" spiral him off into thoughts of Caddy, and then understanding later in the book that the company was playing golf. In the same way that the hectic present can only be understood through the steadier lens of the future, the scattered past can only be understood through the (somewhat) more stable perception of the present. *The Sound and the Fury* must be read several times until the disorder of narrative coheres as an intelligible story. *TCL49*, too, is a mystery whose willful obfuscation and numerous red herrings add up only after a few readings, and whose "solution" never really appears, except for the mystery of the title in the final sentence. Some critics read the title of Faulkner's novel as a challenge to the reader, in that, as "a tale told by an idiot, signifying nothing," the book defies traditional literary

understanding. Faulkner ends the novel with Benjy howling, fulfilling the line from "Macbeth," but after that has an image of order. The form of narrative, and not the content of life, is the only chance for order in the world. A new framing device of literary technique replaces the conventional teleological frame. The novel moves from Good Friday to Easter, from the innocence of Benjy's opening section to the omniscience of Faulkner's (or Dilsey's) concluding section. While Perry Mason and Benjy's howl seemingly signify nothing, the precision of authorial control reveals the deep material of the past in each novel from which we can attribute meaning.