

ART AND OMNIPOTENCE:
GENRE MANIPULATION IN *REQUIEM FOR A NUN*

Requiem for a Nun is usually classified as a novel. Yet it remains an irritating example of the genre, since it appears to defy even the loosest definition of a novel. Published in 1953, it consists of the three acts of a play called *Requiem for a Nun*, each of which is preceded by a long introduction seemingly unrelated to the action, if not the setting, of the play. Together, the introductions are about two-thirds as long as the play. If we consider that the text of a play, since it is not printed in continuous paragraphs, tends to take up more pages than narrative prose, we might actually end up with two Faulknerian texts of about equal length. Although *Requiem for a Nun* has been produced as a play (most notably in 1956 at the Théâtre des Mathurins under the direction of Albert Camus, who had also translated the text) the play cannot be truly understood if seen out of the context of the introductions. The story is a sequel to the events related in *Sanctuary*, published twenty years earlier in 1931, so that ideally even the play *Requiem for a Nun* requires a knowledge of the rest of the Faulkner canon. Yet Temple Stevens, née Drake, of *Requiem for a Nun* is no longer the Temple Drake of *Sanctuary*, nor is the Negress Nancy Mannigoe the Nancy of "That Evening Sun" (also published in 1931). Faulkner, although interested in the development of his characters, severs the ties between their

earlier and later versions because by the Fifties he had secretly become more interested in his own role as author. As we will see, the manipulation of genre in *Requiem for a Nun* can be read as a manner of establishing the primacy of his own authorial self over that of his characters.

The three introductions to the play's three acts concentrate on the story's setting and relate it to that of most Faulkner novels, the city of Jefferson. They are entitled "The Courthouse (A Name for the City)", "The Golden Dome (Beginning Was the Word)", and "The Jail (Not Even Yet Quite Relinquish)". Together they endeavor to create a general frame for the play, enlarging its stage and making it universal in the Shakespearian sense of "All the world's a stage". Through the introductions, the action of the play is related, first, to the history of that fictive place, Jefferson in Yoknapatawpha County, and, second, to the development of mankind in a universe which is both real and fictive, real space related to fictive time. The introductions can, therefore, not be said to explain the action of the play; instead, they establish an individual yet universal history of the author's voice, whose narrative omnipotence, challenged by the non-narrative genre, is thus reaffirmed. Faulkner's manipulation of genre expectations in *Requiem for a Nun* seems to invite us to explore the following: confronting two genres with each other and creating friction between them gave Faulkner the opportunity to insert his own voice into the interstice, since the reader is on the lookout for a unifying principle, someone to tell him how to homogenize the text.

Since the rediscovery of Mikhail Bakhtin's literary discourses, the notion of voice has haunted literary criticism: the voice of the author conversing with the reader; or, more precisely, the voice of the author-in-the-text who takes account of the reader's expected response, thus creating the opportunity for a dialogue which defines the semantic structure of the text; or,

finally, the voice of the author's alter ego in the text, who may in fact be the author as well as the reader. But it is not my aim to render yet another Bakhtinian reading of yet another Faulkner novel¹. Instead my thesis is that certain literary theories can be made to enter into a *dialogue* with certain, but not all, literary texts. In that case the literary text does not merely serve as an example for the literary theory; instead, the literary theory, if, for instance, concerned with the notion of voice, can be seen as a response to an author's voice reaching beyond the limits of the text. That is, Bakhtin's literary theory could serve as a kind of substitute for giving back the author's voice to his alter ego in the text once the author is no longer there to revive it himself yet another time by writing yet another novel. In the case of *Requiem for a Nun*, Faulkner's genre manipulation points to his desire for a space, not infinite—unlike the space he allots to man's puny voice at the end of "The Golden Dome"—but defined, in order to enable him to enter into a dialogue between himself and his alter ego, Gavin Stevens. Since Faulkner's genre manipulation opens up the text, Gavin Stevens' voice must serve as a clear indication of the presence of the implied author in the text; while the "real" author creates the opportunity for an abstract notion of authorial voice to enter into the text at the same time. This abstract notion of authorial voice is included in Bakhtin's theory of genre, which I shall therefore define as a tentative partner for Faulkner's *Requiem for a Nun*.

Mikhail Bakhtin ultimately directs his concept of the dialogically intentional word towards the novel. His basic idea depends on the assumption that the procedure by which signifier and signified are "normally" related in our minds can be inverted.

¹ PATRICK SAMWAY, "Narration and Naming in *The Reivers*" in: LOTHAR HÖNNIGHAUSEN (ed.), *Faulkner's Discourse: An International Symposium* (Niemeyer: Tübingen 1989), pp. 254-62.

We tend to assume that there is a given indefinite number of objects which may become signifieds. The human mind names these objects, typologizes and categorizes them, in order to deal with them more easily. Without—as far as I know—questioning the historical validity of this premise, Bakhtin maintains that semantics, linguistics, and stylistics have neglected the fact that in poetry and prose the word takes precedence over reality. In poetry and prose the word is the vehicle of creative energy. The word, according to Bakhtin, is the expression of an intention, and it is this intention, directed towards an object, that is of primary importance in poetry and prose. However, on its way to that object, the word encounters the resistance of a socio-ideological atmosphere which surrounds the object. The human word is thus kept from reaching its object (the only exception being Adam, who could name objects directly), since it has to enter into a dialogue with the connotative meanings surrounding the object. Only within an extended context of its own can the word overcome these obstacles, either by the speaker's creating his own dialogues, as in poetic language, or by his organizing already existing dialogues so that they comply with his superior will. This second process takes place in the novel. The novel, then, is no longer delimited by a set of rules and laws that define its possibilities. Instead, it consists of a potentially unlimited number of dialogues; it permits the choice and combination of various social and ideological languages. Although the dialogic quality of the word as such can nowhere be denied (it can be found in our everyday utterances as well as in our rhetorical or scholarly efforts), it only becomes art through an intentional, that is, authorial choice, the combination of several intrinsically dialogic discourses².

² Cf. MICHAEL M. BACHTIN, *Untersuchungen zur Poetik und Theorie des Romans*, edd. EDWARD KOWALSKI and MICHAEL WEGNER (Aufbau: Berlin/Weimar, 1986), pp. 95-124.

If we read *Requiem for a Nun* as such a constitution of dialogue, it soon becomes clear that the question is not whether this hybrid novel still fits certain expanded definitions of the genre, but rather how Faulkner's genre manipulation betrays the superior will of the author, who sets two genres against one another as a matter of salvaging his personal voice. Albert Camus called *Requiem for a Nun* "une des rares tragédies modernes"³. But he also called it "un roman dialogué"⁴, evidently referring to the interplay between the introductions and the three acts of the play. We can collapse Camus's two statements so that they point up the reason for Faulkner's genre manipulation: between the authorial voice of the introductions and the voice of Gavin Stevens in the play the concept of tragedy is redefined. Of the three main elements of tragedy, action, reflection, and value, the first two are thematized in the play, the third one in the introductions. (It appears that Camus felt—and if so here I disagree with him—that the play as such contained all the potential needed for modern tragedy).

According to Hegel, the tragic hero is faced with two conflicting sets of values, each of which has a legitimate claim upon him, but has to make a choice and act. Whatever he does, he violates one of those sets of values. Only through the sacrifice of his life can he ultimately reconcile them again, by giving in to a superior will, by bowing in recognition to the inevitability of those values. The tragic hero not only gains insight into the structure of his universe, he once more guarantees its rightfulness. This constitutes his greatness. In the dramatic sequence of changing situations, the phase of action in which the tragic hero decides which of the two irreconcilable values he will honor must be succeeded by a phase of reflection in which he under-

³ ALBERT CAMUS in: William Faulkner/Albert Camus, *Requiem pour une nonne*, *Théâtre* 407 (Gallimard: Paris, 1956), p. 8.

⁴ *Ib.*

stands and accepts the fact that he will have to suffer for the neglect of the other set of values.

The irreversibility of the temporal succession of action and reflection is the source of the problem modern tragedy encounters. Since no set of values which a modern hero might choose is believed to be valid *a priori*, reflection *preceding* action would often resolve the tragic dilemma before it actually acquired its tragic quality. For example: in *Requiem for a Nun* Nancy, the servant in the household of Temple Drake Stevens and Gowan Stevens, kills Temple's second child when she understands that Temple is ready to leave her husband and firstborn son for her lover. Nancy wants to secure a happy childhood for Temple's older son; she believes that Gowan and Temple should stay together. Even at the time when Faulkner wrote *Requiem for a Nun* this plot would have seemed a little shaky. Although it may be convincing enough that both children might have had an unhappy childhood after Temple left with the baby and her lover, this is not sufficient reason for killing the baby. After all, many children survive unhappy childhoods; alleviating or improving their fate by murdering them or their siblings is preposterous. Faulkner's plot is convincing only because Nancy does *not* reflect upon the implications of the given situation. In fact, she is incapable of reflection; she is all emotion and despair. The only one who can be forced to reflect—through the intervention of Gavin Stevens, Gowan's uncle and Nancy's defense attorney—is Temple, the bereaved mother. In the course of the play she comes to an understanding of her own guilt and takes responsibility for what has happened. In the end she consents to stay with her husband, promising that she will give her son the happy childhood Nancy wanted for him. Thus Temple redeems Nancy's action and makes her death sentence meaningful.

The tragic conflict, which usually has to be resolved by the tragic hero himself (in fact, it usually only arises *because* it has

to be resolved by one person), is thus distributed between two characters, Nancy and Temple. Nancy stands for action, Temple for reflection, and the two characters are related through the person of Gavin Stevens, who welds them into one tragic whole. This is a precarious dialogic device on Faulkner's part, since Gavin Stevens thus assumes an almost god-like function, a status of quasi-omnipotence. The device has to be justified, and the three introductions to the three acts of the play are supposed to supply that justification. They establish the larger context in which Gavin Stevens' role as the author's alter ego can be understood. In other words, the three introductions establish the play's socio-ideological context; they create an atmosphere for the reader that surrounds the thus intangible "object" of the play. This intangible object is identical with the absence of values, values that need to be established in the course of the play. Faulkner's *Requiem for a Nun* provides an example for Bakhtin's theory that the word is always intentionally directed towards an object, yet the mediated discourse of the three introductions demonstrates how this object can never be reached directly. As a void demanding fulfillment it creates the tension between play and introductions.

The three introductions are concerned with the role of the representative individual in Southern society. Faulkner achieves this generalization by thematizing the now old-fashioned belief in the American South that male and female individuality can be seen as complementary principles. This becomes apparent especially in the first and the third of the three introductions: "The Courthouse" and "The Jail". In each of these introductions an individual prevails: in "The Courthouse" it is Thomas Jefferson Pettigrew, a seemingly ageless and imperturbable little man who each month traverses the three hundred odd miles between Nashville and the settlement that is to be named Jefferson after him, bringing the mail as well as news about the yet youthful nation called the United States into the wilderness; and in

"The Jail" it is Cecilia Farmer, the daughter of the jailor, who, a frail, blonde, delicate, "workless girl"⁵, attracts a soldier, who in fleeing through Jefferson has happened to exchange one look with her, back after the Civil War to propose to her. In her complete passivity Cecilia Farmer comes to represent woman as such: "Lilith's lost and insatiable face drawing the substance—the will and hope and dream and imagination—of all men"⁶. Both Thomas Jefferson Pettigrew and Cecilia Farmer are individuals, yet they are also representatives of two principles—the active male and the passive female. Both are remembered only by their names. The name denotes individuality, yet can also exist without the individual's actual presence. Since they represent a principle, the names of Thomas Jefferson Pettigrew and Cecilia Farmer gain true significance only after their demise—just as Nancy's deed can only gain significance when Temple in the play *Requiem for a Nun* accepts the burden of Nancy's sacrificial death.

Thomas Jefferson Pettigrew claims a lock that was stolen in the settlement (not as yet named Jefferson) as United States property, since the lock has been used on the mail bag of which he is the carrier. When Pettigrew cites the penalty for "the unauthorised removal or use or wilful or felonious use or misuse or loss of government property" as the value of the article plus five hundred to ten thousand dollars or thirty days to twenty years in a Federal jail or both, the inhabitants of the settlement become deeply disturbed and decide to build a courthouse, found a city and name it Jefferson. They only mean to bride Pettigrew that way; yet unwittingly they have committed themselves to occupying a place in the history of the United States, whose personification Pettigrew has become:

⁵ WILLIAM FAULKNER, *Requiem for a Nun* (Random House: New York, 1951), p. 257.

⁶ *Ib.*, p. 260.

“the little scrawny child-sized man, solitary unarmed impregnable and unalarmed, not even defying them, not even advocate and representative of the United States, but *the* United States”⁷. This scene is a striking thematization of Bakhtin’s thesis that the word in the novel, in being directed towards an object, enters into a dialogue with other socio-ideological discourses that keep it from reaching that intentional object. The name Thomas Jefferson, already directed away from the original Thomas Jefferson towards Pettigrew, because his mother had hoped he would have some of the president’s “luck”⁸, is further redirected towards Jefferson, the city-to-be, center of Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha County and, as Faulkner readers know, center of Gavin Stevens’ world as well as their own as Faulkner *readers*. The name Jefferson thus never reaches its original object at all, but is constantly rebutted by the atmosphere of meanings that surrounds that object. Thomas Jefferson, the president of the United States, has become but a memory within that atmosphere.

The various discourses in *Requiem for a Nun* combine to constitute a new mode of the tragic, a tragic novel where the tragic conflict, the proper “object” of traditional tragedy, has been dialogically dissolved into a tragic atmosphere. If Gavin Stevens connects Nancy and Temple, past action and present reflection, he is in turn connected with the two individuals whose memory projects their tragedy into the future, generalizing and sublimating it into an ideal of Jefferson, Yoknapatawpha County. This ideal can only be realized *as* ideal by being embedded into a set of opposite principles: dynamism (Pettigrew) versus stasis (Cecilia Farmer); male versus female; the happy trading-post beginnings of Jefferson versus its unfortunate situation during the Civil War; a name for the whole city that is constantly being used (“A Name for the City” is the subtitle

⁷ *Ib.*, p. 36.

⁸ *Ib.*, p. 29.

of "The Courthouse") versus an almost illegible signature on a window pane: "her frail and workless name, scratched by a diamond ring in her frail and workless hand, and the date: *Cecilia Farmer April 16th 1861*"⁹. Although the stranger from another time (the reader drawn by that inscription as her lover once had been drawn by her face?) understands the message implied in that name and date, "*Listen, stranger; this was myself: this was I*"¹⁰, he also knows that he will never be able to reach the object of his desire. It has disappeared: "*this was myself: this was I*". Value, it appears, is always attached to memory; cherished by memory it can become an ideal. At the same time, its attachment to memory makes the ideal forever unattainable. Modern tragedy, for Faulkner, can therefore only exist as a hybrid between drama and novel, the respective forms into which past presence, tragedies as they were performed, and present past, the prevailing socio-ideological discourses, are cast.

Gavin Stevens as the author's alter ego can actually stand for Faulkner's concept. The three introductions prove that the reconciliation of action and reflection can be carried beyond the limits of one particular text. While Stevens' action in the play *Requiem for a Nun* mainly consists in reinforcing Temple's reflection, the source for his own reflective stance can only be found in the three authorial introductions, which show how action and reflection can be reconciled only if they are related to memory. From the "present"—dramatized—perspective of Gavin Stevens, Thomas Jefferson Pettigrew and Cecilia Farmer have both become nothing but names—despite their original difference. Together, however, they can point to man's future: Jefferson's—history's—emergence from prehistoric times, as depicted in the central introduction, "The Golden Dome (Beginning

⁹ *Ib.*, p. 229.

¹⁰ *Ib.*, p. 262.

Was the Word)", concentrates in a final celebration of man's immortal voice. In Faulkner's later novel *The Town*, Gavin Stevens can therefore reflect upon Jefferson as the hub, the center of the universe¹¹. If Gavin Stevens is not the *persona* through which these reflections are transmitted directly to the reader in the three introductions, this is because he has to be seen as the author's alter ego, not his spokesman. The later passage in *The Town* proves that Faulkner in the meantime actually engaged in a dialogue with Gavin Stevens, that his character became able to speak up. And this in turn serves to show that for Faulkner value in art is constituted within the atmosphere created by the juxtaposition of text, which—since he has ceased to exist—must be kept alive by juxtaposing Faulkner's texts with other non-Faulknerian texts—in this case Bakhtin's—that can be said to evoke a further dialogue with the author's alter ego in his texts.

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¹¹ Cf. WILLIAM FAULKNER, *The Town* (Random House: New York, 1957), pp. 315-6.