

and looking out (at close objects and at distant ones). Words like “circle,” “descend,” “rises” direct and reinforce the movement. As the reader can confirm by imaginatively tracking the objects in Trakl’s order, the resulting pattern is that of a spiral. Passing through a series of visual foci, that coil repeatedly connects a chill and merciless heaven with a chill and merciless earth. All the while—again in contrast to “Northern Cold”—the objects viewed are never subjected to measurement.

All this can be dramatized by rearranging the lines of “Im Winter” so that “up” lines are sorted out from “down” lines and juxtaposed, with a change also in the “in-out” pattern; lines 1 and 12 keep their positions, and the punctuation is unchanged:

The field glimmers white and cold.
And ravens splash in bloody ditches.
Reeds tremble yellow and tall.
A deer bleeds to death gently on the ridge

And the gray moon rises slowly.
The sky is lonely and monstrous.
A silence dwells in black rooftops.
Jackdaws circle over the weir

Sometimes afar a sleighbell rings
And hunters descend from the wood.
A fire’s gleam slips from the huts;
Frost, smoke, a step in the empty grove.

This piece, both more grim and more optimistic than “Im Winter,” is not Georg Trakl’s poem.

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¹ *The Principles of Psychology* (New York: Holt, 1890), p. 245.

“Voice” in *As I Lay Dying*

To the Editor:

I was so struck by the reasoning that undergirds Stephen M. Ross’s essay “‘Voice’ in Narrative Texts: The Example of *As I Lay Dying*” (*PMLA*, 94 [1979], 300–10) that I feel compelled to comment on it. In confining his exploration of the term “voice” to *As I Lay Dying*, Ross cleverly evades a number of the more problematic uses of this term as a critical tool (i.e., as applied to “impersonal” narratives), and yet the backdrop of his examination would seem to push both author and reader to a consideration of the efficacy of this term even in response to such a text as Faulkner’s, which *on the surface* suggests its applicability.

Ross begins by hinting that the “ordinary” use of “voice” connects it with “vocal sound as the vehicle of human utterance or expression”; he then suggests that there exists a figurative use of “voice” (unspecified, except by reference to a series of critical works that apparently employ it [n. 4, pp. 308–09]) whose origins in critical dialogue are already receding into the darkness of memory, leaving behind a residue of critical “misuse” of this term. While it would seem to be the function of this essay to “pry loose” some of the figurative applications of “voice,” the discussion directs itself toward refuting the use of this word in its more ordinary context, as an extension of human consciousness, using *As I Lay Dying* as a pretext for demolishing what might seem to be an almost perversely literal-minded application of a critical tool.

The approach is clearly structuralist, and therefore the crux lies in language itself: works of fiction are (we now know) nothing more than words, but it has been traditional, unfortunately, to assume that such words issue from a voice that itself “presumably emanates from someone, though the source may be hidden or unnamed” (p. 300). This assumption is provably incorrect (in regard to Faulkner’s text, at least), as Ross demonstrates: “Critics discover discourse they cannot believe: Vardaman, the littlest Bundren, speaks of his brother’s horse as ‘an unrelated scattering of components—snuffings and stampings; smells of cooling flesh and ammoniaic hair’. . . . The objection raised here is very simple. Vardaman *as a person* could not talk this way; therefore he is poorly employed as a narrator” (p. 302).

If the reader is naïve enough to search for an author behind Vardaman, an entity responsible for “raising” the level of this particular discourse beyond the childlike, one discovers another impediment to critical evaluation: “even when no such entity as an author can be discovered, we still try to identify ‘him’ in a speech implying human origin somewhere just over the horizon of the imagined world” (p. 305)—and to no avail, presumably, since “if *As I Lay Dying* does lead the reader to seek an author, it does not do so as a means of anchoring voices in the ‘presence’ of an author; the author, like the narrator, is constituted by mimetic voice, and the paradox of fictional representation remains unsolved” (p. 305).

Another detour one might follow in an effort to discover the human arena for the “voice” we hear leads to an exploration of the consciousness of the characters, specifically that which involves “interior monologue,” expressed in thought rather than in speech. But this too leads to a dead end: “a strict application of the term ‘interior’ presupposes a

metaphysics of consciousness, a metaphysics that the novel challenges" (p. 304). Again, the problem lies in language: since everything in a narrative work is constructed of language, then consciousness itself is nothing more or less than the language in which it is expressed, and even "nonverbal consciousness"—if we concede there is such a thing—must be conveyed from writer to reader *in* language, so that substituting "consciousness" for "voice" in no way assists our understanding of the narrative process—" 'consciousness' cannot serve us as a presence, as a groundwork of the 'real' on which to rest the novel's shifting linguistic patterns, for consciousness itself is constituted by voice rather than revealed by it" (p. 304).

The same circular approach holds for a definition of "textual" voice. One example should suffice: "Faulkner employs italicized print frequently in *As I Lay Dying*, as he does in other novels. . . . For each type change we might devise a rationale appropriate to the context of the particular section in which it occurs. But no pattern emerges. . . . The italics do not *equal* anything. They are arbitrary textual variations that articulate a difference" (p. 308). The italics are "arbitrary," "equaling" nothing (that we can define), and no matter how ingenious our reasoning about the contextual origins of such textual idiosyncrasies, our reasons are dismissed merely as another "fiction"—akin to Faulkner's own. The question remains, The italics "articulate a difference" *in what?*

It seems depressingly obvious that we have gone all around Robin Hood's barn to arrive precisely where we started: if all is "voice" in the novel (and who can argue with fifteen first-person characters who also, sometimes, serve as the novel's narrators?), and all voice is rendered through language, then the sources of the "voices" remain concealed by the very language that produces them. Even when the language is differentiated (by colloquial speech, metaphoric digression, or variations in diction and syntax), even when we can name an individual speaker, even when certain language is emphasized (by italics, for instance), we cannot draw conclusions about the necessity for such occurrences, because such suppositions are both "arbitrary" and "fictitious." And so, Ross sweepingly concludes, "Just as the novel does not allow us to reduce mimetic voice to an imaginary speaker, it continually drives us away from 'represented realities' that might account for, and silence, textual voice" (p. 308).

I wonder whether it might not have occurred to Ross somewhere along his circuitous route that he began at the wrong place, choosing for his discourse an inappropriate term: perhaps "voice" is not a

critical tool that lends itself to a discussion of *As I Lay Dying*, even though this "novel disrupts mimetic voices and thus calls our attention to them as voices" (p. 308). Indeed, at the conclusion of this essay readers are called on to substitute one figural item for another: instead of "hearing" voices they are now to "see" the novel's "perceptual 'surface'" broken into "unexpected discursive planes." This, declares the critic, is not a polyphonic novel at all: instead, it is a cubist painting!

I eagerly await Ross's definition of "discursive planes" in *As I Lay Dying*.

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Mr. Ross replies:

Shari Benstock's quarrel is finally more with structuralism than with my article, and hers is not an atypical reaction to nonrepresentational theories of literary discourse. She is disturbed by the statement that literature is language and that it deserves to be examined as such. She is disturbed, it seems, because to examine language seriously will trap us in circularity and in paradox. Benstock hurls that charge at my head with considerable fervor, as if by rearranging my arguments and labeling them "circular" she had somehow refuted me and the whole structuralist enterprise as well.

Instead she has merely expressed a need for certainty that literature, especially modern literature, refuses to satisfy. Protesting that, after examining voice in *As I Lay Dying*, we end up where we started, Benstock fails to distinguish between circular reasoning and an examination that seeks to elucidate an inherent circularity in fictional discourse. Of course studying voice and voices in the novel will not produce a final "necessity for such occurrences," as she wishes it would. She seems to want voice to do the impossible, to reveal some interpretation Ultimate and True. In just the same way she distorts the final paragraph of my article by reducing the analogy between the way two expressive mediums function to the kind of rigid equation (novel = cubist painting) that a study of voice cautions us against.

Interpretation is invariably "circular," as the famous image of the hermeneutic circle suggests: we can know the whole only by perceiving the parts, we can perceive the parts only in reference to the whole; we know Vardaman by his voice, we assess his voice by what we know of him. And so it goes. Such circularity cannot be chased away by sarcastic restatement. On the contrary, it can be an exciting part of our literary experience. Attention to char-