TIME, MYTH AND CONSCIENCE IN JAMES JOYCE'S AND WILLIAM FAULKNER'S NOVELS

Oana-Raisa STOLERIU
"Al. Ioan Cuza" University of Iaşi

Abstract: James Joyce's and William Faulkner's characters can be divided into two groups when it comes to the construction and the formation of their conscience: there are characters that gravitate around the pattern in which they have been formed, unable to write their own destinies, and there are also characters that try to flee away from this pattern, from the social environment in which they have been raised, in order to shape their own history. This article focuses on the relation between (mythical) time and conscience, and the way conscience can be seen either as a reflection of the outside world, a centripetal force, or as an inside voice, a centrifugal energy.

Keywords: patterns, conscience, the sacred, the profane

Conscience is like an abyss present in every individual, a force around which all our actions gravitate. Its voice guides, pushes or stops our habits and decisions. This world of conscience is the most intimate part of a human being, reflecting at the same time individual personality, the inborn difference among people, and also the environment in which a person has been formed, giving thus information about his or her family, social and educational background.

What is the relation between history and conscience? "*History is the nightmare from which I am trying to escape" (Ulysses,* 42), Stephen Dedalus confesses in one episode, and history can be divided between the cultural one, the one that is written day by day, in which everyone lives, and the story of every person's life, having a personal shape. Is conscience a consequence of these histories, an outer thing that is built in time, or is it an inner part of human beings, with which we are born? Can it be an **escape** or an **obstruction** of other's echoes of conscience? And if we think of these echoes we can discover a collective conscience, the one of a state, or the way of thinking in a certain age, and also an individual one, of the people who influence and draw the sketches of our own inner voices.

Psychology seems to have at least two answers. On the one hand, Freud sees the human being as a split personality among id, ego and superego, among what the others want him to be, what he wants to be and his unconscious, undisclosed wishes. On the other hand, Alfred Adler talks of holism, i.e. of the man seen as a whole, emphasizing at the same time the central role played in every human by his or her childhood. According to his book, *On Human Nature*, every person is constructed around a pattern, in which education, family and society have equal importance.

People unbind themselves with great difficulties from the pattern in which they have been raised in their first living years. Few are the ones who succeed to transgress this, even in adulthood, when their psyche life is unfolding in other life systems.[1]

Furthermore, the morality of an action, according to Adler, is not given by a common voice present in every being, but the morality and the things that a person learn in time are

[1] Alfred Adler, *Cunoaşterea omului*, , editura Iri, 1996, Bucureşti, Partea generala – Introducere, p. 44

BDD-A22257 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 01:19:19 UTC)

also gravitating around this pattern, so that a man is twisting his emotions and memories until they fit his personality.

If this pattern is formed by others conscience, be it the society in which he lives or the people who raised him, personal conscience can be an outer reflection, a mirror of these voices. Let us take for example William Faulkner's characters, who live in the past and any present action is led by past events, where their existence is always turning back. One simple example could be the one from *Absalom, Absalom*, in Quentin's character:

Quentin had grown up with that; the mere names were interchangeable and almost myriad. His childhood was full of them; his very body was an empty hall echoing with sonorous defeated names; he was not a being, an entity, he was a commonwealth. He was a barracks filled with stubborn **back-looking ghosts** still recovering […] (*Absalom, Absalom,* 12)

Even if characters want to escape their "destiny" or let themselves fall in it, their thoughts and actions show the tight bond between them and their past. In *The Sound and The Fury*, Quentin kills himself, Caddy runs or Quentin, pushed more or less by Jason flee away from home; in James Joyce, especially in *Dubliners*, characters don't have the courage to depart from Dublin and to make a change; in *Ulysses*, Leopold Bloom represents the Everyman, his thoughts rambling through past, present and future. If we analyze these voices, we can find strings attached to them, strings in the form of a past memory or of the influence of people.

If Quentin, Jason, and Bloom are reflections of outer conscience, what can we say of the ones who tried to free themselves from the pattern in which they have been raised and educated? How is their voice of conscience different from these characters? For instance, Stephen Dedalus, in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, who is aware of the nets around him, but who wants to fly away from them, differentiating himself by the characters of *Dubliners* or, if we think of Faulkner's novels, by Quentin, in *The Sound and the Fury*, who is driven back into the past, unable to cut the strings of his own memory.

When the soul of a man is born in this country there are nets flung at it to hold it back from flight. You talk to me of nationality, language, religion. I shall try to fly by those nets. (*A Portrait ...*,231)

What is the pattern, what does Thomas Supten respect and take from his childhood in his *design?* Is he obstructed by his early life or is he trying to write his own story, trying to forget from where he had come? Are these two characters drawn by outer calls or by their inner will and voices? Their acts are a result of their inner reflections, a movement from their insight, from their goals and designs to the outside world, governed by a pattern not encouraged or formed by the outside world, but another kind of pattern, according to which they interpret these outside movements.

Conscience is the state of human mind which is formed in **time**, a reflection of the outside world, a **centripetal** force, having a background in other's conscience for characters such as Leopold Bloom, Quentin, Jason and Henry, but it is an inside voice, stronger than any outer form, be it society or family, a **centrifugal** energy, for characters such as Stephen Dedalus and Thomas Sutpen.

Voices of conscience become stronger or weaker in time, but for James Joyce and William Faulkner, time plays a more important role, having not the shape of chronology and clocks, but reflecting the world of conscience, in which clocks do not exist, and a period of a day can hide events from a lifetime. With the help of stream of consciousness, every character has his own voice(s), his own style realizing the differences among characters; in bergsonian time, life is presented at a new dimension, gaining sometimes a mythical perspective.

For neither of these writers does time unfold itself chronologically; in Faulkner, everything happens in the past, the present is not lived, but pushes the characters back into memories; in *Ulysses,* we have the events of a day, but in this day the reader has access to the time of conscience, which rambles into past, present and near future; in an ordinary day, the reader

BDD-A22257 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 01:19:19 UTC)

finds out the concerns and stories of characters with the help of conscience, which goes behind the date of 16 June 1904. Furthermore, if we think of what T.S. Eliot said in his essay, "Tradition and Innovation", *Ulysses* detains an historical sense not only by having history as one of the themes, but also owing to its intertextuality with the *Odyssey* - and not only with it - where this aspect "*involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence*"[2], time for literature being cyclical.

Moreover, its mythical values and the importance of myth are also emphasized by T.S. Eliot, in "Ulysses, Order and Myth":

In using the myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him.[…] It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history. […] It is, I seriously believe, a step toward making the modern world possible for art.[3]

The archaic time for William Faulkner is represented by an archaic mentality, an attempt of return in *illo tempore*, in which gods and human beings made remarkable things. Sorin Alexandrescu distinguishes between the sacred and the profane in Faulkner's novels, seeing that the profane time, and not the sacred one, had been abolished and so Time and History were born[4].

In this History, however, Faulkner's characters remain caught in the past, the reader assisting at a continuous return to archetypal thinking and traditions. In their stream of consciousness, characters seem to move on in their stories, build up new things, try to be part of a society, but never accepting equality with all men, be them black, octoroon or black.

On the one hand, **time as myth** in Faulkner's novels is given first of all by the role played by South's history. As Robert Penn Warren shows it,

South offered an image of *massive immobility* in all ways, an image, if one was romantic, of the unchangeableness of the human condition, beautiful, sad, painful, tragic – sunlight slanting over a mellow autumn field, a field the more precious for the fact that its yield had been meager.[5]

On the other hand, the myth is created by how characters report to History and to *illo tempore*. Both in *The Sound and the Fury*, and *Absalom, Absalom!*, characters try to maintain the old order, to live in a traditional South, where modernity does not have access and where past is an obsession. As Robert Penn Warren says, the only change that takes place for these characters is *"history-as-lived back to history-as-contemplated, from history-as-action to history-as-ritual*"[6]. In James Joyce, history is seen as a nightmare, but if Stephen tries to awake and depart from it, what can we say about other characters? The Irish conscious is sketched in *Dubliners*, and detailed in chapters from *Ulysses*, such as "Oxen of the Sun" or "Aeolus", but it cannot be seen as a ritual or as contemplation for none of them.

However, this archaic time from Faulkner seems to coincide with the pattern used by Joyce in creating his masterpieces. Joyce combines Giambattista Vico's ideas with the bergsonian free-flowing time. According to the former, history is split among the age of God,

---

[2] T.S.Eliot, "Essays"- "Tradition and Individual Talent", apud. *Modernism. An Anthology*, edited by Lawrence Rainey, Blackwell Publishing, USA, 2005, , p. 152

[3] T.S.Eliot, "Essays"- "Ulysses, Order and Myth", pp. 165-167, *Modernism. An Anthology*, edited by Lawrence Rainey, T.S.Eliot, "Essays"- "Ulysses, Order and Myth", pp. 165-167

[4] Cf. Sorin Alexandrescu, *William Faulkner*, Editura pentru Literatură Universală, Bucureşti, 1969, capitolul VI.„Poetul tragic" – "Nivelul arhaic. Sacru şi profan", pp. 291-310

[5] Robert Penn Warren – *Faulkner. A Collection of Critical Essays*, Prentice-Hall, Inc, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1966, Introduction: Faulkner: Past and Future", Robert Penn Warren, pp. 3-4

[6] Ibid. p. 5.

BDD-A22257 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 01:19:19 UTC)

similar to the archaic time of Faulkner, the age of heroes, and the age of men, where every man is equal to the other, an age not accepted by the Southern people.

If the accent moves to traditional southern society, traditional time - organized in present, past and future - does not have the same value as in the Victorian novels. For Faulkner, the present does not play any role, and the future is quite absent. Jean-Paul Sartre, in his essay "On *The Sound and the Fury: Time in the Work of Faulkner"*, accentuates the absence of present – "The present is not; it becomes. Everything was."[7]
'Fui. Non sum'. In this sense, too, Faulkner is able to make man a sum total without a future: 'The sum of his climactic experiences', 'the sum of his misfortunes', 'the sum of what have you'. At every moment, one draws a line, since the present is nothing but a chaotic din, a future that is past. Faulkner's vision of the world can be compared to that of a man sitting in an open car and looking backward. At every moment, formless shadows, flickering, faint trembling and patches of light rise up on either side of him, and only afterward, when he has a little perspective, do they become trees and men and cars.[8]

If for James Joyce the "central role of literature is affirmation of life"[9], for William Faulkner the only thing which is real is **past**, the past being a "motionless image of eternity"[10].
Faulkner's people are real only in their pasts. They do not rethink their pasts, they simply live them, because if the past is to be rethought, as by Proust, it has to be distinct from a perfectly real present.[11]

What is the role between past and conscience? Can we say that the world of conscience is a world of memories? If so, memories are part of past events and this can be one of the reasons of past's importance. Stephen Dedalus, for instance, in *Ulysses* is caught into his past by his mother's death and his returning in Dublin, Bloom thinks all day at his dead son and at the end Molly remembers her meeting with Bloom, but all these characters, at the end of the novel, seem to start moving into the present and not all their actions are centered in the past. The lack of future in Faulkner's novel is seen by Sartre and also by Claude-Edmonde Magny as the existence of an absurd world. How would a world without future be possible? But are Faulkner's novels absurd or their mythical and biblical structure offers them another perspective of time, destiny and tragedy? Thinking of the prose of the absurd, we can discover in literature other patterns related to absurdity and time. In Albert Camus' *The Plague*, where, as in Faulkner's novels, future is an absent word, characters gravitate around past and a present that does not bring anything new for the citizens of Oran, but this future is waited … The lack of future, of change can even be found in one of Sartre's writings, *No Exit*, where for the three characters there is no future and their only memories are the ones from the past, from their living years.

The absence of future, according to Günter Blöcker, is given because Faulkner's characters live in "archaic time', in "mythical space" and that
The mythical claims no grasp of the future because it excludes it, just as it excludes it, just as it excludes the notion of past and present.[12]

---

[7] Robert Penn Warren – *Faulkner. A Collection of Critical Essays*, Prentice-Hall, Inc, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1966, Jean Paul-Sartre, "On *The Sound and the Fury:* Time in the Work of Faulkner", p.89
[8] Ibid, p. 89
[9] James Joyce in *Selected Letters of James Joyce*, edited by Richard Ellmann, Faber and Faber, London, 1992, p. 260
[10]Robert Penn Warren – Faulkner. A Collection of Critical Essays, Prentice-Hall, Inc, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1966, "Faulkner or Theological Inversion", Claude-Edmonde Magny, p. 77
[11] Robert Penn Warren – Faulkner. A Collection of Critical Essays, Prentice-Hall, Inc, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1966, "Time and Destiny in Faulkner", Jean Pouillon P.82

BDD-A22257 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 01:19:19 UTC)

Furthermore,
Everyone participates individually in the fate of all, deep down through the shafts of time. This again is mythical consciousness, living myth, archaic present. Man is made responsible not only for the single deeds he himself commits but for everything omitted since his beginnings. Hence the continual descent into the shadows of the primordial, into the fear which is the beginning of all human recording, and, at the same time, the beginning of every purification.[13]

How do we know? How much do we know? When do we know? In a continuous present of the human mind, or in a continuous past of memories? Time and conscience are interconnected, and in its time and space, conscience reflects the maze of human's mind.

Bibliography:

Primary sources:

- Faulkner, William, *Absalom, Absalom,* Vintage Classics, Great Britain, 2005.
- Faulkner, William, *The Sound and the Fury,* Vintage Classics, Great Britain, 2005.
- Joyce, James, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Penguin Books, UK, 1996.
- Joyce, James *Ulysses*, Penguin Classics, England, 2000.

Critical sources:

- Adler, Alfred, *Cunoaşterea omului*, , editura Iri, 1996, Bucureşti, Partea generala – Introducere, pp. 41-51; Capitolul III. ,,Copilul şi societatea", pp. 65-74.
- Alexandrescu, Sorin, *William Faulkner,* Editura pentru Literatură Universală, Bucureşti, 1969
- Attridge, Derek, Editor, "The Cambridge Companion to James Joyce", second edition, Cambridge University Press, UK, 2006, Chapters: **Christopher Butler** – "Joyce the modernist", pp. 67-87, **John Paul Riquelme** – "*Stephen Hero* and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man:* transforming the nightmare of history", pp. 103-122, **Jennifer Levine** – *Ulysses*, pp. 122-149, Jeri Johnson, "Joyce and Feminism", pp. 196-213.
- Balotă, Nicolae, *Euphorion,* Editura pentru Literatură, Bucureşti, 1969, Chapter "Argonauţi ai secolului XX" – "Impasul lui Ulise", pp. 451-464.
- Burlui, Irina – *Lectures in Twentieth Century British Literature,* Faculatea de Filologie, Universitatea"Al. I. Cuza", Iaşi, 1980, Chapters: I."The Modernist Spirit in the First Half of the Twentieth Century", II. "Psychology, Realism and Experiment in Twentieth Century British Fiction – The Experimental Novel: Theory and Representatives; James Joyce's Contribution to the Development of the Experimental Novel", pp. 1-61.
- Ellman Richard, *Selected Letters of James Joyce,* Faber and Faber, London, 1992.
- Grigorescu, Dan, *Realitate, mit, simbol: un portret al lui James Joyce,* Editura Univers, Bucureşti, 1984, Chapter 11, "Ulise".
- Kumar, Shiv K, *Bergson and the Stream of Consciousness Novel,* New York University Press 1963.
- Robert Penn Warren – "Faulkner. A Collection of Critical Essays", Prentice-Hall, Inc, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1966, Chapters: **Robert Penn Warren -** Introduction:

[12] Robert Penn Warren – Faulkner. A Collection of Critical Essays, Prentice-Hall, Inc, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1966, "William Faulkner", Günter Blöcker, p. 125

[13] Ibid, p. 126

BDD-A22257 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 01:19:19 UTC)

Faulkner: Past and Future", pp.1-22; **George Marion O'Donnell**, "Faulkner's Mythology", pp.23-33; **Claude-Edmonde Magny** - Faulkner or Theological Inversion", , pp. 66-78; **Jean Pouillon -** "Time and Destiny in Faulkner", pp. 79-86; **Jean Paul-Sartre**, "On *The Sound and the Fury:* Time in the Work of Faulkner, pp.87-93; Michael Millgate "The Sound and The Fury", pp. 94-108; **Lawrence Thompson** in "Mirror Analogues in *The Sound and the Fury"*109-121; **Cleanth Brooks –** "History and the Sense of Tragic: *Absalom, Absalom!,* **Günter Blöcke -** William Faulkner",122-126.

BDD-A22257 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 01:19:19 UTC)