Figural forms of knowledge: a study of the short prose of Sam Shepard

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Abstract

The paratactical style and the indeterminacies are literary strategies that resist the conventional impulse of totalizing the elements projected by the text, because instead of selecting the aspects of reality and subordinating the images and perceptions into a hierarchy, the use of these techniques favors the juxtaposition of multiple perspectives and the frustration of narrative closure. Thus, the use of parataxis and indeterminacies in the collection of short stories Great Dream of Heaven (2002), by the American author Sam Shepard, tends to challenge the process of meaning production through the progressive erasure of narrative "certainties".

Key words: Postmodern, indeterminacy, parataxis, narrative, Sam Shepard.

Because of its careful strategies of omission and delicate condensation of meaning, the short forms of prose have always challenged authors, readers, and, above all, critics. As the theories designed for longer forms such as the novel do not seem to fit well the short stories, the critics have realized that it was necessary to develop separate theories that could apply to these cultural products. Since then, theorists as diverse as Vladimir Propp, Ian Reid, Leonard Ashley, Julio Cortázar, Nádia Gotlib, among many others have tried to analyze the specific narrative procedures of the short story.

But some of the fiction produced during the last three decades seem to offer interesting challenges to those strategies of interpretation. This may sound somewhat awkward since there are not any absolutely

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new techniques being employed by authors nowadays – the artistic procedures concerning the short fiction discussed in this work are not totally original, though the manner they are employed may be. But the suggestion of challenges in contemporary fiction has to do with the fact that, as Jameson puts it when considering a larger artistic context, many of the previous critical categories are no longer functional given the way the contemporary works of art embody fragments and elements from various cultural products ranging from the high culture and the so-called mass culture (2004, p. 41).

The embodiment of these varied and even conflicting elements tends to distort the logic, evoking different responses in different readers and to expand the margins of possibilities of interpretation of a simple sketch or condensed narrative. The very terse nature of the language employed in these stories can generate, through its attempt to suggest rather than tell, a density of perception carefully compressed within these fragile shells of story (Hallett, 1996).

Thus, if the imaginary world we can visualize in fiction is constructed in terms of language, this construction can vary enormously depending on the author. And when it comes to the contemporary creators of short fiction, the language used by some of them attempt to map the increments of textual contraction introduced in everyday life of society by the technological gadgets such as e-mails, cell phone messages, online instant communication, among other "products of an accelerated culture of distraction" (Birkerts, 2001, p. 68). The texts constructed by such patterns only enable the reader to visualize this imaginary world through a keyhole, to catch just a glimpse of the situation. Therefore, one of the challenges in short fiction today seems to be the interaction of the reader with the fragmentary nature of these stories, which question the privileged position the reader has occupied in conventional narratives. Examples of such a trend can be found in the fiction of writers as diverse as Raymond Carver, Bobbie Ann Mason, and, more recently, the short stories by Sam Shepard.

Acknowledged as one of the major American dramatists of his generation (Siegel, 1982, p. 236; Cohn, 1988, p. 1118-1119; Zellar, 2002, p. 1; James, 2002, p. 30), the author of plays such as *La Turista* (1968), the Pulitzer prize-winning *Buried Child* (1978), *Simpatico* (1994), among many others, has also participated as actor and director in numerous movies such as *The Right Stuff* (1984), not to mention his collaboration with Wim Wenders in films like *Paris, Texas* (1984) and *Don't Come Knocking* (2005), among other activities. The involvement of Shepard with the short story has been relatively recent: he published his first major collection of stories, *Cruising Paradise*, in May, 1996. While the texts by Carver and Mason dealt with the bafflement of working-class people consumed by alcoholism and/or alienation, the short pieces by Shepard, especially those encompassed in his latest volume of stories, *Great Dream of Heaven* (2002), seem to capture "not only the dissonances of familial life, but also the fundamental loneliness of the human condition" (Kakutami, 1996, p. 23) in a world where it is hard to transcend the "ordinary, mundane march of mortality" (Siegel, 1982, p. 235).

This trace can be detected in stories like "Coaling ½ Way", in which a man leaves his wife and son and crosses a barren landscape in order to reach his lover, but he is the one who is eventually going to be left completely lost in a hotel room in Los Angeles (2002, p. 11-18). As the story is very concise, the reader is not provided with a detailed account of the characters' motivation, what could explain their attitudes since who they really are or feel is not something readily graspable. There are many "facts" hidden in the omissions of the story and these ellipses are not illuminated by the surface facts presented in the text. Thus, it seems to be clear that this story, among other texts encompassed in this volume ("Tinnitus", "Betty's Cats", "Blinking Eye", etc, for instance), employ the technique of inconclusiveness and indeterminacy to suggest deeper dimensions of interpretation (Sobreira, 2007, p. 173-185). These evocations of different responses in different readers are

due to the fact that these works are full of indeterminacies, which are, according to the initial definition of Terry Eagleton, "elements which depend for their effect upon the reader's interpretation, and which can be interpreted in a number of different, perhaps mutually conflicting ways" (1996, p. 66). Thus, as Stephen J. Bottoms puts it, "Shepard's work is dominated, and indeed distinguished, by patterns of internal tension and contradiction, by loose ends and uncertainties, which – far from obstructing the […] creation of meaning – operate to generate a plethora of possible readings" (1998, p. ix).

Although ambiguity, indeterminacy, and omission have been employed before and they constitute ageless traces inherent to the art of all time, these techniques aim at different artistic intentions nowadays. Umberto Eco identifies this indeterminate, ambiguous feature of contemporary poetics as an overt objective of these works of art, a value to be achieved to the detriment of others (1969, p. 22-23). Thus, some artistic products in the last few decades can take on several forms ranging from concrete poetry to partial, minimalist forms, which contribute to their indeterminacy or "indetermanence", as defined by Ihab Hassan, to whom this artistic style tends, basically, to promote "a playful plurality of perspectives, and generally shift the grounds of meaning on [the] audiences" (1987, p. 72-74).

On the other hand, some theorists use to regard this contingent (or sometimes called minimalist) kind of short fiction as a superficial, laconic and depressive form of writing (Hallett, 1996, p. 487-488) that does not tell a story in a satisfactory manner because it lacks too much information and, for that reason, it could not be viewed as a piece of art because it is a "storyless" story.

Strategies of omission, subtle suggestion and the use of conflicting images are interesting features of some of the short pieces collected in *Great Dream of Heaven*. Stories like "The Company's Interest", for instance, seem to pose questions to the reader that he or she cannot quite grasp in a totalizing manner because such text resists the

conventional scrutiny of reason by relying on inconclusive situations and indeterminacies.

The story is about an unnamed woman who works the night shift as a cashier at a remote gas station. As she works all by herself, she feels jittery and believes that every vehicle pulling up brings a fare-dodger customer who can murder her at any time. Oppressed by her employer, Noling, who tells her "three drive-offs and you're history" (SHEPARD, 2002, p. 65), she is struck by a feeling of complete powerlessness. When the first customer drives off without paying for the services, she goes berserk and asks "Now, what am I supposed to do? Go running my fat butt out there, screaming and waving my arms around? Take a chance of getting shot at? How am I supposed to stop him? I'm not armed. I'm one lone woman out here" (p. 66). But it is the arrival of two other clients who look like "a horror show" (p. 67) that makes her feel more threatened and fear for her own life. But the reader cannot know whether her fears are justified or not since the story does not provide a "harmonious" resolution to that situation.

"The Company's Interest" is full of epigrammatic sentences which constitute an interesting attempt to fictionalize the typical diction of a working class character. As a matter of fact, "The Company's Interest" deals with the impossibility of getting to know the other and rationalize the reality in a society of ubiquitous simulacra of stereotypical images. This is suggested in the passage in which the narrator watches one of her customers: "I see a car pull up. Four in the morning. Car looks cool to me. Indiana plates. Kinda clean. White guy and his family. Looks like his family anyhow. Woman and two babies. How am I supposed to know? Maybe he's kidnapped the whole bunch" (p. 65).

The passage above shows the character as they are seen by the narrator. Although they look like a perfectly stereotypical, nuclear, white and traditional family to the extent they represent the sexual division of labor – the father controls the productive force (he gases the car up and is also responsible for wiping up the vehicle) while the mother provides

the children with material care and emotional support – these same people are to drive off without paying for the gas. This is very surprising to the narrator, who claims she has "got a clear view from here" (p. 65) and, judging by the looks of the family, she has "no reason to be suspicious" (p. 65) of the white man. But, as her assessment of the facts is based only on the appearance of the character rather than on effective communication and careful reasoning, the narrator's perception of reality proves to be very imperfect.

The use of the paratactical style in the passage above reinforces the inexactitude of her impressions concerning the client: the depthless impressions apprehended in a context of great tension and arranged without links between them only emphasize the superficiality of her judgments. Her jittery eyes do not spend any time analyzing the objects perceived. Instead of that, they capture synecdochic images of the objects around her as if they were flickering images on a television screen.

This television analogy seems to be productive to understand the character's tendency to judge people by the way they look and to rely on stereotypical images. As the text suggests, she comes from a kind of coach-potato tradition. Her mother still cries "big tears over all the bad-luck people" on Oprah's show while eating junk food in front of the TV (p. 69). Thus, as a person who has been raised on television, the narrator conceives reality in terms of TV images: when confronted with two mean-looking clients, she describes them as a "horror show" (p. 67) and, above all, when confronted with her own isolation and despair, she believes that "radio, TV or something" can be a kind of antidote for her solitude because they "break[…] the air up; get[…] the loneliness out" (p. 67). As a result, the television language of fluid images and fragmented relationships with the spectator become the parameters according to which she both understands and conceives reality.

In *Imagologies* (1994), Taylor and Saarinen suggest that in our culture of the simulacrum (or "simcult"), represented by television and all other forms of media communication, "the figural, which has too

long been repressed by the conceptual, returns as the medium for understanding and communication" (1994, p. 13) and, as they also put it, "in the society of spectacle the idea becomes the image and the real is imaginary" (ibidem, p. 23). Therefore, read against the background of such notions, it is possible to conclude that the narrator of "The Company's Interest" obsessively conceives the world in terms of superficial images, naively judging people and facts based on the way they look to her rather than on conceptual forms of knowledge. Such a kind of thoughtless evaluation has to do with the fact that in mass media communication, as Jean Baudrillard puts it, "To know is to see" (1970, p. 107).

By often underestimating the intellectual processes of the spectator in order to place great emphasis on the mechanisms of immediate reaction, Baudrillard suggests, the gadgets associated with the mass media do not see a point in considering the facts carefully (Ibidem, p.107-108). Thus, the narrator's judgments derive more from sudden emotional responses to the visual stimuli than from careful consideration of the aspects of the objects and circumstances surrounding her. Basically, she forms her opinions based on the simplest principles such as binary oppositions between appearance and essence, good and evil, and the stereotypes that these basic oppositions invite. The first customer, for example, is above suspicion just because he *looks* clean, straight and white to her. But then she gets scared and believes she is going to have her "brains blown out" (Shepard, 2002, p. 69) by the next customers depicted in the story, the mean-looking twins, because they have "raggedy beards, hair down to their asses, tattoos" (p. 66) and, for that matter, "suspicion wrote all over'em" (p. 66-67). But, as the story unfolds, her expectations are frustrated since the first customer, the mainstream family man, proves to be a fare-dodger and there is no evidence to assert that the twins do her any harm because the text somehow leaves that question unresolved and is narrated *in medias res*, which confirms that she was not killed by the mean-looking truck drivers.

The predominance of the parataxis in the narrative highlights the focus on the fragmented images. In a study of *Le Chanson de Roland*, Auerbach (2004) had already discussed that the paratactical process, by subdividing the scene into static frames, can focus on the imagery of the gestures and render them with a remarkable energy (2004, p. 83-105). In the passage depicting the white family, the depthless images pop up before the narrator's eyes, but she cannot, impressed and scared as she is, make them coalesce into stable concepts.

Her imagination, formed by a theatrical culture, conceives superficial hypotheses, which lead her to face difficulties to distinguish between fact and illusion. But this difficulty, as Taylor and Saarinen put it, is typical of our society of spectacle for "disillusion is impossible when the real is imaginary. Illusion gives way to illusion to create a hall of mirrors in which there is no exit. To survive in simcult [the culture of simulacrum], one must learn to live the impossibility of dis-illusionment" (1994, p. 44). Thus, her emotional responses to the imagistic stimuli are the very source of her pain since she is more tormented by the imaginary possibilities she conceives than by the events themselves.

The narrative itself evokes the elements of television programs: the lone woman working the night-shift at a filling station in the middle of nowhere, taking a chance of being stabbed to death is the perfect ingredient for either a horror show or, as Jameson puts it when analyzing *Something Wild* (1961) and *Blue Velvet* (1986), the modern gothic (2006, p. 285-301). Her heart-breaking suggestion of a life of loneliness and her heroine's devotion to her mother recall the old cliché of soap operas, full of subliminal advertising: "I start to see [Mama] sitting on the sofa, watching *Oprah;* smoking reds; eating Cheeze Whiz and Ritz crackers" (p. 69). But as the twin truckers who look like "real deep-woods animals" (p. 66) walk right up to the counter where the narrator is, frantically scribbling down their plate number, there is a gradual build-up of suspense during which she describes all the "ugly" elements in the characters believing they are going to "wig out and pull some monster

gun" on her (p. 68), just like in the thrillers. Although the text had suggested a few pages earlier ("the other night for instance") that she survived the tattooed twins, the suspense is kept until the end in the best television style. But, as it follows, there are other situations in the story that undermine narrative closure.

Narrated in first person, the text creates an illusion of proximity between the reader and the situations experienced by the narrator. Although the first-person narration seems to promote a "closer" contact with the narrator, this perception is elusive since, as the story unfolds, the reader is less and less aware of the character and her life. The initial "certainty" that we believe we possess when we read, in the beginning of the text, that the narrator defines herself as "one lone woman out here" (p. 65) is progressively mined by the indeterminacies presented in the text. As Eagleton puts it, "the paradox of this [indeterminacies] is that the more information the work provides, the more indeterminate it becomes" (1996, p. 66). Thus, the stable meaning found in her initial words seem to be destabilized as the narrative unfolds and her self-definition reappears in different contexts.

In *Poetics of Indeterminacy: From Rimbaud to Cage* (1993), Perloff, in her analysis of the artistic techniques of Gertrude Stein, states that "indeterminacy is created by repetition and variation, sameness and difference" (1993, p. 83). A similar procedure is employed by Shepard in "The Company's Interest". After the narrator's initial attempt at defining herself – "I'm one lone woman out here" (p. 65) – there are several repetitions with slight variations in which she emphasizes her solitude. Most of the passages include the words "lone" and "alone", except for the last one:

(1) "I'm one lone woman out here". (p. 65)
(2) "I'm all alone. I'm trying to make my voice sound big". (p. 65)
(3) "I'm not armed. I'm one lone woman out here". (p. 66)
(4) "One lone woman, middle of nowhere, and these two come cruising in?". (p. 67)

(5) “And I’m all alone, understand. Not a soul in the store”. (p. 67)
(6) “I’m sure I’m gonna die. There’s no way out of it. I’m all alone here. What am I supposed to do?”. (p. 69)
(7) “There’s nobody. I’m the only one left. I don’t know how it ever got like this”. (p. 69)

If we read the text for the first time, we tend to interpret the statement (1) as a piece of information about the kind of work the narrator does, that her job as a cashier does not require any further skills and it feels very lonely. But as the story unfolds and the same elements reappear several times in different paratactical contexts, the meaning of her loneliness expands and embodies other meanings such as vulnerability in (2), menace in (3), and powerlessness in (6). In (4), the stable and centered space-reference “here” used in (1) and (3) is replaced by the adverb of place “middle of nowhere” and it suggests her progressive emotional instability through this image of unclear location. The use of imperative in (5) sounds like a cry for help directly addressed to the reader as if the narrator wanted him or her to get involved by the pathos of her dramatic depiction of the incidents, rather than really understanding her situation, as she pleads. Such *understanding*, we would posit, requires further explanation on her part, what she seems to be unable (or unwilling) to do. The text fragments the reader’s perception of the character since it only provides some clues to her imaginary universe.

But it is the passage (7) that strikes the reader’s conscience to the fact that her loneliness transcends the particular situation she experiences at the gas station. The use of “the only one left” instead of “lone” or “alone” evokes some kind of incident that has deprived her of a more consistent net of social bonds. But in contrast to passages (1) through (6), in which the meaning of “lone” and “alone” were somehow determined by the context, in (7) there is no clear reason for her loneliness. And again, the use of short paratactical sentences (“there’s nobody. I’m the only one left”) avoids explanation for it leaves questions

like why there is nobody and what happened to cause her to be the only one left unanswered. In addition to these indeterminacies, the text also does not specify what kind of bonds she refers to. However, what seems to be even more intriguing is the fact that she argues that she does not know how she lost contact with the "others".

The text does not provide the reader with clear evidences neither of what might have happened nor how it might have taken place: the narrator does not seem to be a bad person or someone incapable of getting along with other people. Despite her paranoia about the possibility of being killed, she even suggests that she cares about her mother and that she had a close connection to her father to the extent she learned how to "eyeball weights" from "watchin' Daddy sort feeder calves" (p. 66). Thus, the reason why she has ended up being so alone both at work and, above all, in life cannot be readily graspable in the narrative. As we read the story, we come to know the circumstances less and less rather than more and more, as it would be expected in a conventional narrative like, for example, in Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839), in which the mystery (the emotional vulnerability of Roderick) is progressively revealed by the narrator (Poe, 1993, 111-128). In "The Company's Interest", it works the other way around: the terse prose and the indeterminacies distort our original certainty as the narrative unfolds and as we gradually enter the narrator's tormented existence.

Formas figurais de conhecimento: um estudo da narrativa breve de Sam Shepard

Resumo

O estilo paratático e as indeterminações são estratégias literárias que resistem ao impulso convencional de totalizar os elementos projetados pelo texto, pois, em vez de selecionar os aspectos do real e subordinar as imagens e as percepções a uma hierarquia, o uso dessas técnicas favorece a justaposição de múltiplas perspectivas e a frustração do "fechamento" narrativo. Dessa maneira, o uso da parataxe e das indeterminações na coletânea de contos *Great Dream of Heaven* (2002), do autor americano Sam Shepard, tende a desafiar o processo

de significação por meio de um progressivo apagamento das "certezas" narrativas.

Palavras-chave: Pós-moderno, indeterminação, parataxe, narrativa, Sam Shepard.

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