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The Three S's of Stylistics

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Résumé : Cet article est une réflexion sur la méthodologie stylistique, librement inspirée du travail de G.Leech et M.Short, appliquée à une nouvelle de William Trevor, « Solitude ».

Mots-clés: nouvelles, saillance, ligne serpentine, silence, stylistique, William Trevor.

At summer's end, the three S's that inevitably come to mind are those in Serge Gainsbourg's famous song:

> Sea / see: In some ways, a text can be viewed as a seascape, with changing, shimmering waves of meaning, and stylistics is undoubtedly about sight, vision-point of view. The reader becomes sailor, scrutinizing the text for signs indicating direction[1].

Sex: textual pleasure and the erotics of reading are familiar notions to readers of Roland Barthes's *Le Paisir du texte* (1973)

Sun/son: undoubtedly radiant, stylistics is also about filiation. We are here today, celebrating the 30th birthday of a seminal work and its authors (should I say fathers), and I would like to add here that my interest in stylistics is closely linked to *Style in Fiction*, a book Professor Jean-Pierre Petit made all his Licence students (among whom, myself) read in his short story class, precisely in 1981, which is why I would like to dedicate this paper to him.

Probably the most obvious meaning of the letter S is plurality, diversity; historically Marc Alain Ouaknin in *Les Mystères de l'alphabet* traces its origins

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[1] Michael BURKE speaks of "the dynamic ebb and flow of affective mind processes during engaged acts of literary reading" (2011, 255)

back to ancient Hebrew (where its first meaning was "tooth"), through the Greek letter *Sigma*, used by mathematicians as the sign of sum. Adding up, combining different elements to reach a result is indeed quite representative of the methodology of stylistics, linking analysis and synthesis, objective observation and subjective interpretation. To try and offer some perspectives on what stylistics means to me and the ways it can prove to be an invaluable tool to make sense of texts, I will focus on one of William Trevor's short stories, "Solitude"[2]; not only because its title features an "s" word, but also because short stories lend themselves particularly well to stylistic investigation. Their textual closure often makes it possible to reach convincing, or at least plausible interpretation more easily and stylistic features, because of the concentration of narrative, are often more salient than in novels.

Indeed, the first S in Stylistics, and in some ways, the capital S of stylistics, is SALIENCE. It is one of the three "s-words" focused on by Leech and Short in *Style in Fiction,* along with "sequence" and "segmentation". Like most stylistic notions, it has a very specific and precise meaning, but it can also be taken more broadly; I will take here the word in its lay meaning; the definition to be found in the Oxford English Dictionary spans from heraldry to architecture via medicine; salience first refers to the quality of leaping or springing up[3]. It thus stands out as a dynamic notion. Prominence and high visibility are then emphasized as key features. Most, if not all stylistic notions, can be related to salience: foregrounding, end-focus, thematization, deviation and repetition, sound patterning, cohesion…. The list is long and the crucial issue is discernment. "Literary considerations must therefore guide us in selecting what features to examine" warn Leech and Short (1981, 70).

Salience can be more or less objective, more or less simple to identify[4]: titles – Labov's *abstracts* – are unquestionably salient; they create expectations, give some sense of direction to the following text. "Solitude" for instance strikes an uncertain note, and the double tonality, positive and negative - major and minor - focuses on ambivalence, thereby establishing, at the outset of the text, interpretation and coming to terms with experience as potentially central themes. Salience can sometimes be more difficult to identify, depending on

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2   TREVOR, William, 2005, *A Bit on the Side,* London, Penguin, 100-28. All page numbers refer to this edition.

3   In heraldry it refers to an animal standing on its hind legs as if in the act of leaping ; in old medical use, *punctum saliens* referred to the heart, as it first appears in an embryo, hence the first beginning of life, or motion ; in architecture, it refers to an angle, pointing outward, jutting out, away from the centre of the fortification.

4   It is simply defined in *Key Terms in Stylistics* as "concerning elements which stand out, for instance in the lay-out of the page", (NORGAARD Nina, BUSSE Beatrix, MONTORO Rocio 2010, 32).

one's sensitivity to modulation, difference, prominence and deviance, one's capacity to select and interpret; on what Leech and Short call "stylistic competence", "an ability which, they say, different people possess in different measure" (1981, 49).

"Solitude" opens in the following way:

> I reach the lock by standing on the hall chair. I open the hall door and pull the chair back to the alcove. I comb my hair in the hallstand glass. I am seven years old, waiting for my father to come downstairs. (100)

At first sight, everything seems to be salient in this overture. The rhythm is striking, short sentences, parataxis, many monosyllables, repetition of the first person pronoun four times in three lines, always in the position of subject, sounding a note of control and assurance. The use of the simple present tense is also salient in a fictional context; it is endowed with a strong actualising power that literally causes the scene to appear unmediated before our eyes. Directness and immediacy are dominant features, undoubtedly connected with the choice of perspective, that of a 7 year old child in familiar surroundings (the use of definite articles is a well known tactic).

But since salience is a dynamic phenomenon, power and control that appeared very much in the foreground, once established, tend to recede into the background when our attention is further drawn to the verbs used and the transitivity system[5]. The "I" shifts from the position of "actor" of material processes (I reach, I open, I comb) to that of "behaver/sensor" (I am[…] waiting) while the "actor" changes to "my father" as subject of the material process ("to come"). Spatially speaking, saliency can be seen as inverted; the child steps down from the chair and the father comes from upstairs. What then might potentially be interpreted as salient is the vulnerability of the child, (presumably a little girl, although we are not explicitly told that) deeply longing for her father's return. At the end of the first paragraph, the dialectics of the text are established.

The following paragraph develops the subjectivity of the child's perspective and subtly defines the architecture of relationships inside the family:

> Our house is a narrow house with a blue hall door, in a square, in London. My father has been away and now he is back. *The first morning we'll go to the café.* Ages ago my mother read what he had written for me on the postcard. 'They're called the Pyramids,' she said when I pointed at the picture. And then: 'Not long before he is back.' But it was fifty days. (100)

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5 Material process (actor), mental process (sensor), behavioural process (behaver), process of verbalisation (sayer), relational process (carrier), existential process (there is… existent). See SIMPSON (2004, 23-25) for a complete account of the transitivity system.

The order chosen: the house - the blue hall door - the square – London, departs from the more traditional and neutral zooming in from general to particular, without being strongly deviant. The blue hall door is nevertheless worth noticing as a slightly salient mark of subjectivity since it is difficult to include in a clearly identifiable sequencing. But more striking is the difference in the modes of speech representation chosen; free direct style for the father's words which, though italicised, are thus presented as part and parcel of the child's memory and thoughts; direct style complete with inverted commas and inquit for the mother's words which, by contrast appear as clearly separate from the child's train of thoughts. Proximity versus distance; the opposition is further emphasized by the obvious contrast in the perception of time between mother and daughter. To a little girl "fifty days" is indeed a "long" time, and it seems therefore that the mother has been lying.

Father and child eventually go to the café; the father has coffee and the child "a slice of Russian cake".

> But all the time there is what happened and all the time I know I mustn't say. A child to witness such a thing was best forgotten, Mrs Upsilla said, and Charles nodded his long black head. No blame, Charles said; any child would play her games behind a sofa ; all they'd had to do was look. 'No skin off my nose', Charles said. 'no business of a poor black man's' and not knowing I was still outside the kitchen door, Mrs Upsilla said it made her sick to her bones. Well, it was something, Charles reminded her, that my mother wouldn't take her friend to the bedroom that was my father's too. At least there was the delicacy of that. But Mrs Upsilla said what delicacy, and called my mother's friend a low-down man. (101)

This fifth paragraph opens up a textual abyss. The discovery of the mother's betrayal, highly disturbing for the child, is presented in an equally disturbing way to the reader. Salience here takes the form of obliqueness and ellipsis; the fragments of speech collected and juxtaposed as free indirect speech, possibly free direct speech, or direct speech, in what strongly looks like an impossible attempt at producing a coherent paragraph in indirect speech on the narrator's part appear as mimetic, iconic, of the disruption this traumatic event caused in the child's life. A disruption that culminates in the somewhat enigmatic passage that closes the first part of this four part story, putting an end to the party organized to celebrate the father's return from Egypt:

> My mother's friend looks up from the landing that's two flights down. He waves and I watch him coming up the stairs.[…] and I wonder if my mother's friend is drunk because he takes another cigarette from his packet even though he hasn't lit the first one.
>
> […] When I reach out I can touch him. My fingertips are on the dark cloth of his sleeve and I can feel his arm beneath, and everything is different then.
>
> There is his tumbling down, there is the splintered banister. There is the thud, and then another and another. There is the stillness, and Mrs Upsilla looking up at me. (110)

The stylistic choice of existential processes following an ellipsis here appears as a clear strategy to erase the actor completely, emphasizing powerlessness and shock while undoubtedly appearing as an evaluative strategy; no responsibility can be attached to anyone. The actor's disappearance is all the more salient as this last paragraph rhythmically speaking echoes the opening paragraph in which the seven-year old "I" was so strongly present and proudly in control. Both reader and child are thus sent on an uncertain voyage of interpretation and reconstruction.

Salient elements do not stand alone in works of fiction; connections need to be drawn for interpretation to be reached. But connections are seldom straightforward, which is why the middle S in stylistics may stand for SERPENTINE. The serpentine line takes us back to Hogarth and Eighteenth Century aesthetics. The representation to be found on the cover of *The Analysis of Beauty* (1753) associates the rigor of mathematical construction to the freedom of the curve:
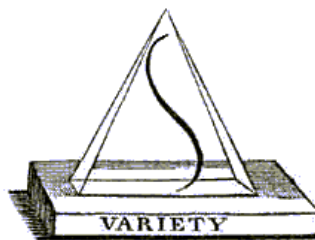
Hogarth explains in chapter VII, "Of Lines": "The serpentine line, by its waving and winding at the same time different ways, leads the eye in a pleasing manner along the continuity of its variety[…] and […] by its twisting so many different ways may be said to enclose (though but a single line) varied contents".

In stylistics, it easily connects with perspective, mind style, or empathy and offers quite an apt representation of reading strategies based on an unfailing trust in Paul Grice's Cooperative Principle (1975). Stylisticians can thus be viewed as following or tracing more or less tortuous lines across texts, similar to Tristram Shandy's famous plot lines, to situate and relate elements in order to make sense, in particular when interpretation is problematic, which is often the case in literary texts. "Solitude" is no exception.

The first line we tend to draw in a text is the story-line; we identify the major world building elements (who, where, when what…) and place them in some sort of dynamics. In "Solitude", we have a time-line which turns out to be

made up of three separate segments with two salient ellipses, 10 years between parts 1 and 2; 36 years between parts 2 and 3.

7 year old – London

// (10years) //

17th birthday France

// (36years) //

53rdyear, Bordighera

The discourse line, which is usually thought of as a more or less continuous line tends to play hide and seek with the reader in this story. The narrator in the first part of the text is difficult to identify; the narrative voice seems to follow the meanders of the 7 year-old reflector's perception and the inflexions of her voice too, giving a striking example of a child's mind style. We have to wait until the second part of the text to find, in a brief aside, the first and only explicit dissociation of the narrative voice from the character's: "I can hear now, thirty-five years later, that man's rippling voice" (111); we know the character is 17; so we add up 17+35=52 and we identify the narrator's age; the retrospective dimension of the narration is fleetingly established together with the polyphonic nature of the first person (as child, as teenager, as adult narrator). In the third and fourth phases of the short story, the character has now moved to Italy and explicitly speaks up in her narrator's voice : "I'm in my fifty-third year now, a woman who has settled down at last in the forgotten Italian seaside resort where they met. In nineteen forty-nine that was, I calculate." (117) We add up: 1949 + 53 equals 2002, a palindrome-number, which is interesting in a story where everything seems to fold back on itself. This approximately corresponds to the time of telling. Character and narrator have caught up with each other. If we take into account the fact that the story was first published in 2002, they have even caught up with the reader!

Child reflector,
Narrative transparency
  Child's voice ?

Adolescent reflector / voice ?
One single (salient)narrative aside
17+35=52

Adult
reflector,

Narrative maturity?

1949+53=2002

We have been trying, more or less successfully, to bridge gaps and include the discontinuity of events at story level into some kind of progression to match our expectations of traditional story telling. Yet, this discontinuity is resistant, and paradoxically appears reinforced by the constant use of the present tense in the narrative, which makes distance impossible. We are inescapably plunged in the obsessive present of the autodiegetic narrator's personal memories and thoughts winding, snakelike, around the double traumatic event of the mother's betrayal and the accident at the party and trying out different viewpoints (her own, her father's as she perceives it, Mr d'Arblay's) so that discourse and story lines combine in the following way:

The narration of those two events is fragmented in a sparse number of paragraphs, scattered over the entire story. And we are soon made aware that in fact, the central issue is not to understand exactly what happened[6]. It has to do with approaching the much more fundamental and difficult task of coming to terms with experience, in this case, telling itself, requiring us to try and trace an ultimate serpentine line with metatextual and intertextual coils.

Acquiring a voice is a complex enterprise; the child cannot speak to her father "all the time I know I mustn't say" (100); the teenager is silent: "that is how we live, our conversations incomplete, or never begun at all" (114); only the adult narrator becomes aware of the importance of relating: "who then, in all the world, would be aware of the story that might be told?" (119); like Coleridge's Ancient Mariner, she desperately starts looking for a listener: "Again and again I searched among strangers for a listener who would afterwards pass on as a wonder the beneficence of those two people "(120). She eventually meets a mysterious Mr d'Arblay on the promenade, at Bordighera, who listening to her, gives sense to her narrative[7] and puts an end to her quest.

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[6] It is not easy to identify the narrative voice or the type of narration, or the perspective chosen. All certainties are denied to the reader.

[7] We are at last given the end of the traumatic scene and a final echo of the accident, though the voice still remains unclear:

  "My mother gathered her dress from the floor, her necklace too, where she had thrown them down[…] And Charles came in then, and knew, and took me out to the square to show me the flowerbeds he'd been tending" […]

  "A child 's slight fingertips on a sleeve, resting there for longer than an instant. So swift her movement then, so slight it might not have occurred at all: that too Mr d'Arblay can imagine and

Their conversation starts as literary small talk, about Ford Maddox Ford's *The Good Soldier,* Somerset Maugham's stories, and the benefits of re-reading "good" novels, opening for the reader the double path of intertextuality and metatextuality.

The hint takes us back to the beginning of the text, the little girl is at the café with her father.

> He spreads out on the table a handkerchief he has bought, all faded colours, so flimsy you can see through it in places. Old, he says, Egyptian silk. There is a pattern and he draws his forefinger through it so that I can see it too. 'For you', he says.' For you'. (102)

Two pages later in the story, we are told the mother is offered a similar handkerchief by her husband :

> He has brought her a handkerchief too, bigger than mine, and already she wears it as a scarf. 'So beautiful you are!' my father says and my mother laughs, a sound that's like the tinkling of a necklace he gave her once. (104)

The handkerchief is associated with the necklace, which is, with the dress, central in the fragmented memories of the betrayal scene.[8] Intra-textually, thus, the motif of the handkerchief implicitly points to the antagonism between mother and daughter (we might hear a vindictive note in "bigger than mine"), a feeling which the father either is not aware of, or chooses to ignore, focusing instead on the idea of interpretation, pointing the obvious intertextual and metatextual reference to Henry James's famous "Figure in the Carpet", thereby back-grounding a more serpentine, more hypothetical and more complex intertext to the scene, Shakespeare's *Othello.* III, 4, 53-65, Othello warns Desdemona:

> that handkerchief
> Did an Egyptian to my mother give,
> She was a charmer, and could almost read
> The thoughts of people; she told her, while she kept it
> 'Twould make her amiable, and subdue my father
> Entirely to her love: but if she lost it,
> Or made a gift of it, my father's eye
> Should hold her loathly, and his spirits should hunt

> he does. The unlit cigarettes are crushed beneath a shoe. There is the crash of noise, the splintered banister. There are the eyes, looking up from far below. There is the rictus grin." (125)

8   "My mother's dress was crumpled on the floor and I could see it when I peeped out, her necklace thrown down too. Afterwards, she said they should have locked the door." (108) followed a few pages later by:

> "My mother gathered her dress from the floor, her necklace too, where she had thrown them down. The drawing room was heavy with her scent and her friend put a record on the gramophone, the voice still sang when they had gone, And Charles came in then, and knew and took me out to the square to show me the flowerbeds he'd been tending."(125)

> After new fancies: she dying, gave it me,
>   And bid me, when my fate would have me wive,
> To give it her;
>   […]
>   'Tis true, there's magic in the web of it.

Calling forth tragedy as intertext casts on the most casual remarks foreboding overtones; thus Mrs Upsilla's warning when tying up the little girl's shoelace before the party that " A nasty accident there could be", or Charles's comment over the number of wine bottles "Enough to get drunk" are made to resonate ominously and trigger off a sense of inevitability. Yet, whereas Othello wrongly suspected his wife of being unfaithful and kept misreading signs, the father in "Solitude", who offers his wife a handkerchief without knowing about her unfaithfulness, apparently reaches acceptance without too much difficulty:

> My father accepts what he has come to know which I believe is everything – of my mother's unfaithfulness. There is no regret on my mother's part that I can tell, nor is there bitterness on his; I never heard a quarrel. (114)

According to the narrator though, only telling can bestow meaning. Shakespeare's tragedy ended on the very similar note of the necessity of telling:

>   I pray you in your letters,
>   When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,
>   Speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate,
>   Nor set down aught in malice; then must you speak
> Of one that lov'd not wisely but too well[…]"(V,2, 341-5)

At the end of "Solitude", Mr d'Arblay is the one to reassert the cathartic, redemptive value of telling:

> 'It is natural too,' Mr d'Arblay replied while we walked, 'to find the truth in the agony of distress. The innocent cannot be evil […]
> 'Theirs was the guilt' […] 'his, that he did not know her well enough, hers that she made the most of his not knowing. Theirs was the shame, yet their spirit is gentle in our conversation: guilt is not always terrible, nor shame unworthy'. (126)

Quite revealingly, his ontological status is never completely clear. His name seems to come straight out of a Jane Austen novel; it turns out to be the name of eighteenth century novelist Frances Burney's husband. Is the character 'real' (like the kind widower, Mr Fairlie[9] in part 1), or is he a figment of the narrator's imagination, (like Abigail and Davie, her two imaginary companions)? There is no answer to that question; the focus is on his role as intermediary, as

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9   But Mr Fairlie is also the name of a character in Wilkie Collins' novel, *The Woman in White* (1859).

revealer. The narrative eventually shifts from first to third person, from self-centeredness to otherness and a displaced perception of the self that can be interpreted, in the coda as a sign of narratorial maturity[10]:

> Petits fours have been brought too, although I never take one from the plate. One night she may, is what they think in the kitchen, and even say to one another that one night, when she sits down at this same table, as old as she will ever become, she will be lonely in her solitude. How can they know that in the dining room where royalty has dined she is not alone among tattered drapes and chandeliers abandoned to their grime? They cannot know, they cannot guess, that in the old hotel, and when she walks by the sea, there is Mr d'Arblay, as in another solitude there were her childhood friends. (127)

Intertextuality and metatextuality can often seem de-lirious (in the etymological sense of the term de-lirare, of swerving from the furrow) in so far as both take us away from straight trajectories; yet, the role of serpentine lines in perspective is to open up onto vanishing points; and it might well be the ultimate role of stylistics to make us sensitive to the sounds of silence to reach deeper understanding.

Offering SILENCE as the third and final S in stylistics may seem slightly perilous and paradoxical. Yet there are stylistic traces of silence in a text. One is ellipsis, and we have seen how salient ellipsis can be; the many things left out in texts create an empty space open to the reader's interpretation and serpentine conjectures; other things, expressed at a slant angle (among which intertextual suggestions), meant rather than said, create a sort of no man's land between discourse universe and text worlds where, in Sylvie Germain's evocative formula, "the echoes of silence" (1996) might be perceived. In many ways, what is explicit in a text only corresponds to the tip of the iceberg; this is particularly familiar in poetry where meaning is often evoked, suggested, transmitted via sounds for instance, but it is equally true of artists such as William Trevor. Before being a writer, Trevor was a carver, carving out, taking away material to create form; he admitted to his writing methods' not being very different from his carving techniques. His use of sounds, assonance, alliteration or rhyme as vectors of sense has always been for him a privileged strategy to mean without being explicit, thus turning writing into an indirect speech act.

For instance, the verb "know" and more precisely its central diphthong is repeatedly used as a leading sound; it combines with "no", "so", "old", "told", "shadow", circulating between the character: "I know I mustn't say" (100), the narrator: "I know that this is not so, yet still it seems to be" (119), Mr d'Arblay, "It is not difficult for him to imagine the house as it was; he does not say so,

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[10] One can note that this short story is part of a volume entitled *A Bit on the Side.*

but I know" (125) and the parents, "This is what, during that sleepless night, they came to know" (126), linking all of them beyond life and death in a final common intuitive understanding which other sound patterns help reinforce:

> It was eno<u>ugh</u>, Mr d'Arblay di<u>ffi</u>dently insisted, that what there is to t<u>ell</u>, in honouring the d<u>ead</u>, has now been t<u>old</u> between two other people, and shall be t<u>old</u> ag<u>ain</u> between them, and each time something g<u>ained</u>. The sel<u>fl</u>ess are undemanding in their gr<u>a</u>ves. (126)

Thus "tell", "dead", "again" are made to echo and connect, just like "gained" and "grave", reasserting continuity and meaning.

In a similar way "lives", "lies", "silence", "time", "night", "child", are connected through sound, creating a tight web of meaning above the fragmentation expressed by words:

> Three <u>lives</u> were changed for ever in that instant. Whatever <u>lies</u> my father told were good enough for people at a party, the s<u>il</u>ence of two servants bought. My mother wept and hid her tears. But some <u>time</u> during that sleepless <u>night</u> was she – my father too – touched by the instinct to abandon the <u>child</u> who had been born to them[11]? (126)

The linking of sound tends to suggest that the answer to that question is no and that the family, in spite of the double drama it underwent cannot be disintegrated.

Echoing words can also be perceived, exploring in a different way the rich fields of cohesion. It is the case here with "blue" which works as a sort of password[12] connecting the past to the present; "the blue hall door"(100) which might now, alas, be "a different colour" (115); the narrator wears blue "because it suits [her] best" (p.117), but also probably to assert that continuity with the past, she notices about Mr d'Arblay "his eyes quite startling blue[…] the blue of his eyes repeated in the tie that's knotted into a blue-striped shirt." (122), and this unmistakably singles him out as privileged interlocutor. This "blue note" is also particularly tuned to a story entitled "Solitude", not to mention Purcell's tonally unstable and complex famous musical piece "O Solitude":

> […] O how agreeable a sight
> These hanging mountains do appear
> Which th'unhappy would invite
> To finish all their sorrows here
> When their hard fate makes them endure
>   Such woes as only death can cure[…]

This conveying of an indirect, at times luminous, at times darker, epiphanic meaning through what could be termed textual whispering seems to

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[11] underlining, mine.

[12] The idea of password comes from Jean Pierre Richard's book *Microlectures* (1979).

be Trevor's SIGNATURE, a sort of genetic print, secret and discreet; it is present in many other stories and obstinately affirms the resiliency of sense, accepting the risk of the reader's overlooking, or over-interpreting signs.

As a last word, I would venture the idea that stylistics, in the unfailing attention to sight, sound and sense it demands, is the SALT of reading (and probably of teaching too) ; over these last 30 years, that salt has never lost its flavour; yet, if too little salt makes the food tasteless, too much salt renders it inedible…

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