

Hurling Yourself against the Beautiful: Faulkner and Creativity

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In *The Sound and the Fury* I had already put perhaps the only thing in literature which would ever move me very much: Caddy climbing the pear tree to look in the window at her grandmother's funeral while Quentin and Jason and Benjy and the negroes looked up at the muddy seat of her drawers.

This is the only one of the seven novels which I wrote without any accompanying feeling of drive or effort, or any following feeling of exhaustion or relief or distaste. When I began it I had no plan at all. I wasn't even writing a book. I was thinking of books, publication, only in the reverse, in saying to myself, I won't have to worry about publishers liking or not liking this at all. . . . One day I seemed to shut a door between me and all publishers' addresses and book lists. I said to myself, Now I can write. Now I can make myself a vase like that which the old Roman kept at his bedside and wore the rim slowly away with kissing it. So I, who had never had a sister and was fated to lose my daughter in infancy, set out to make myself a beautiful and tragic little girl.

—William Faulkner, “An Introduction for *The Sound and the Fury*”

In my senior year of high school, my AP English teacher assigned us *The Sound and the Fury* (1929). Being a classic teacher pleaser and a voracious reader, I dove in. But this was a book like none I had ever seen. I did not understand what was happening, and I did not understand why this William Faulkner did not write the story clearly, in a straight line, like Stephen King. Why did he make us feel so disoriented on purpose, starting with the first paragraph? Why did he tell the story through the voices of three different people before giving us

a fourth story in a completely different voice? And why, in spite of all these questions and irritations, did I still finish the book with haunting pictures, and even smells, lingering in my head: honeysuckle drifting over a porch swing where Caddy sits with her lover, Benjy stumbling over the frozen ruts of barnyard mud, the old buggy swinging around the right of the Confederate monument. Why did I still sense that something important *was* going on in this novel and that it was worth trying to understand? How could it ever be “good” to say something mysteriously, indirectly, and visually rather than just telling someone what you meant? Yet somehow, I knew that it was “good” that Faulkner had written it that way. And I knew it was better than good. It was necessary.

Many years later, after I had gone on to become an English professor, to write novels and essays and stories of my own, and to teach *The Sound and the Fury* to my own students, I realized that my favorite way to approach this novel is a creative-writerly one: I draw on the way all of us—particularly writers—imagine and remember the stories and pictures we carry in our minds and the way we try to render them into words. This approach leads us into the heart of what gives this novel its strange power. If you have ever had an experience or emotion that is linked with a visual picture in your head, and you have struggled to describe it to others, either in writing or in spoken language, you already have a sense of what motivated Faulkner to write this book and of what made him keep trying through the filters of four narrative perspectives.

As a teacher, I can give my students historical contexts, technical narrative terminology (like “stream of consciousness”), and other facts to help them understand *The Sound and the Fury*. But increasingly, that is not enough for me or for them. Terminology does not describe the way this book creates an imaginative world and wraps it completely around us, asking us to pay a new and heightened kind of attention, but rewarding us with an experience of total immersion in other people’s lives. And it does not help us understand why we should read this book or why it is important. This novel has a quality of challenge

and foreignness that rewards us for approaching it on its own terms, letting it call us up out of and beyond ourselves. Any great art stretches the boundaries of our own mental worlds and gives us greater empathy and vision and joy in just this way. And so to understand *The Sound and the Fury*, it is useful to think about making art as Faulkner might have thought about it and as writers still do. As a writer, it is useful to think about how and why you might—as Faulkner did—keep hurling yourself against some beautiful and mysterious thing, trying to get it into words.

At first, you might well wonder why you are being asked to enter into the worlds of the Compson family, which is enmeshed in circumstances different from those most of us know: dysfunctional and embittered lives in the long post-Reconstruction southern twilight that had not really ended even by World War II. Of the four Compson siblings, one is mentally handicapped, in his thirties, and with the mental age of four. Another is intelligent but neurotic and is driven to suicide by his own ideals and his own perceived failure to live up to them. A third is grasping and greedy and is driven by the desire to make a fortune off somebody else while protecting his own interests at all costs. And the fourth—the luminous, loving, openhearted girl around whose memory all three of her brothers revolve—is the absent presence of the novel: the sister whose sensuality becomes both the reason for the family's shame and the type of human connection that none of them can achieve. But if you settle in and read carefully, letting this book wash over you, you will see several important writerly principles at work through these characters, and you can learn things from Faulkner that will help your own writing, both critical and creative.

Faulkner's fellow southern writer Eudora Welty explains in her essay, "Is Phoenix Jackson's Grandson Really Dead?" that the writer should become "at one" with reality as the character understands it. In other words, you have to work from inside the particular quality of your character's lived experience, seeing the world through his or her eyes and, to some degree, setting yourself aside. This requires an act

of imagination that feels positively muscular, like lifting or stretching, because it calls upon your own physical memories and senses too. It takes practice and time, but when you do it, it is unmistakable.

Faulkner does this on every page of the novel and positions the reader deeply inside the skins of Benjy, Quentin, and Jason; he lets the reader walk closely beside Dilsey, and one must adjust the lenses of one's own vision in order to see through theirs. It takes a little while to get in, to shift over to the foreign space of another separate person's mind and heart and body. But once in, we are given the needed clues to keep ourselves there, if we only pay attention. Finishing *The Sound and the Fury* feels like waking from a dream because we have been inside and sharing the writer's dream, called out of the familiar territory of our own minds and preoccupations by his appeal to the senses and emotions we share with him and his characters.

With a closer look at one of the most intense passages in the novel—Quentin's confrontation with Caddy in the branch (in the "June Second, 1910" section), one can see and even feel how this artistic empathy works and is created, word by word, on the page:

then she talked about him clasping her wet knees her face tilted back in the gray light the smell of honeysuckle there was a light in mothers room and in Benjys where T.P. was putting him to bed

do you love him

her hand came out I didnt move it fumbled down my arm and she held my hand flat against her chest her heart thudding

no no

did he make you then he made you do it let him he was stronger than you and he tomorrow Ill kill him I swear I will father neednt know until afterward and then you and I nobody need ever know we can take my

school money we can cancel my matriculation Caddy you hate him dont
you dont you

she held my hand against her chest her heart thudding I turned and caught
her arm

Caddy you hate him dont you

she moved my hand up against her throat her heart was hammering there

poor Quentin (95)

Unbroken for nine pages, this tension has been coiled at the heart of Quentin's section all along, as he and his sister both become aware that his frantic need to "save" her from a soiled sexual reputation misunderstands the nature of sexual, or any, experience—and that this misunderstanding is born of codes of southern genteel masculinity, emotional confusion, and love. We can enter so closely into Quentin's stream of thought because the physical markers of the distance between reader, writer, and writer's imagined world have dropped away: Punctuation, capitalization, paragraph indentations, and even apostrophes are gone in order to shorten the distance between the inside of Quentin's mind and our own as much as words on a page can manage. And these prose markers have been replaced by physical ones—sensations and gestures: She sets his hand on her heart to feel it beat; he holds the point of the knife at her throat; he is dizzied by the smell of honeysuckle. The stream of Quentin's memory—and of the time that keeps running forward, carrying both him and Caddy away from this moment he cannot forget—is embodied by the stream of water in which he and Caddy are immersed. By giving us such a physical mirroring of the invisible, which we can imagine with our own senses if we have ever been immersed in a stream, Faulkner helps us participate in the dissolving of boundaries between two bodies and minds and in the shared history

and mindset of these two siblings. (They share so close a connection that when “her muscles gathered I sat up,” with no separation between the gestures even on the page.) The abstract presence of emotions becomes, then, bodily and real. We even see where he tries to distract himself from the tension of hearing Caddy talk about her lover, Dalton Ames, by looking at the house, because—to his dread and delight—he and Caddy are totally alone. We are inside the ongoing flow of Quentin’s thought as it surrounds and encompasses a memory of almost unbearable intimacy that spills out and engulfs him. We are engulfed. We, too, can barely stand the intimacy and tension, even as we cannot look away. And it all happens because of a string of little black marks on a page. It is a mysterious, and miraculous process.

Here is what I tell my own students when they first encounter *The Sound and the Fury* and are puzzled by what seems, like a wall of strangeness on the page, words that make little or no literal sense: “Through the fence, between the curling flower spaces, I could see them hitting.” What? Where are we? With Benjy’s, and the novel’s, first words, we have been deliberately alienated and deliberately cast adrift into the foreign space of not just another person’s mind, but the mind of a person who processes memory and language in different ways than many of us do. Consider this: Faulkner is trying to render onto the page consciousness itself, the way it feels to be inside a person’s head, where what is happening this instant and what did happen at different times in the past and what we hope will happen are always coexisting, shooting off one another, bouncing forward and backward. If Faulkner had had the Internet, he might have written this novel in a series of hyperlinks where clicking on the words *Caddy’s shoe* might take you back not only to words describing Benjy’s first possession of the shoe but also a picture or video of the shoe itself, thereby taking you through the same routes Benjy’s consciousness travels in reencountering that shoe, which, like the force of Caddy’s loss, is new and sorrowful to him every time.

Benjy does not frame memories as “past” or “present,” “then” or “now.” His interior world—like the artist’s, perhaps—is a series of strong mental images with strong feelings attached to each one, and when one reminds him of another, he slides involuntarily between them. The reader has to rely on external markers of time (Who is the servant attending Benjy? Is Caddy or Miss Quentin in the house?) to place these images in a narrative order that is recognizable, both eliding and emphasizing the differences between the way the reader and Benjy understand reality. But to Benjy, as to our own consciousnesses, all these images are coexisting in the same place, exploding into imaginative life at the same time. In consciousness, everything is all and is always happening at once. Think about the way it feels inside your own head at any given time—present concerns and new ideas colliding and reminding you of past ones, which remind you of ideas from the deeper past, which bring you back to the present almost instantaneously. Yet to render this reality on the page, Faulkner has only language, in which words follow one after another and add up their meanings in a straight line. Therefore, he has set himself a pretty big challenge—to overcome a basic mismatch between his tool, which is language, and the consciousness that he is trying to use that tool to represent. Consciousness does not run in a smooth, straight line. It is more like a mirror ball that is hanging and turning, glittering and throwing out light in all directions at once. But language adds up, word by word.

Yet something about this near-impossible effort seems worth trying to Faulkner because something about this story is irresistible to him to tell. What makes it irresistible is bound up in that first image of the little girl in the tree, quoted at the beginning of this essay. For reasons that perhaps Faulkner himself never fully understood, and quite probably did not want to (writers cannot always fully articulate everything they are doing in their work, and the smart ones let that be a mystery), the mental picture he carried of Caddy climbing the pear tree—the seat of her drawers innocently and heartbreakingly dirty from playing in the same branch where Quentin will later place a knife at her throat—

carried so much poignancy and power to him that it was a picture he could not forget, a story he had to try to tell. “Images hold the meaning of our lives,” the poet and memoirist Nick Flynn has written. “Without images we have no memory; they give the past shape, keep the memory” (15). Think about your own mental gallery of powerful, meaningful images, which may be memories of people or places, pictures from dreams, moments in which someone looked at you or said something you cannot forget. That is the power of the imagined image the little girl has for Faulkner. That is why he keeps trying to nail that emotion to the page, although, as you know if you have ever tried to describe your own precious images to another person, this effort is really hard.

That image has a type of magnetic force connected to your own deep convictions, memories, and longings. For Faulkner, as illustrated in his introduction to *The Sound and the Fury*, that image is the image of a “beautiful, doomed little girl” climbing a pear tree to seek and to know the truth, as her brothers and her friends are afraid to do. She wants to see the forbidden, the scary, the wondrous and the awful for herself. She wants to see her grandmother’s funeral. So she climbs. The less courageous, standing on the ground, can see her creek-muddied underwear, a sight both innocent and, in light of the adult Caddy’s continued sensual seeking, sadly premonitory. Faulkner had already lost a baby daughter of his own. Like many southern men, he grew up with a nearly cultlike fascination and suspicion of womanhood—wondering about the unique ways women see and know, the reasons they should be respected and the reasons, many men thought, they would always be just a little weaker than men—never quite as good—more “sinful” and fallible. The artist in Faulkner was drawn to the truth and not the prejudices in this mix, to the mystery: Women became connected for him with mystery, with loss and death, and with the deeper things you see in life once you have lost someone dear or wanted something terribly. The novelist is always looking for ways to see deeper into that mystery.

This fact leads to a third “lesson” from *The Sound and the Fury*: It is not only normal but necessary to work in the dark as a writer, to be comfortable with mystery and not knowing, to let the story develop like a Polaroid photograph before your eyes. (An excellent book on writing, Anne Lamott’s *Bird by Bird* (2007), develops this “Polaroid” analogy even more helpfully.) It is simply not true that you “have to know where you are going” as a writer in order to write something, no matter what that is. You discover what you have to say by trying to write it. You discover what you really feel in trying to get it down. This comes through practice and the regular work of multiple drafts over time. If you get serious enough about this process, you tend to get impatient with pretty much everything that is not your writing or does not contribute to it. Controversially, if a little sarcastically, invoking his favorite poem, Faulkner described the lengths a writer will go for his work: “If a writer has to rob his mother, he will not hesitate; the ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’ [Keats] is worth any number of old ladies” (qtd. in Blotner 619). Perhaps this is an extreme way to deal with the interruptions of families and their claims on us. But what are the interruptions we are more susceptible to, the latest viral YouTube video, Facebook friends’ status updates? Even writers enjoy distractions such as these, but writers must stay mindful of what they cost. Centering your life on your work and on the experiences that truly feed your writing—physical activity, conversations with friends and family, reading—tend to make you impatient (in a good way) with the trivial stuff and help you to minimize it or even cut it out.

Once you get involved with a significant project—as Faulkner also describes, in “shut[ting] a door between myself and all publishers’ addresses and book lists”—you find that your work needs to proceed with something like self-forgetfulness. Writing with one eye on an audience can be necessary, because every audience shapes what we say and how we say it, but when we are struggling to say something beautiful and true, we cannot afford to keep asking “will a publisher like this? Will my friends and family like this? Will this make me famous?” Letting

yourself be drawn away into dreams of fame dilutes the quiet, patient intensity of the search for the form your material is really trying to take through you. Also, it keeps you worrying about concerns (money, fame, who will your agent be) that in the long term, in the grand scheme of things by which art is measured, really do not matter. Think of any one-hit musical wonder or reality-television star of the last few years. Will we still remember in ten more years who that person is? It is doubtful. (And if you question this, ask people ten or twenty years older than you about their own “one-hit wonders.”) Nonetheless, that person, by the world’s standards, was “successful” and made money and became famous. But what kind of fame did that person achieve? What kind of art and what kind of life was really made?

By contrast, when Faulkner wrote *The Sound and the Fury*, he had already published three novels, the second of which was less successful than the first, and the third of which he was having trouble getting published at all. So he released—in a sense that seems near-spiritual—the idea of success as the literary industry defines it and simply said “now I can write” without worrying about the idea of success. When *The Sound and the Fury* was published, it was not well received either, nor was it recognized by more than a few as the masterpiece it is. Yet look at how it is regarded now.

Like the shift of imaginative gears required to enter into the skin of another person, real or imaginary, adjusting our notions of truth and beauty in art and being in it for the long game can take a bit of effort. But you do not make anything worthwhile without it. Like living a good life in general, making good art involves figuring out your own beliefs, desires, and urges as routes to your own best and most generous self and then acting on them—not in constantly adjusting yourself to what you think “the market” needs or requires and trying to hit a moving target that is not really worth hitting anyway. You have to be willing to be alone with this thing you are trying to make, this thing that you love and that no one else might understand. Be alone with it and be quiet in the manner of someone who is helpless and humble

before something whose beauty and wonder are difficult to describe. The artist needs to have a serious appetite for mystery, for comfort with the unknown.

Perhaps this appetite for mystery is why Faulkner did not give Caddy her own section. Often what we love or long for is wordless and is a sort of luminous presence (or absence) in our minds. We keep returning to it, trying to touch it even as it escapes our grasp. Caddy is this kind of presence in her family's life, and the lack of a section in her voice is Faulkner's way of respecting that. We get to imagine her, to dream of her, and long for her (just as her three brothers do in their own ways) and contemplate how our own family relationships—the ways we mythologize or resent or forgive family members—can either distort or enable the flourishing of our own selves and personalities. In their own ways, none of the brothers can see Caddy as a whole and independent person, separate from the family and from themselves. They try repeatedly to explain themselves to us, revealing in the process only how deeply they have built their self-images upon their own ideals of their sister's, and their family's, purity.

For example, Jason at first seems, despite his unforgettable opening line (“Once a bitch always a bitch, what I say”) the most objective and clear, the easiest to understand, the most uncomplicated, and perhaps the most tempting to sympathize with. But as Jason's section proceeds, Faulkner moves carefully through the layers of his consciousness by showing us his moods and traits: greed and stinginess, casual xenophobia, a hypocrisy that can excuse his keeping a mistress but not his niece's or his sister's sexual activity, a grudging hatred of the family duties he still holds himself to. Faulkner also shows the troubling and highly informative ways that these layers connect to one another. If Quentin was most closely connected to their father and his stories of faded Compson family grandeur, Jason is bound to their mother and to her competing mythologies of how the Bascombs (her own people) are better, how Jason and all of them have been cheated by life, and how she and Jason (but particularly herself) have been owed something

better by the world than what they have been given. He is her captive audience for a symphony of complaints, passive aggression, and neurosis (“codependency,” we might now say) that grow darker until, almost in spite of ourselves, we feel sorry for Jason, even as we might also find ourselves laughing at his over-the-top attempts to control his niece. We see, as he does not, how his warped adult self has grown out of the overlooked small boy with his hands in his pockets and how emotionally stunted and resentful the clash between his perceived duties to the family and to himself have made him.

Caddy is the catalyst for Jason’s most revealing moments and deepest feelings, as she is for all the other brothers. The scene in the “April Sixth, 1928” section in which Jason reencounters her at their father’s funeral long after she has fled the Compson home for good shows us in midparagraph that his memory leaps directly to the funeral at the very word *Father* from the apparently unrelated topic of Caddy’s letters, suggesting that this remains for him a deep and unacknowledged wound:

When they begun to get it filled up toward the top Mother started crying sure enough, so Uncle Maury got in with her and drove off. He says You can come in with somebody: they’ll be glad to give you a lift. I’ll have to take your mother on and I thought about saying, Yes, you ought to brought two bottles instead of just one only I thought about where we were, so I let them go on. Little they cared how wet I got, because then Mother could have a whale of a time being afraid I was taking pneumonia.

Well, I got to thinking about that and watching them throwing dirt into it, slapping it on anyway like they were making mortar or something or building a fence, and I began to feel sort of funny and so I decided to walk around a while. (127)

“Feeling sort of funny” is an understatement of grief, but it is all that Jason, locked inside his own furious reticence, can muster to us or to himself. He is the youngest of four children, feeling that their father always preferred Caddy and Quentin and that Benjy absorbed most

of whatever emotional energy was left. He has been left behind by his own mother and uncle at his father's grave where there is no one else to take him home and where he is forced to watch and listen to earth being "slapped" onto his father's coffin. (He cannot even bring himself to say "coffin" or "grave.") To avoid that sound, he hides under dripping trees until the gravediggers are gone, and when he comes out, there is Caddy, whom he does not even need to name: "I knew who it was right off, before she turned and looked at me and lifted up her veil" (127). Simply and directly, "we shook hands" (127). Just for an instant, reconciliation seems possible. Yet almost in spite of himself, Jason's resentment about the job Caddy's former husband Herbert promised and failed to give him—which he is held against Caddy ever since, perhaps as a convenient label for more complicated feelings—surges forward: "You dont mind anybody. You dont give a dam about anybody" (127). Caddy continues to respond with gentleness—"I'm sorry about that, Jason"—and then comes close to defusing his anger completely with her own vulnerability:

"I dont want anything," she says. She looked at the grave. "Why didn't they let me know?" she says. "I just happened to see it in the paper. On the back page. Just happened to."

I didn't say anything. We stood there, looking at the grave, and then I got to thinking about when we were little and one thing and another and I got to feeling funny again, kind of mad or something, thinking about now we'd have Uncle Maury around the house all the time, running things like the way he left me to come home in the rain by myself. (127)

From word to word, you can see Jason floundering at the quicksand edge of feelings he cannot name, then casting about until he hits a familiar line of grievance (Uncle Maury) and follows it back onto his most familiar emotional ground (anger). Grievances fuel his passage through the world and his dealings with family, and anger is a kind of engine that lifts him up and speeds him over the surfaces of other

psychological waters that are darker, deeper, sadder, and full of the kinds of pain with which he is completely unequipped to deal. How many times have we sought refuge in anger in just this way? And how many times have we realized all over again that the way we recoil from (or reconcile with) our families or loved ones so often mirrors the way we try (or fail) to do these things within ourselves? It is Jason's tragedy that he can never realize or accept this—can never move beyond the self-willed reflex of anger—and so he continues to be an instrument of hurt to everyone he encounters: his sister Caddy, his niece Miss Quentin, the loyal family servant Dilsey, and even his brother Benjy. Nonetheless, if we read his section carefully, we can see, as he cannot, that he is just as deeply marked as any of his siblings by their shared history and memory, even if he refuses to acknowledge it.

The Sound and the Fury is important because, like any great art, it has the potential to make you a better person. Watching Jason skirt the edges of his own pain and take refuge in cruelty; feeling indignant at the way Dilsey is relied upon and misunderstood by the family; sympathizing with Benjy's mute, bewildered longing for the sister he loves—all these things make us better, gentler, and wiser people. That is reason enough to pick up this novel and let it work its mysteries on you.

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