Lawrence Edward Bowling

FAULKNER:

TECHNIQUE OF *The Sound and the Fury*

ALTHOUGH Faulkner's critics are frequently at variance on many issues, they all concur on one point — that his narrative technique is extremely intricate and perplexing. Having agreed upon this, however, they divide into two groups: those who feel that this complexity is justified and those who hold that it is an unnecessary obstacle. Taking the latter point of view, Granville Hicks says, "One can almost imagine Mr. Faulkner inventing his stories in the regular chronological order and then recasting them in some distorted form."[1]

Of all Faulkner's prose writings *The Sound and the Fury* is the most complex; it is also one of his best works. It is not one of his most popular works, for its unusual technique is confusing to most readers and prejudices many of them against the book to the point of laying it aside without a complete and fair hearing. Therefore, if Faulkner is to go on trial for his involved technique, this novel makes an appropriate test case.

There is certainly nothing about the first two pages of this novel to entangle or frighten away the average reader. The most unusual characteristic of the writing is its flat simplicity. It is composed of simple words and much repetition; the basic structural unit is the simple sentence; the question mark and the exclamation point are reduced to the period. The narrator formulates no abstract ideas or explanations but records only what he perceives through the physical senses. All this implies on the part of the narrator an undiscriminating mind — a mind which does

1. "The Past and Future of William Faulkner," in *The Bookman*, September, 1931, p. 22.

not distinguish among a statement of fact, an exclamation, a question and a command, and does not recognize any relation between one external fact and another. As the reader soon discovers, Benjy is an idiot, to whom life is a tale full of sound and fury signifying very little.

On the basis of the author's use of the first person and the past tense, the reader assumes that the story is going to be an ordinary first-person, objective rendering of a past experience, similar in technique to Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*. In the first two pages of the book, there is nothing to contradict and everything to support this assumption, until the reader encounters the italicized paragraphs on page three. This passage introduces the first main hurdle in the book and requires detailed consideration, for without a clear understanding of what is taking place here, the reader can never hope to get even to first base with *The Sound and the Fury*:

> We went along the fence and came to the garden fence, where our shadows were. My shadow was higher than Luster's on the fence. We came to the broken place and went through it.
>
> "Wait a minute." Luster said. "You snagged on that nail again. Cant you never crawl through here without snagging on that nail."
>
> *Caddy uncaught me and we crawled through. Uncle Maury said to not let anybody see us, so we better stoop over, Caddy said. Stoop over, Benjy. Like this, see. We stooped over and crossed the garden, where the flowers rasped and rattled against us. The ground was hard. We climbed the fence where the pigs were grunting and snuffling. I expect they're sorry because one of them got killed today, Caddy said. The ground was hard, churned and knotted.*
>
> *Keep your hands in your pockets, Caddy said. Or they'll get froze. You don't want your hands froze on Christmas, do you.*
>
> "It's too cold out there." Versh said. "You don't want to go out doors."
>
> "What is it now." Mother said.
>
> "He wants to go out doors." Versh said.
>
> "Let him go." Uncle Maury said.

If the reader can grasp the key to this passage, he is well on the way to understanding the technique employed in the first

section of the book. The problem is to discover by what means the story is suddenly shifted from Benjy and Luster on April 7, 1928, to Benjy and Caddy in the Christmas season of some other year, and just as suddenly shifted again to Benjy, Versh, and Mother. In solving this problem, the reader finally realizes that the first two pages of the novel (up to the italicized passage) are not a regular first-person, external rendering of a *past* experience but are, despite the use of the past tense, a stream of consciousness rendering of a *present* action.

In the first paragraph of this passage, the thirty-three-year-old idiot Benjy and his fourteen-year-old colored bodyguard Luster are coming back from the golf course. They arrive at a broken place in the fence and start to crawl through. Benjy snags on a nail. This snagging experience recalls to his mind a similar childhood experience of crawling through a fence with his sister Caddy and snagging on a nail about twenty-five years ago. This association of ideas causes his mind to break off from the present experience and continue in the earlier experience.

However, at the end of the italicized passage Benjy's mind does not return to the present but shifts again (because of certain associations) to another past experience with Mother, Versh, and Uncle Maury. His mind continues in this second past experience until Caddy comes in from school (in the past experience) and takes him out for a walk; while she is talking to him, he begins crying (in the present experience) and this causes Luster to interrupt the recall of the past experience by scolding Benjy.

As is characteristic of Benjy, his backward-looking mind returns to the present only long enough to be reminded of another fragment from his past. In this case, the sight of a carriage becomes a new associative stimulus (as the nail had been before) and causes the needle of Benjy's attention to drop into the recording at the point of his going to the cemetery with his mother ten or twelve years ago. In this manner, Benjy's mind continues throughout the first section of the book, jumping capriciously back

and forth between the present and thirty years of transcribed past experience. What first appeared to be a straightforward, first-person narrative turns out to be a unique stream of consciousness rendering of Benjy's mind during part of one day in this idiot's life.

Although this discovery is a major move in the right direction, there are numerous other problems which arise out of the nature of this narrative method, for the stream of consciousness technique tends to break down three stabilizing elements traditionally considered fundamental in narrative fiction: exposition, plot, and chronological order. The average reader is accustomed to the type of novel which begins with a certain amount of exposition, moves into the main plot, and follows this action in chronological order to the resolution of the conflict. He has become accustomed to reading stories with a beginning, a middle, and an end — for this has been the conventional method of story-telling employed all the way back to the *Iliad* and the Book of Genesis, which begins with "the beginning."

But this is not Faulkner's method in *The Sound and the Fury.* He begins at the end and works backward. The fragments from Benjy's past are presented not in the chronological order in which they occurred but in the order in which chance associations cause him to recall them. The last pages of this section deal with the earliest of Benjy's recalled experiences, his going to bed with his brothers Quentin and Jason and his sister Caddy when he was three years old. Thus, Benjy's section ends on a note thirty years before it began.

Serious violation of chronology is not in itself an insuperable obstacle, provided that the separate units are fairly large and are focused around a central plot, as is the case in Conrad's stories. But in the first section of *The Sound and the Fury* many of the recalled passages are only a few lines in length and appear to have almost no relation to each other or to a central plot. Furthermore, the author offers absolutely no assistance by way of exposition.

The only editorial liberties which he takes with Benjy's mental processes is the use of italics to indicate the point at which his mind shifts from one fragment to another. It is as if the author said: "Here's an idiot; it's you and him for it" — except that Faulkner never goes so far as to say that Benjy is an idiot.

We find ourselves alone with the idiot Benjy, trying to get the necessary information from him. In this we are handicapped on two counts: first, since Benjy is not aware that we are eavesdropping his thoughts, it does not occur to him to explain things for our benefit; second, he could not explain anything if he tried, for he is incapable of the simplest abstraction. His best efforts in this direction are the turning of a few simple direct quotations into indirect quotations. Even this much cerebration seems almost out of character for Benjy. Throughout the whole book, he does not manage to speak one word and gives little indication that he understands human speech, except what he can gather from the tone of the voice. To expect Benjy to explain the phenomena which his mind perceives is like expecting a phonograph to comment upon a recording. All his mind does is reproduce what it takes in through the physical senses. His section of the book is probably the most thorough-going sustained effort in impressionistic writing in all literature. Any passage from his section will illustrate this point, but the best example is the description of his burning his hand:

> I put my hand out to where the fire had been.
>
> "Catch him." Dilsey said. "Catch him back."
>
> My hand jerked back and I put it in my mouth and Dilsey caught me. I could still hear the clock between my voice. Dilsey reached back and hit Luster on the head. My voice was going loud every time.
>
> "Get the soda." Dilsey said. She took my hand out of my mouth. My voice went louder then and my hand tried to go back to my mouth, but Dilsey held it. My voice went loud. She sprinkled soda on my hand.

This report is as objective and impressionistic as if it were rendered

by an observer; it is even more impressionistic than an observer's report would be, for an observer would probably say that Benjy burned his hand. But Benjy does not once use the word *burned.* He tells us only what we would hear and see if we were there. Any conclusion on our part that he burned his hand or that pain resulted would be a pure abstraction and not a sensation perceived by the physical senses — for as Joseph Conrad and Ford Madox Ford were discovering half a century ago, "Life does not narrate but makes impressions on our brains. We in turn, if we wished to produce on you an effect of life, must not narrate but render impressions."[2]

Most of what has been said about the first section of the book will apply also to the second section, "June 2, 1910." This section is rendered exclusively by means of the stream of consciousness technique and from the mind of Benjy's oldest brother, Quentin, during one day at Harvard, where he commits suicide by drowning. Like Benjy's section, Quentin's section may be divided into two parts: that which takes place on June 2, 1910, and that which is recalled from various past experiences. It is further like Benjy's section in that it employs the past tense for present events and at first gives the impression of being a first-person narrative. In the first paragraphs, the sentence structure and the word order are as regular and logical as any first-person narrative is expected to be. A recalled speech by the father is led up to gradually and is exactly the sort of thing which a first-person narrator might put into his story in just this way. It certainly cannot be said of the first two pages that they give the reader the impression of looking directly into Quentin's mind and there observing his most intimate and fragmentary thoughts just as they are born. Rather these pages give the reader the impression that he is hearing or reading a summary narration of past events. This is true of almost all the passages dealing with the

2. Ford: *Joseph Conrad: A Personal Remembrance,* pp. 180ff.

events of June 2, 1910. The writing has the tone of communication rather than the tone of self-expression. It is in the presentation of fragments from the past that this section is most convincing as stream of consciousness writing.

The technique in this section is not quite the same as that employed in the first section. The difference is due to the fact that Quentin's mind is much more complex than Benjy's. Since Benjy is incapable of the simplest abstraction, there is in his section nothing that can truly be called soliloquy. Quentin, however, is capable of thought, and we find throughout his section numerous soliloquies. Since Quentin's intellect is more highly developed than Benjy's, it is more nimble in shifting from one experience or idea to another. Although such capriciousness often makes Quentin's mental processes difficult to follow, this is no mere personal whim on the part of the author to make the section unduly perplexing. Even in the most complex and realistic passages, Faulkner has greatly simplified Quentin's mental processes in order that the reader may be able to understand them. The following representative excerpt will illustrate this point. Quentin is on a street car in Cambridge, but his mind is preoccupied with recalling a drive with his mother, his sister Candace, and her husband Herbert, shortly after their marriage on April 25, 1910. The mother is doing most of the talking:

> Herbert has spoiled us all to death Quentin did I write you that he is going to take Jason into his bank when Jason finishes high school Jason will make a splendid banker he is the only one of my children with any practical sense you can thank me for that he takes after my people the others are all Compson *Jason furnished the flour. They made kites on the back porch and sold them for a nickel a piece, he and the Patterson boy. Jason was treasurer.*
>
> There was no nigger on this street car, and the hats unbleached as yet flowing past under the window. Going to Harvard. We have sold Benjy's *He lay on the ground under the window, bellowing. We have sold Benjy's pasture so that Quentin may go to Harvard* a brother to you. Your little brother.
>
> You should have a car it's done you no end of good dont you

> think so Quentin I call him Quentin at once you see I have heard so much about him from Candace.
>
> Why shouldn't you I want my boys to be more than friends yes Candace and Quentin more than friends *Father I have committed* what a pity you had no brother or sister *No sister no sister had no sister* Dont ask Quentin he and Mr. Compson both feel a little insulted when I am strong enough to come down to the table I am going on nerve now I'll pay for it after it's over and you have taken my little daughter away from me *My little sister had no. If I could say Mother. Mother.*

The mother's mention of Jason's practical sense and his future job in Herbert's bank reminds Quentin of the time that Jason demonstrated his practical wisdom at an early age. As Quentin looks around him in the street car, his mind is temporarily recalled to the present and to the people on the street who are "going to Harvard." This phrase reminds him of a speech (probably by his mother) about his own going to Harvard, but when he gets to Benjy's name in the recalled speech, he is reminded of Benjy's bellowing under the window at Caddy's wedding. In the next paragraph, Herbert is obviously the speaker, and the mother is talking again in the last paragraph. Her phrase "more than friends" recalls to Quentin's mind the conversation in which he tried to convince his father that he and Candace had committed incest. The mother's remark about Herbert's not having a sister is echoed in Quentin's mind with added emphasis until he again begins attending what his mother is saying and follows her to "my little daughter." He snatches up this phrase and fuses it with *had no sister* to form the ambiguous fragment *My little sister had no* — for which there are three possible interpretations, depending upon the omitted object. First, Quentin is thinking that his sister Caddy had no *mother*, for Mrs. Compson, instead of being the mother that she should have been to her children, has always taken refuge in a halo of camphor and self-pity, just as she is now doing throughout this passage; if she had been a real mother, Caddy probably would not have lost her personal honor and her family pride by allowing herself to be seduced and by finally

marrying a northern banker. Second, Quentin is thinking that his little sister had no *sister*, and therefore can never understand what a sister's loss of honor means to a brother. Third, the uncompleted fragment *My little sister had no* suggests The Song of Solomon 8:8-10.[3] What is worrying Quentin is not that his sister had no *breasts* when she was little, but that she proved to be a *door* instead of a *wall* when she grew to maturity. Then was she in his eyes (and later in the eyes of her husband and the rest of her family) as one that found *dis*favor.

Since this short passage contains fragments dealing with six different time-scenes, the reader may conclude that the author has unnecessarily exaggerated the complexity of Quentin's mind. However, if he will try to imagine what a representative excerpt from his own mind would look like if transcribed onto the printed page, the reader will realize that Faulkner has actually simplified Quentin's mental activity in this passage (and throughout his section). He has eliminated all extraneous details which would not contribute to the main theme, and he has presented Quentin's mind as operating much more logically than it would in reality.

In one instance, Faulkner carries this simplification to the extreme of having Quentin's mind continue in chronological order in the same recalled experience for eighteen pages (185-203). He wants to present in an uninterrupted, dramatic unit the central memory which is the basis of Quentin's internal struggle. Since it would be unusual and out of character for Quentin's mind to recall this much of one past experience at one time without interruption, the author makes this particular instance plausible by having the recalled unit pass through Quentin's mind while he is temporarily unconscious. The unit is not difficult to understand, but it does raise certain interesting questions. A short excerpt from near the first of the unit will illustrate the technique. Caddy

3. We have a little sister, and she hath no breasts: what shall we do in the day when she shall be spoken for?
If she be a wall, we will build upon her a palace of silver: and if she be a door, we will inclose her with boards of cedar.
I am a wall, and my breasts like towers: then was I in his eyes as one that found favor.

has just come home after being out with Dalton Ames, and Benjy has sensed her shame and started screaming. She runs out to a nearby stream and plunges in. Quentin follows her:

> the water sucked and gurgled across the sand spit and on in the dark among the willows across the shallow the water rippled like a piece of cloth holding still a little light as water does
>
> he's crossed all the oceans all around the world
>
> then she talked about him clasping her wet knees her face tilted back in the grey 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 be was stronger than you and he tomorrow Ill kill him I swear I will father neednt know until afterward

In this passage and throughout the unit, the author steers a middle course between making the material comprehensible and at the same time keeping it convincing as a stream of consciousness rendering of a past experience. The speeches and the descriptive fragments are paragraphed separately to avoid confusion. The general absence of orthodox punctuation and capitalization causes no real difficulty but does succeed in distinguishing the unit from ordinary narration and giving it the desired appearance.

One may ask: why did the author not render all of Quentin's recalled experiences in some such simplified, chronological manner as this? It would certainly have made it far less difficult for the reader to follow the main threads of the plot. This is just the question raised by Mr. Hicks's remark that Faulkner seems first to have invented his stories in the regular chronological order and then recast them in a distorted form. The answer is that in the first three sections of *The Sound and the Fury* the author is not primarily concerned with presenting the facts of a story, but with presenting the *reactions* of certain characters to these facts and

thereby revealing individual states of mind. Every simplification of the technique necessitates a corresponding simplification of the character's mental reaction and alters his state of mind to a slightly different state of mind. In the particular unit under discussion, for example, Quentin's state of mind is much less complex than it is in other parts of his section. The author had to sacrifice complexity in order to gain something else which he considered worth the temporary sacrifice. However, if the whole of Quentin's recalled experiences were rendered in this manner, the distinguishing characteristics of Quentin's state of mind would certainly be lost. That this would be the case can be seen by comparing the first three sections of the book. In each section a different variation of the stream of consciousness technique is used, and in each case the resulting state of mind of the character is different and the effect upon the reader is different.

While dealing with the interrelations of technique, content, and the desired effect upon the reader, one may ask another question: if the absence of standard punctuation and capitalization in the above passage is effective in setting it apart and giving it the illusion of a recalled experience, why did the author not use some such method as this in the first section for presenting Benjy's recalled experiences? The answer is that, by using the same punctuation and capitalization for the past experiences as for the present, the author is trying to suggest that to Benjy's undiscriminating mind the past is no less real and immediate than the present. To have made even a formal distinction between the two would have implied that Benjy was himself aware of a difference.

The third section of *The Sound and the Fury* is almost wholly orthodox both in content and in technique and requires no detailed analysis. Although one can detect on examination that Jason's section, "April 6, 1928," is presented through a simplified version of the stream of consciousness technique, it is not necessary that the reader give any particular attention to this fact in order to understand the section. Except for a few recalled fragments,

Jason's section is a straightforward first-person narrative of events taking place on April 6.

The last section, "April 8, 1928," is the most orthodox of all the sections, for it is a regular ommiscient rendering of this day's events. The only characteristic which it has in common with the other three sections is the strictly objective attitude which the author maintains toward his material. Although there are a few interpretative statements in this section, these are kept at a minimum and incorporated into the main body of the material in such a way as not to attract attention to themselves or alter the prevailing tone of the section.

Most readers and critics have been baffled by the unusual arrangement of the four sections in the following unchronological order: "April 7, 1928," "June 2, 1910," "April 6, 1928," "April 8, 1928." Commenting upon this aspect of the novel, Granville Hicks says, "It is not certain that Benjy was the inevitable narrator of the history of the Compson family, or that the story could only have been told in four episodes, or that in the arrangement of these episodes chronological order had to be violated." This statement, as well as the other one quoted earlier, assumes that *The Sound and the Fury* is fundamentally a conventional type of "story" which the author is unnecessarily distorting into a difficult form. But this is hardly the case. According to this method of reckoning, Benjy's section is almost eighteen years out of its chronological order. This conclusion would be correct if each section were devoted entirely to events of the designated date. But this is true for only one section of the book, "April 8, 1928." Each of the other sections deals with two sets of events: those which take place on the designated date and those which are recalled from the past; and these recalled events are no less important than the present. In the first two sections, recalled experiences are far more important than the present enveloping action. If one is to determine the fundamental chronology of the four sections, he must consider the dates of the recalled experiences.

In his introduction to *The Portable Faulkner*, Malcolm Cowley raises another stimulating question for discussion. "In *The Sound and the Fury*, which is superb as a whole," he says, "we can't be sure that the four sections of the novel are presented in the most effective order." What disturbs Mr. Cowley is not the violation of surface chronology but the fact that "we can't fully understand and perhaps can't even read the first section until we have read the other three." By "most effective order" he seems to mean the order in which a section would be most easily understood and most effective individually. One may very well agree with Mr. Cowley that some other order of arrangement might have made Benjy's section more comprehensible on the first reading; however, the shifting of this section would merely mean that some other section would then come into first position, and the same trouble would start all over again, for each of the four sections is interdependent upon the other three. This is true even of the fourth and simplest section — as Cowley discovered when he considered printing this unit in *The Portable Faulkner*. "I thought that the last part of the book would be most effective as a separate episode, but still it depended too much on what had gone before."

Let us consider some of the ways in which the present position of Benjy's section does contribute to the desired effect of the novel as a whole. If the childhood experiences are to be included at all, it does seem definitely preferable that they be presented early, before the reader advances too far into the problems of adult life dealt with in the following three sections. But Benjy's section is far more than a mere background summary of ordinary childhood experiences. From one point of view, it is the whole novel in miniature. It presents all the main characters in situations which foreshadow the main action. This is particularly true of the recalled water-splashing episode which took place when Caddy was seven, Quentin nine, Jason about five, and Benjy about three. These children and a little colored boy, Versh, are playing in the branch one evening. Caddy gets her dress wet and, in order to

avoid punishment, pulls off the dress to let it dry. Quentin is perturbed because she gets her dress wet and also because she pulls it off before Versh and the other children. He slaps her and she falls down in the water, getting her bodice and drawers wet. He then feels partly responsible for Caddy's guilt and says that they will both get whipped. She says it was all his fault. However he and she and Versh agree not to tell; but Jason decides to tell if Caddy and Quentin do not give him a bribe. When the children go to bed, Dilsey the Negro cook discovers the stain on Caddy's buttocks, but she is unable to remove the spot.

The parallels between this and the main plot are obvious. When Caddy becomes a young woman, she soils her honor with a serious stain which will not come off; Quentin assumes responsibility for her shame and finally commits suicide in an attempt to expiate her sin; Jason, true to form, makes the most of Caddy's shame by blackmailing her for all he can get. In the childhood experience, Jason walks with his hands in his pockets (as if "holding his money") and once falls down because he does not have his arms free to balance himself; in the main action later, his "holding his money" (by keeping it at home in a box instead of banking it) results in his being robbed by his niece. Since this childhood experience is obviously intended to forshadow the adult action, it can accomplish this purpose only if it comes before the other three sections.

The Sound and the Fury is a novel about disorder, disintegration, and the absence of perspective. As an introduction to this theme, what could be more appropriate than the flat, perspectiveless language of Benjy's section? The novel is essentially about the internal chaos of the characters — their intellectual, moral, and spiritual confusion. It is therefore appropriate that the first section be presented from the point of view of an idiot who symbolizes this general disorder and exemplifies the simplest variation of it — intellectual confusion; Benjy is incapable of intellectual discrimination, constantly mistaking the past for the present.

Two of the four sections are restricted in two respects and two are restricted in only one respect. Quentin's and Jason's sections are restricted to the internal point of view and to a limited phase of Caddy's transgression. Quentin is preoccupied almost exclusively with Caddy's loss of honor; Jason's attention is concentrated upon Caddy's illegitimate daughter. Benjy's section, although it is restricted in point of view to the mind of Benjy, is not restricted to Caddy or to any one phase of her problem to the exclusion of other matters and other characters. The last section of the novel is similar to Benjy's section in that it too deals with the Compson situation in a general manner, but it accomplishes the effect of comprehensiveness by another means. Whereas Benjy's section is restricted in point of view and not narrowly restricted in time-span, the last section is restricted in time-span to the events of one day but still acquires breadth of outlook by being written from the omniscient-omnipresent point of view, which gives the reader the impression of being outside the characters and at a sufficient remove to view the whole general panorama. The comprehensive quality of the first and the last sections, as contrasted with the two middle sections, gives a good architectural balance to the structure of the novel as a whole. It also allows the reader to begin with the general situation, move into two particular phases of this situation, and emerge again on the other side with a broad, general view. By beginning and ending the novel in this way, the author gives extension to the theme by making clear that the novel is not merely about Caddy's transgression and the reaction of her family, but about a much more comprehensive theme. The disorder, disintegration, and absence of perspective in the lives of the Compsons is intended to be symbolic and representative of a whole social order, or perhaps it would be better to say a whole social disorder.