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0521451140 - New Essays on *The Sound and the Fury*

Edited by Noel Polk

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Introduction

NOEL POLK

THE SOUND AND THE FURY is the quintessential American high modernist text. For over sixty years now, but especially since its sudden “discovery” by readers and critics in the late forties and early fifties, it has attracted the attention of most major critics and nearly every major critical movement. It has been a sort of litmus paper on which critical approaches have tested themselves, from Marxism to New Criticism, to Structuralism and Poststructuralism, Deconstruction, Psychoanalytics, Linguistics, Feminism, and New Historicism, all of which seem to find it among the sine qua nons of its particular approach. Because it is so rich, so astonishingly full of the mainstreams of twentieth-century culture, it stands in a reciprocal relationship to us: it opens itself up to economic, historical, philosophical, religious, cultural, and social analyses, and in its reflecting turn enables us to see how profoundly all these streams are related to each other, and to us. Each of these approaches has enriched our understanding of the novel (though not all readings have done so), and it has generously given us back ourselves. Even so, if the amount of current critical activity involving *The Sound and the Fury* is any indication, it remains a Matterhorn of seemingly inexhaustible splendor, with unscaled faces we haven’t even discovered yet.

Faulkner’s fourth completed novel, *The Sound and the Fury* comes in his career at the end of more than a decade of feverish reading and writing. In the late teens and early twenties he wrote reams of derivative poetry that reflected his absorption of the language and concerns of the European Romantics, of the fin de siècle poets, of the essential thinkers during the period of his intellectual gestation: Freud, Einstein, Bergson, Frazer; the literary modernists:

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Pound, Anderson, Dos Passos, and especially Joyce and Eliot. Thanks partly to the mentorship of Oxford, Mississippi, lawyer Phil Stone, partly to his friendship with writers like Stark Young and Sherwood Anderson, partly to his travels, and partly to the University of Mississippi Library, Faulkner had access to a wide range of the literature of the past and to the most avant garde of current writing, all of which he devoured.

His own accounts of the origins of *The Sound and the Fury* are eyeball-deep in metaphors economic, romantic, modernist, and paternal:

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. Four years before I had written *Soldiers' Pay*. It didn't take long to write and it got published quickly and made me about five hundred dollars. I said, Writing novels is easy. You don't make much doing it, but it is easy. I wrote *Mosquitoes*. It wasn't quite so easy to write and it didn't get published quite as quickly and it made me about four hundred dollars. I said, Apparently there is more to writing novels, being a novelist, than I thought. I wrote *Sartoris*. It took much longer, and the publisher refused it at once. But I continued to shop it about for three years with a stubborn and fading hope, perhaps to justify the time which I had spent writing it. This hope died slowly, thought it didn't hurt 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.¹

He wrote this in 1933, as part of an introduction to a proposed new edition of the novel which never got beyond the planning stages. The introduction, extant in several versions, was not published until 1972, but throughout his career, especially in the 1950s when as a Nobel Laureate he was lionized and interviewed everywhere he went, he continued to mine the vein he had opened there, and spun variations on this basic story, creating a sort of myth about the novel's writing and conception. His oft-cited interview with Jean Stein in the *Paris Review* in the mid-1950s is

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his most elaborate and well-known version of the novel's composition:

It began with a mental picture. I didn't realize at the time it was symbolical. The picture was of the muddy seat of a little girl's drawers in a pear tree where she could see through a window where her grandmother's funeral was taking place and report what was happening to her brothers on the ground below. By the time I explained who they were and what they were doing and how her pants got muddy, I realized it would be impossible to get all of it into a short story and that it would have to be a book. And then I realized the symbolism of the soiled pants, and that image was replaced by the one of the fatherless and motherless girl climbing down the rainpipe to escape from the only home she had, where she had never been offered love or affection or understanding. I had already begun to tell it through the eyes of the idiot child since I felt that it would be more effective as told by someone capable only of knowing what happened, but not why. I saw that I had not told the story that time. I tried to tell it again, the same story through the eyes of another brother. That was still not it. I told it for the third time through the eyes of the third brother. That was still not it. I tried to gather the pieces together and fill in the gaps by making myself the spokesman. It was still not complete, not until 15 years after the book was published when I wrote as an appendix to another book the final effort to get the story told and off my mind, so that I myself could have some peace from it. It's the book I feel tenderest towards. I couldn't leave it alone, and I never could tell it right, though I tried hard and would like to try again, though I'd probably fail again.²

In other accounts, Faulkner claimed that it began in a short story about the Compson children, a story

without plot, of some children being sent away from the house during the grandmother's funeral. They were too young to be told what was going on and they saw things only incidentally to the childish games they were playing.³

Most commentators have taken Faulkner a bit more literally in these comments than is wise – or necessary. If *The Sound and the Fury* is the quintessential American high modernist novel, it is probably sensible to take Faulkner's claim to have "shut the door

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between [himself] and all publishers' addresses" as the quintessential modernist metaphor, in its implicit assertion of High Art's right and need to exist for itself alone, its rejection of any relationship between art and economic motive, its claim not to have to submit itself to any market, much less one geared to the debased tastes of a bourgeois public. All his comments about the conception and writing of the novel come at least four or five years after its publication, and so probably ought to be taken less as fact than as his retrospective rumination about a profoundly important experience, a warm and loving distillation of that experience into metaphors that would allow him somehow to retain and evoke at will the passion that writing *The Sound and the Fury* gave him. That passion was something he truly seemed to cherish for the remainder of his life. Nor, he claimed, doubtless also metaphorically, did the ecstasy he felt in writing the Benjy section ever return in any of his other books. He never again felt "that eager and joyous faith and anticipation of surprise which the yet unmarred sheets beneath my hand held inviolate and unailing."⁴ Of course it may well be that he conceived and wrote the novel exactly as he later described; in any case, legions of critics have found his description of the muddy seat of Caddy's drawers a very evocative, and provocative, entrance into the novel's various structures and meanings, and much fruitful discussion has recently emerged from considerations of Caddy as the novel's absent center, its absent presence. But whether he was speaking metaphorically or not, clearly writing *The Sound and the Fury* was an immensely powerful experience for him, an experience by which he seemed to have defined himself as a writer, and he must have taken enormous satisfaction in its accomplishment, no matter what he later said about its being his "most splendid failure."⁵ It should not surprise us to see how easily the master mythmaker mythologized the creation of his favorite book.

Whether the image of Caddy's drawers was in fact the cohering center of the novel's conception, we do not know. What we *do* know about the novel's antecedents might suggest something a bit more prosaic. Though he completed the typing of *The Sound and the Fury* in October of 1928, there is some evidence that fictional materials which he would eventually weave into it had been

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on his mind for several years at least. It is certainly not necessary to believe that he actually had in mind the *Sound and the Fury* that we know as he worked through these materials, or even that he saw them as related to one another. But as Faulkner's letters home from New Haven in the spring and early summer of 1918 demonstrate, even then he was, willy-nilly, storing up materials which he would eventually incorporate into *The Sound and the Fury*.⁶ As nearly every historian of this text has pointed out, a crude preliminary version of Benjy Compson appears in one of the sketches, "The Kingdom of God," that Faulkner published in the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* in early 1925. Carvel Collins claims to have been told by one of his sources that Faulkner read or told him a story about the Compson children in Paris in 1925.⁷ This is possible, though by no means provable. Some fictions we do know he worked on in Paris – *Elmer* (1925; published 1983) certainly, and probably *Sanctuary* (1931) – and a pseudomedieval allegory entitled *Mayday* (1926; published 1977) has significant and specific affinities of theme, character, and mise-en-scène with *The Sound and the Fury*, as does *Flags in the Dust*, completed in 1927 and published two years later in a truncated version as *Sartoris* (1929). Moreover, similar affinities of theme and character might argue that *Flags*, *Sanctuary*, and *The Sound and the Fury* emerge from a single matrix in Faulkner's imagination. Certainly *Flags* and *Sanctuary*, especially in its original version,⁸ are closely related, so closely that bits of the materials deleted from *Flags* to make *Sartoris* turn up in the original version of *Sanctuary*, salvaged as it were from what he doubtless assumed would be lost. *Sanctuary* was mainly written in the spring of 1929, while Cape and Smith were copyediting *The Sound and the Fury*. At some point during that spring Faulkner put *Sanctuary* aside long enough to revise extensively and retype forty-one pages of the Quentin section of *The Sound and the Fury*, so that in important ways *Sanctuary* and *The Sound and the Fury* are practically simultaneous, and I have suggested elsewhere that Horace Benbow, the Prufrockian hero of *Sanctuary* and *Flags*, is a forty-three-year-old Quentin Compson, what Quentin would have become had he lived that long.⁹ Furthermore, if we can reasonably suspect that the letter Faulkner wrote to his mother from Paris in 1925 describing something he

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had just written about the Luxembourg Gardens and rain and death¹⁰ is a version of *Sanctuary's* final vision of Temple Drake in the Luxembourg Gardens, it may be worth speculating that the origins of that matrix lie in the materials of *Sanctuary*. Clearly he conceived of *Sanctuary* as a highly experimental novel. The holograph manuscript of that novel – with its thousands of revisions, its continual shift of passage after passage, page after page – and the revised galleys – characterized by the same restless shifting of large blocks of material – demonstrate how very difficult *Sanctuary* was to get on paper in a form that satisfied him. The extant materials thus make it possible to speculate that Faulkner worked on it sporadically through the late twenties, couldn't get the Horace Benbow–Temple Drake material to coalesce, then defaulted into *Flags*, a much more traditional novel. After *Flags*, something magical, perhaps even the discovery of Caddy's muddy drawers in a tree, moved him into *The Sound and the Fury*. The experience of writing *The Sound and the Fury* then released him to complete work on the Benbow–Temple Drake book, which in its "original version" was a book exclusively about Horace Benbow. In its revised, post-*Sound and Fury* avatar, Horace shares the spotlight with Temple.

Central to these early fictions is not a little girl with muddy drawers, but rather an effete, idealistic young man trying to find his way through a modernist tangle of postwar despair, historical disfranchisement and disillusionment, and Freudian-psychosexual problemata; all except the idiot in "The Kingdom of God" are recognizable avatars of Quentin Compson. Even so, it's not difficult to imagine that the discovery of Caddy's muddy drawers in that tree provided Faulkner a riveting imaginative center for all that masculine suffering to cohere around, a powerful narrative locus which gave him what he needed to organize the materials of his imagination.

The main thrust of the writing of *The Sound and the Fury* came in 1928. Faulkner finished typing it in October of that year in New York, apparently while Wasson edited *Flags in the Dust*. As Wasson – and legend – would have it, Faulkner erupted into Wasson's room one morning, tossed the manuscript on his bed, and said "Read this one, Bud. . . . It's a real son of a bitch."¹¹ Faulkner sent the ribbon typescript directly to his friend Harrison Smith, an editor

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at Harcourt, Brace, which was to publish *Sartoris*, the edited version of *Flags*. Harcourt rejected the new novel on February 15, 1929.¹² In the meantime, Smith left Harcourt to go into partnership with the British publisher Jonathan Cape, who wanted an American subsidiary. Smith took Faulkner's new typescript with him and the new firm of Jonathan Cape and Harrison Smith executed a contract for *The Sound and the Fury* on February 18, 1929, barely three days after Harcourt's rejection. Cape & Smith lost no time getting the novel into production, but the editing and the proof-reading did not go smoothly. After entrusting the completed ribbon typescript to Smith, Faulkner apparently began tinkering with the carbon typescript text of Quentin's monologue, which he had retained (with few exceptions, the pages of the Quentin section are the only ones in the carbon typescript with holograph revision). Faulkner revised some passages of this section extensively, polished and pruned others, and experimented with several possibilities for punctuation, italicization, and phrasing.¹³ When he received the copyedited ribbon typescript, he retyped forty-one pages completely and substituted the new ribbon copies in the setting copy he returned to Smith. In the carbon copy he was keeping he carefully replaced the worked-over and revised carbon pages with the newly typed carbons; the old carbons are not known to exist.

Faulkner probably received galleys just as he was getting married and leaving for his honeymoon. The only available correspondence concerning the proofreading is undated, but the return address is Pascagoula, Mississippi.¹⁴ It is not clear from this correspondence whether he received at this or any other time any proof other than that for the Benjy section; his only comments are about the text of that part of the novel. Wasson, assigned to edit the new novel, changed a number of the details of the text. Faulkner took issue with him, however, over only one major problem in the proof of the Benjy section: Wasson changed all of Faulkner's italics to roman type, and proposed to indicate time shifts by line spaces in the text. Wasson's presumptuous editing of the first section prompted Faulkner's now well-known letter in which he patiently, but in no uncertain terms, told Wasson to put it back the way it was, or nearly so: "I know you mean well, but so do I."

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This letter, with its detailed explanation of the alternating italic and roman passages, is a source of joy for a critic:

I received the proof. It seemed pretty tough to me, so I corrected it as written, adding a few more italics where the original seemed obscure on second reading. Your reason for the change, i.e., that with italics only 2 different dates were indicated I do not think sound for 2 reasons. First, I do not see that the use of breaks clarifies it any more; second, there are more than 4 dates involved. The ones I recall off-hand are: Damuddy dies. Benjy is 3. (2) His name is changed. He is 5. (3) Caddy's wedding. He is 14. (4) He tries to rape a young girl and is castrated. 15. (5) Quentin's death. (6) His father's death. (7) A visit to the cemetery at 18. (7) [sic] The day of the anecdote, he is 33. These are just a few I recall. So your reason explodes itself.

But the main reason is, a break indicates an objective change in tempo, while the objective picture here should be a continuous whole, since the thought transference is subjective; i.e., in Ben's mind and not in the reader's eye. I think italics are necessary to establish for the reader Benjy's confusion; that unbroken-surfaced confusion of an idiot which is outwardly a dynamic and logical coherence. To gain this, by using breaks it will be necessary to write an induction for each transference. I wish publishing was advanced enough to use colored ink for such, as I argued with you and Hal in the speak-easy that day. But the form in which you now have it is pretty tough. It presents a most dull and poorly articulated picture to my eye. If something must be done, it were better to re-write this whole section objectively, like the 4th section. I think it is rotten, as is. But if you wont have it so, I'll just have to save the idea until publishing grows up to it. Anyway, change all the italics. You overlooked one of them. Also, the parts written in italics will all have to be punctuated again. You'd better see to that, since you're all for coherence. And dont make any more additions to the script, bud. I know you mean well, but so do I. I effaced the 2 or 3 you made. . . .

I hope you will think better of this. Your reason above disproves itself. I purposely used italics for both actual scenes and remembered scenes for the reason, not to indicate the different dates of happenings, but merely to permit the reader to anticipate a thought-transference, letting the recollection postulate its own date. Surely you see this.¹⁵

Faulkner's adamant concerns with such details suggests how intimately related to the novel's themes he considered the text's visual qualities to be, how relevant to its meanings; his savagely

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ironic comment that he might have to rewrite the Benjy section more conventionally if publishing were not “grown up” enough to handle it as it was, likewise suggests that at least prior to publication he was not quite so indifferent to publishers or the reading public as his postpublication comments about shutting the doors between himself and his publishers would indicate.

The Sound and the Fury was published on October 7, 1929, in a text marred by surprisingly few errors, astonishingly few, given its textual difficulties and the amount of repair done to the Benjy section in galleys. It was read and appreciated by a select few writers and readers who seemed to have some sense of what Faulkner had done. The Grabhorn Press proposed a new edition in the early thirties, one which would publish the Benjy section in three different colors to indicate time shifts, and for which Faulkner apparently marked up a copy (which has subsequently been lost), but abandoned the project as too expensive in those parlous economic times.¹⁶ It was not republished in the United States until 1946, in the wake of renewed interest in Faulkner spurred by a variety of things, including Malcolm Cowley’s editing of *The Portable Faulkner* (1946),¹⁷ Robert Penn Warren’s influential review of the *Portable*,¹⁸ and Albert Camus’ and Jean-Paul Sartre’s important “discovery” of his books in the thirties and forties, in their French translations. In 1946 it appeared with *As I Lay Dying* in a Modern Library volume, along with the “Compson Appendix,” which Faulkner had written in 1945, ostensibly as a sort of introduction to Cowley’s selection from the novel’s fourth section. In the mid-fifties the Modern Library and Vintage reissued the first edition text in facsimile, and this text remained in print, with the Compson Appendix, until 1984, when the present editor prepared a new text based on Faulkner’s carbon typescript (for a complete record of the editing, see Polk¹⁹). That text, with a couple of corrections in later printings, has been used in subsequent issues of the novel, including Vintage (1987), the Norton Casebook (1987), Vintage International (1990), and the Modern Library (1992); it was issued in 1992 on computer diskette by Voyager.

The 1984 text and its subsequent issues omit the “Compson Appendix,” though the new Modern Library text does include it, along with a prefatory note which explains something of its prob-

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lematic relationship to the novel proper. That relationship is worth a word here. On September 20, 1945, Faulkner suggested that Malcolm Cowley include the "last section, the Dilsey one," in *The Portable Faulkner*, and proposed to write "a page or two of synopsis to preface it, a condensation of the first 3 sections, which simply told why and when (and who she was) and how a 17 year old girl robbed a bureau drawer of hoarded money and climbed down a drain pipe and ran off with a carnival pitchman."²⁰ Less than a month later, on October 18, he sent Cowley not a one- or two-page synopsis, but a completely new short-story-length discursive genealogy of the entire Compson clan: "I should have done this when I wrote the book," he wrote Cowley. "Then the whole thing would have fallen into pattern like a jigsaw puzzle when the magician's wand touched it. . . . I think it is really pretty good, to stand as it is, as a piece without implications."²¹ On February 4, 1946, he was still enthusiastic about it; he wrote to Robert Linscott of Random House about a proposed new edition of the novel: "When you reprint THE SOUND AND THE FURY, I have a new section to go with it. I should have written this new section when I wrote the book itself. . . . By all means include this in the reprint. When you read it, you will see how it is the key to the whole book, and after reading it, the 4 sections as they stand now fall into clarity and place."²²

All this notwithstanding the 1984 Random House edition did not include the Appendix, for reasons having to do with the editor's decision to produce a text of the novel as it would have been originally published in 1929, and with the broader context of Faulkner's life and career in the mid-1940s, as he approached his fiftieth birthday. The forties were especially difficult and bitter years for him. After the furious pace of the previous decade (he published thirteen books between 1929 and 1942), he slowed almost to a stop, partly through miserable contractual obligations with Hollywood and partly through an increasing preoccupation with *A Fable*. After 1942 he published only one new piece (the Appendix) before *Intruder in the Dust* in 1948. He had numerous personal troubles, as well as professional and artistic anxieties about the effect he feared Hollywood was having on his work, on his capacity to produce, and on his ability to make a decent living, and about