

WILLIAM FAULKNER

A reader of novels hospitably invited to talk about them in another country is bound to note the importance of topography. Whether the Americans travel to Italy with *A Farewell to Arms*, or commute from Long Island with *The Great Gatsby*, or put their roots in the middlewest with *My Ántonia*, or are deracinated from New York with *The Age of Innocence*, perhaps topography is even more important for generations that spend their lives on the same terrain. The spirit of the place, the *genius loci*, the regionalism of the North American South is omnipresent in the work of William Faulkner. For his compatriots who are not Southerners, the South may well seem to look like another country whose history is clouded with the issue of slavery leading to the Civil War, and by legends nostalgically suffused with the verandas and magnolias of *Gone With the Wind* or the decadent aroma of Faulkner's story, "A Rose for Emily."

Given the inclination to live in a feudal, quasi-mythical past, and given the need to face up to the windmills of commonplace reality, it is not surprising that Faulkner set himself to rereading *Don Quixote* every year. In *Absolom! Absolom!*, Quentin Compson is asked, "Tell me about the South. What is it like there? What do they do there? Why do they live there? Why do they live at all?" His reply is, "You can't understand it. You'd have to be born there." But Quentin goes on at some length to try to tell Shreve about the South, until Shreve says, "Now I want you to tell me just one thing more. Why do you hate the South?"

"I don't hate it," says Quentin quickly. "I don't hate it," he thinks, panting in the cold air, the iron New England dark. "I don't hate it." But clearly there is hatred mixed with his love; this same ambivalence is present in the complex attitude of Ike McCaslin in *Go Down Moses*. In the course of a single sentence he professed first his love for

this land for which God has done so much with woods for guns and streams for fish and deep rich soil for seed and lush springs to

sprout it and long summers to nurture it and serene falls to harvest it and short, mild winters for men and animals...

Then the sentence goes on to express the hate:

this land which man has deswamped and denuded and derivered in two generations, where white men rent farms and live like niggers and niggers crop on shares and live like animals.

It was with these mixed feelings that Faulkner created his Yoknapatawpha County, signed himself on its map as its sole proprietor, and traced its declining dynasties: the Compsons and Sartorises and Sutpens, the Snopeses, its carpetbagging interlopers, and last but not least, taciturn but increasingly vocal, the black population. Remember –we can scarcely forget– that Faulkner started with all the prejudices of his class and race.

William Faulkner was born at New Albany, Mississippi, in 1897, and died in 1962 near Oxford, Mississippi, where he spent most of his life; Oxford figures as Jefferson in his fiction, the county seat of his Yoknapatawpha County. He kept returning there, with a homing instinct from Hollywood, where he lived during some unhappy intervals. He resisted the temptation of most American writers to spend much time in New York. His own family did not stand quite so high, and did not sink quite so low, as the Compsons; but they had been prominent in the past and given the state a governor and a general. His father, however, ran a livery stable when he was a boy; and that may tell us something about his interest in horses. He quickly dropped out of the university, having done little except contribute to the college magazine, and got more education from a bookshop in New Orleans, where he started writing his poems. During the first World War, he enlisted in the Royal Canadian Air Force; but, like Fitzgerald, he did not see action abroad. Instead he returned to marry his childhood sweetheart, already divorced from her first marriage; he helped to bring up her children and, with some success, to build up a local estate. The culmination came with the Nobel Prize in 1950.

Despite the distractions, the centralization of his interests gave him a power of synthesis which helped him to produce a massive

body of work: twenty novels, a good many short stories, and some incidental commentary. You must not be put off –you can also be led on– by Faulkner’s style, touched as it is by the Latinate heritage of Southern oratory and by a disposition to try to crowd everything into a single, two-page sentence. But eloquence has seldom been carried farther in fiction; and though he does not always choose to tell a straightforward story, he can be a delightfully anecdotal storyteller: in “Spotted Horses,” for example, and in *The Bear*. As a writer, he made all too few concessions to the reader, and consequently recognition was slow. Despite the mild sensation created by *Sanctuary*, which he would deprecate, it took a long time to recognize his literary worth. *The Sound and the Fury* was his fourth novel, the one that remained –as he said– closest to him, though it had caused him so much agony. It appeared in 1929, shortly after *Sartoris*, which first sketched the dynastic scheme for the novels, and sold very few copies. There was no reprint of *The Sound and the Fury* for a long time, and very little impact. But national and international fame came to him through two unexpected chances. The first was represented by a French professor at Princeton, Edgar Maurice Coindreux, who had read some of his books, was fascinated by them, and undertook to translate them into French. You can not get away with such long sentences in French, or such mixed metaphors, so it all had to be clarified and consequently made more accessible to the readers. That was where Faulkner made his first important impact.

The second figure who helped him in this respect was the editor and critic, Malcolm Cowley, who put together a little volume of selections for the *Viking Portable* series in 1945, and managed to persuade Faulkner to append a detailed and explicit genealogy of his families and their relationships. That genealogy, planned as an appendix, appears, rightly or wrongly, in the front of most reprints of *The Sound and the Fury*, which otherwise would have started with the ravings of a madman. The consequence is much less off-putting than it might otherwise have been. You enter the book by way of that synopsis, the account of the Compsons from their origin in ancestral Scotland, where already they were fighting for lost causes. The Jacobites had sent them to the United States, where their fortunes are

traced in outline by the appendix through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, through the Civil War and up to the point where we are ready to come across them in Faulkner's book.

That is past the point, of course, where they had possessed great plantations. Their estates have already been mortgaged and sold off to the up-and-coming Snopeses, and in a flashback we catch just a glimpse of Jason III, the father of our family, who has studied law but given it up to become a kind of cultivated dipsomaniac. He is dead by the time the main business of the novel begins, and his widow Caroline is presented as a weak and cold, supine and hypochondriac lady. "I'm still a lady," she asserts, "though you wouldn't guess it by looking at my off-spring." That assertion is typical of her querulous manner.

Now three of those offspring, the Compson children, had made a preliminary appearance as the chorus to a story of Faulkner's entitled—in a line from "The Saint Louis Blues"—"That Evening Sun." This was a story that centered upon a violent relation between a black laundress and her homicidal husband. Witnessing that relationship, those childish onlookers undergo a kind of transition from innocence to experience, a realization that there must be some difference between the blacks and the whites. And that prepares the way for the epiphany that threads thematically through *The Sound and the Fury*, as seen through the eyes of those three.

Damuddy—that is their name for their grandmother—is dead. This being the day of her funeral, the children have been banished to the garden, and naturally they are curious about what is happening: especially Candice, the daughter Caddy, who is the most adventurous one. "I'm stronger than you," she says to her two brothers, Quentin and Jason. And so it is Caddy who climbs the pear tree and looks in at death from the window. All that her brothers see, while they are looking up toward the tree, is the muddy seat of her drawers and that becomes a theme in the novel.

Not unlike Ernest Hemingway, Faulkner could be apt at finding a literary allusion to title his fiction; and, in this case, the epigraph comes from *Macbeth*. The most explicit parts are left out of the title; we are expected to know the quotation and to figure out that "life is a tale

/Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, /Signifying nothing." Life signifies nothing; it has become meaningless to Macbeth at that stage with his back to the wall. But the opinion is Macbeth's, not Shakespeare's; and, in the scheme of things, justice will finally prevail. Benjy, of course, is Faulkner's idiot, who begins the tale. His sound is a wail, hopeless and prolonged, the commentary that Faulkner adds to Shakespeare, of life "lived with all its incomprehensible passion, turmoil and grief, of fury and despair."

Consequently that these twisted strands have a meaning for those who would disentangle them. Actually, it has taken a great deal of artistic endeavour and genius to twist them together in the first place, because this is not a family chronicle step-by-step, generation by generation, like Galsworthy's *Forsythe Saga* or Mann's *Buddenbrooks* or Zola's *Rougon-Macquart*. Conrad Aikens, who was a fairly skillful novelist himself, called it a novelist's novel. It has been very tightly and neatly constructed. So have many of the others been, which we have been considering in these discussions; but none has been quite so complex. It would be hard, in that respect, to find a counterpart.

Time is of essence. Quentin's section opens with a kind of laying-on-of-hands, if I may call it that. It is not exactly an apostolic succession, considering the *dramatis personae*; but Quentin's father presents him with his own father's—Quentin's grandfather's—watch, a watch which thereupon betokens the fate of the family. Quentin's father, that particular Jason, calls it the "mausoleum of all hopes and desires." And soon it stops; then soon again Quentin breaks it; and there is a moment in his day when he stops in front of a jeweler's shop with many clocks in the window, and notices that each has a different time. This prompts him to speculate on relative values. It might remind an American reader of the chapter on "horologicals and chronometricals" in Melville's *Pierre*, where contrasts are drawn between watches that have different times, the clocks across the world and Greenwich time, the absolute as opposed to the relative.

The time-scheme involves four days, or perhaps it would be a little clearer to say three-plus-one. Each of the three brothers has a day to himself; or again, if you consider them consecutively in a period of time, there are three days plus a flashback. It is all dated from Easter,

the whole weekend, which is also a weekend for carnival –not the Carnival that comes before Lent, but a very profane carnival, a travelling circus with side-shows and other distractions that is in town at the time as a sort of competing attraction. We move towards a conclusion through four sections.

The first section takes place on April 7, 1928, Holy Saturday; the second on June 2, 1910, that is to say, eighteen years before; the third on April 6, 1928, Good Friday; and the fourth and last on April 8, 1928, which is Easter Sunday. The protagonist and spokesman of the first is Benjy; that of the second, the flashback, is Quentin III, the other, older son; and that of third section is Jason IV, the middle son. Finally, in the fourth section, the author speaks out at last; and the chief protagonist is the mammy, Dilsey Gibson.

You have some interesting precedents for a story told by many voices, to be put together by the reader: the Japanese tale of *Rashomon*, with which the film has familiarized some of us; Browning's *Ring and the Book*, a long narrative in a series of monologues, catching the point of view of various different characters; Joyce's *Ulysses*, where you hear first from Stephen Daedalus, then for the most part from Leopold Bloom, and from his wife Molly in the end. It would be for Faulkner to carry this take-apart-and-put-together method farthest, not merely in the book that we are considering, but in the one that followed, *As I Lay Dying*, where you learn the story from more than twenty different voices. Generally speaking, the story itself is less complex than various notes of narration.

It is most convenient, I think, for us to proceed in a chronological and linear order, which means proceeding through the sequence of Chapters Two, Three, One and Four. The final one is the only chapter that takes place in a temporal place. Therefore we look back, we flash back, in the second chapter to Quentin, the oldest son at twenty, intellectual, sensitive, vulnerable and this is the last day of his life. It is Decoration Day, a holiday for those who died in the Civil War. He has just completed his freshman year at Harvard, and it has been a difficult transition, it would appear, in going North from the South. That point comes out very strongly when we are shown a scene at a

railroad junction in Virginia. Quentin looks out through from the window from his birth, and seems to feel for the first time what he may come to feel increasingly through the year, a closer kinship with Southern blacks than with Northern whites. We feel that again when we meet the character Deacon, a Boston negro who runs errands for him and will be deputed to carry Quentin's farewell letter.

Quentin spends the whole day endlessly wandering, though indeed it has a fatal aim. He picks up a little Italian girl and is accused of molesting her, an accusation which might better have been leveled at his brother Benjy. We have his recollections and flashbacks and fantasies, looking nostalgically not toward his parents nor toward his two brothers, but toward his adored sister, Caddy. She has been the virgin of his religion, and her deflowering has become his obsession. Among these musings and memories there comes to us his confrontation with her seducer, Dalton Ames, and the increasing anxiety, because it is right now -the chosen day- that she is being married off pregnant to Hubert Head, who will soon divorce her. Quentin's suicide, when he drowns himself at the end of the day in the river Charles, has been chiefly motivated by his early and incestuous feeling for Caddy.

Now, we do not really see much of her except for a passing flash, or hear her voice except for a word or two. As for her daughter, named Quentin because she was born at the time that her uncle died, she appears only incidentally. We catch a glimpse of Caddy when she seeks out Quentin and is teased and cheated of any interview by their brother Jason. We later hear of her as an international adventuress; then she appears in Hollywood again, and in Nazi Germany, and then is finally lost from sight.

The next episode that is chronologically the third, on Good Friday, is Jason's monologue. This makes the easiest reading, as a matter of fact: straight talk, black humor, snide innuendo. Jason resents his siblings; he thinks they are all crazy, not just Benjy. If sanity is as mean-spirited as he is, one prefers the others. He is a Ku Klux Klan racist in his attitude toward the blacks, and the shrewd little old negro Jobe makes us feel in his backtalk that the attitude is well reciprocated. Jason works in a hardware store, a cavern, "cluttered

and walled and stalagmite-hung." The atmosphere seems almost magical, but it becomes more realistic with "plows and disks and loops of tracechain, and the kind of thing that farmers would be needing...":

It is gloomy because the goods it contained were not shown but hidden rather, since those who supplied Mississippi farmers, or at least Negro Mississippi farmers, a share of the crop did not wish, until that crop was made and its value approximately computable, to show what they could learn to want but only to supply them on specific demand what they could not help but need.

That sentence turns around and whips out a lash. Jason had been gambling and betting and underhandedly, with his mother's money, speculating on the cotton market. And remember, this is 1928. Most of that money will soon be lost in the crash. Meanwhile, he can exercise his inherent meanness with Luster, the little black boy, Benjy's current attendant. (The earlier one was Virsh.) All day Luster has been begging to go to the carnival, which costs twenty-five cents; and Jason has some tickets which he is not going to use (he was given them free for putting a sign in his store window); but he insists on getting five cents from Luster, who hasn't a penny. He continues to tantalize the boy and then finally, for lack of that nickel, one by one he burns up those two tickets.

His ultimate conflict could be put into his own words at the very beginning of the chapter: "Once a bitch, always a bitch." Quentin the Fourth is his niece, at seventeen an unhappy, mixed-up girl, deposited by her mother in the decaying bosom of the family to share in its decomposition. As head of the family, for lack of anyone else, Jason continually quarrels with her. By way of discipline he threatens to belt her, and would already have done so had it not been for the intervention of Mammy Dilsey. When Quentin says, "I wish we were all dead," Jason's comment is: "That's the only sensible thing I've ever heard you say." He locks her up and then Quentin makes her escape to run away with a pitchman, a barker in the carnival. And, so far as the chronicle of the Compsons goes, she is never heard from again.

But there has been an ironic, a thematic reprise in her very mode of departure. "She climbed down from that very window, slid down that very pear tree" that her mother Caddy had climbed up on the day of Dammit's funeral long ago. Thus in her departure she symbolizes the ups and downs, the vicissitudes of the Compson family. Faulkner once spoke of this book as "a tragedy of two lost women," and yet they play small part in the foreground of the story, which is taken over by the three brothers. In a letter he wrote, "I never had a sister, and I lost a daughter, and consequently I've tried to create a beautiful little girl." But it is only in the final chapter that the feminine element comes out strong.

There is hardly a more extreme example of the dictum that you should start a story in *medias res* than the first chapter, which might have been supposed to introduce it. This first chapter introduces the idiot who tells the tale, the feeble-minded youngest brother Benjy; and it is Holy Saturday, which celebrates the Harrowing of Hell, when Jesus descended into the lower world in order to redeem the lost souls there. Now Benjy cannot really speak. He babbles; he makes noises which are more or less transposed for our benefit, along with many echoes from other voices through the chapters. But his own vocables are whimpers, bellows, wails, and many of his impressions come to us, it would seem, through the other senses. With him we hear the dark. His keeper, Luster, says of Benjy, "He smell what you tell him," and that is how he converses. We might overlook one early sentence that speaks of two shadows going over the fence; but we definitely realize, when we look back at that sentence, that we have been given a physical impression, and that Benjy is three times the size of Luster. It is Benjy's thirty-third birthday.

Benjy has loved just three things, we are told: the pasture, his sister, and the firelight. The firelight, which so often gives way to the darkness, as at the end of the chapter. And his sister Caddy, who "smells like rain" when he pines for her. The pasture, which was supposed to be his share of the family inheritance, has been sold off by the father to pay for Quentin's education and Caddy's marriage, so that now the town has made it into a golf-links. And that is the situation at the first event, otherwise easy to miss because we haven't

yet met Caddy. But when some golfer shouts, "Caddy!" calling for the golfing attendant, that sets off a wailing reaction in Benjy. He identifies this word with the nickname of his sister.

You will notice that many of the intervening passages, which are much straightforward than the complexities in Benjy's stream of consciousness, are italicized, and that these refer backward in time, actually to six different previous times. It got so complex that Faulkner once wanted to simplify it by printing those italicized passages in six different colors, but the publisher forbade this undertaking, which could hardly have passed as a simplification. Now these italic passages recall different stages in the past, stages that we come to recognize in the family history. One of them is Dammy's funeral: the children, the pear tree and so forth. Another is Quentin's death, and its impact on the family home. Another, the most recent, is Caddy's wedding and the loss of her. But the crucial event in Benjy's fragmented life has been caused by the occasion when he scared a group of schoolgirls, who feared he would molest them. Jason, who then authorized the authorities to castrate him scornfully refers to him as "that gelding." It was on that occasion that he was rechristened: his name had been Maury, but he now was given the favorite's name of Benjamin. Biblically, this betokens the youngest son, the son of old age in the tribe. With the fourth section it is Easter at last, and the voice here is authorial. It is as omniscient as it needs to be at this point, in the third person, and we have a visual depiction of Benjy. We see what he looks like at thirty-three, while we behold some of the various other characters. The elements that heretofore have been chaotic now come into focus. The principal occasion is a service in the black church. Dilsey and her daughter Frony are going there for the Easter rites, and they take Benjy along. Benjy is the one white person in this black congregation, which "sways and chants, 'Yes, Jesus,'" as the grotesque little minister preaches his sermon on resurrection and sacrifice from the biblical text about "the recollection and the blood of the lamb."

Other novels have utilized religious homilies for their ironic moral reverberations and reflections of the basic theme. One thinks of the Jesuit retreat in Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, of the

Father Mapple's sermon in *Moby Dick*, or of the parable of the Grand Inquisitor in Dostoyevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*. Here the irony is underlined by Jason's blasphemous comment. He is impatient for that Sunday dinner: "Where's Dilsey?" When he hears that she has gone, he thinks that she may have gone to the carnival: "Hasn't that damn show left yet?"

'To church,' Mrs. Compson said. 'The darkies are having a special Easter service. I promised Dilsey two weeks ago that they could get off.'

'Which means we'll eat cold dinner,' Jason said, 'or none at all.'

'I know it's my fault,' Mrs. Compson said [she's always whining], 'I know you blame me.'

'For what?' Jason said, 'You never resurrected Christ, did you?'

That is indeed the dilemma, the ultimate blame: that no one has yet succeeded, alas, in resurrecting Christ.

Jason will be the last of that name. He will, as we learn from the appendix, give up the estate, sell off the family mansion, and live in a boarding house. Soon there will be "no more Compsons to mourn for." Meanwhile, the remaining ones hold their own Easter observances, visiting the dead father and brother in the local cemetery; and Luster will harness Queenie, and take Benjy along with him. The trouble is that they proceed in the wrong direction. They go to the square where the Confederate soldier statue "gazed with empty eyes beneath his marbled hand into wind and weather. [Their blindness is a comment.] Ben sat holding a flower in his fist, his gaze empty and untroubled." In the meantime Luster is going in the wrong direction around the square. Benjy finds expression: "Bellow on bellow, his voice mounted, with scarce interval for breath. There was more than astonishment in it, it was horror;..." Then Jason comes out from the opposite direction, jumps on the carriage, hurls Luster aside, catches the reins, and "swayed Queenie about, cut her again and again into a plunging gallop," putting Luster back in his place:

'Get to hell home with him. If you ever cross that gate with him again, I'll kill you!'

‘Yes, suh,’ Luster said. He took the reins and hit Queenie with the end of them. ‘Git up! Git up, dar! Benjy, fer God’s sake!’

We have been concerned with closure in these discussions, and here this is the closing paragraph:

Ben’s voice roared and roared. Queenie moved again, her feet began to clop-clop steadily again, and at once Ben hushed. Luster looked quickly back over his shoulder, then he drove on. The broken flower drooped over Ben’s fist and his eyes were empty and blue and serene again as cornice and façade flowed smoothly once more from left to right; post and tree, window and doorway, and signboard, each in its ordered place.

Order is restored, if you call it order, when perhaps it should be called doom. The chief survivor, the major witness, is Dilsey Gibson, who dominates this chapter and gradually comes to dominate the book. Talking back to her mistress, keeping the household together, we have her portrait at seventy, slowed somewhat down, but more and more indomitable. Dilsey is as much the heroine of this novel as *Ántonia* was of Willa Cather’s. The characterization of Dilsey, one of his favorite characters, was based upon Faulkner’s own black nurse, Mammy Caroline Bass, who had lived with and worked for his family during fifty years. Indeed he would preach her funeral eulogy, in which he called her brave, courageous, generous, gentle, and honest –“More brave, courageous, generous, gentle, and honest than I.”