

William Faulkner

THREE DECADES OF CRITICISM

Edited,
With an Introduction and Bibliography,

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TIME IN FAULKNER:
THE SOUND AND THE FURY

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THE READER OF *The Sound and the Fury* is at first struck by the oddities of its technique. Why has Faulkner broken up the time of his story and disarranged the fragments? Why does the mind of an idiot provide the first window opened on Faulkner's imaginary world? The reader is tempted to look for points of reference and to re-establish the chronology

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for himself: "Jason and Caroline Compson had three sons and a daughter. The daughter, Caddy, was seduced by Dalton Ames and driven to find a husband. . . ." But he stops here, because he notices that he is telling another story. Faulkner did not first think in terms of an orderly narrative and then shuffle the parts like a pack of cards; he could not have told the story in any other way. In the classical novel, the action has a focus: for example, the murder of the Karamazov father, or the meeting between Edouard and Bernard in *The Counterfeiters*. It would be futile to look for this kind of focus in *The Sound and the Fury*: is it Benjy's castration? Caddy's unfortunate love affair? Quentin's suicide? Jason's hatred for his niece? Each episode, once it has been grasped, invokes others—in fact, all the other episodes connected with it. Nothing happens, the story does not progress; rather, we discover it behind each word as an oppressive and hateful presence, varying in intensity with each situation. It is a mistake to think of these anomalies as mere exercises in virtuosity; the novelist's aesthetic always sends us back to his metaphysic. The critic's task is to bring out the author's metaphysic before evaluating his technique. And it is obvious that Faulkner's is a metaphysic of time.

It is man's misfortune to be confined in time. ". . . a man is the sum of his misfortunes. One day you'd think misfortune would get tired, but then time is your misfortune. . . ." This is the true subject of the novel. And if the technique adopted by Faulkner seems at first to be a negation of time, that is because we confuse time with chronology. Dates and clocks were invented by man: ". . . constant speculation regarding the position of mechanical hands on an arbitrary dial which is a symptom of mind-function. Excrement Father said like sweating." (96) To reach real time, we must abandon these devices, which measure nothing: ". . . time is dead as long as it is being clicked off by little wheels; only when the clock stops does time come to life." (104) Quentin's breaking his watch has, therefore, a symbolic value; it forces us to see time without the aid of clocks. The time of the idiot, Benjy, is also unmeasured by clocks, for he does not understand them.

As for Faulkner's concept of the present, it is not a circumscribed or sharply defined point between past and future. His present is irrational in its essence; it is an event, monstrous and incomprehensible, which comes upon us like a thief—comes upon us and disappears. Beyond this present, there is nothing, since the future does not exist. One present, emerging from the unknown, drives out another present. It is like a sum that we

1. *The Sound and the Fury* (New York: Modern Library, 1946), p. 123.

compute again and again: "And . . . and . . . and then." Like Dos Passos, but with greater subtlety, Faulkner makes his story a matter of addition. Even when the characters are aware of them, the actions, when they emerge in the present, burst into scattered fragments: "I went to the dresser and took up the watch, with the face still down. I tapped the crystal on the corner of the dresser and caught the fragments of glass in my hand and put them into the ashtray and twisted the hands off and put them in the tray. The watch ticked on." (99) The other characteristic of Faulkner's present is *suspension*.* I use this word, for lack of a better one, to indicate a kind of arrested motion in time. In Faulkner, there is never any progression, nothing which can come from the future. The present does not contain in itself the future events we expect—as it seems to when I say that the friend I have been waiting for finally appears. On the contrary, to be present is to appear without reason and to be suspended. Faulkner does not see this suspension in abstract terms; he perceives it in things themselves and tries to make it felt. "The train swung around the curve, the engine puffing with short, heavy blasts, and they passed smoothly from sight that way, with that quality about them of shabby and timeless patience, of static serenity. . . ." (106) And again: "Beneath the sag of the buggy the hooves neatly rapid like the motions of a lady doing embroidery, *diminishing without progress* like a figure on a treadmill being drawn rapidly offstage."² Faulkner appears to arrest the motion at the very heart of things; moments erupt and freeze, then fade, recede and diminish, still motionless.

However, this fugitive and incomprehensible state can be grasped and made verbal. Quentin can say: I broke my watch. But when he says it, his gesture will be *past*. The past can be named and described. Up to a certain point it can be fixed by concepts or intuitively grasped. We have already noted, in connection with *Sartoris*, that Faulkner always shows us events when they are already completed. In *The Sound and the Fury*, everything occurs in the wings; nothing happens, everything has happened. This is what enables us to understand that strange formula of one of the heroes: "I am not is, I was." In this sense also, Faulkner can make of man a being without future, "sum of his climactic experiences," "sum of his misfortunes," "sum of what have you." At every instant we draw a line, since the present is nothing but disordered rumor, a future already

* The French word is *l'enfoncement*, for which the word *suspension* seemed the most suitable translation, in view of the context. [translator's note]
2. *Ibid.*, p. 143. Italics mine.

past. Faulkner's vision of the world can be compared to that of a man sitting in a convertible looking back. At every moment shadows emerge on his right, and on his left flickering and quavering points of light, which become trees, men, and cars only when they are seen in perspective. The past here gains a surrealistic quality; its outline is hard, clear and immutable. The indefinable and elusive present is helpless before it; it is full of holes through which past things, fixed, motionless and silent, invade it. Faulkner's soliloquies make us think of plane flights made rough by air pockets; at every point the consciousness of the hero "falls into the past" and rises once more, to fall again. The present does not exist, it becomes; everything *was*. In *Sartoris*, the past was seen in terms of "stories" because it consisted of a store of familiar memories and because Faulkner had not yet found his technique. In *The Sound and the Fury* he is more experimental and therefore less certain. But his preoccupation with the past is so strong that he sometimes disguises the present—and the present makes its way in the shadows, like an underground river, to reappear only when it has become past. Thus, Quentin is not even conscious of having insulted Bland, for he is reliving his quarrel with Dalton Ames.³ And when Bland hits him, the fight is identified with the past fight between Quentin and Ames. Later, Shreve will *relate* how Bland struck Quentin; he will describe the scene because it has become history—but when it was taking place in the present it was nothing more than a shadowy and obscure event. I have been told of an old school principal whose memory had stopped like a broken watch; it remained forever fixed at his fortieth year. Though he was sixty, he was not aware of his age; his last memory was of the schoolyard and his daily rounds in the playground. Thus he interpreted his present by means of this fixed past and he walked around his table, convinced that he was watching students at their play. Faulkner's characters behave in a similar fashion. Worse than that, their past is not ordered according to chronology but follows certain impulses and emotions. Around some central themes (Caddy's pregnancy, Benjy's castration, Quentin's suicide) innumerable fragments of thought and act revolve. Hence the absurdity of chronology, of "the round and stupid assertion of the clock." The order of the past is the order of the heart. We must not believe that the present event, after it has gone, becomes the most immediate of our memories. The shift of time can submerge it at the bottom

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 178-184. Cf. p. 179, the dialogue with Bland inserted in the middle of the dialogue with Ames: "did you ever have a sister did you," and the inextricable confusion of the two battles.

of memory or leave it on the surface. Only its own intrinsic value and its relevance to our lives can determine its level.

This, then, is the nature of Faulkner's time. How valid is it? This indefinable present; these sudden invasions of the past; this affective order, opposed to the rational order which, though chronological, lacks reality; these memories, monstrous and recurring; these fluctuations of the heart—don't we recognize in them Marcel Proust's lost and recaptured time? I am aware of the differences; I know, for instance, that in Proust, salvation lies in time itself, in the total recovery of the past. For Faulkner, on the contrary, the past is unfortunately never lost; it is always there, almost as an obsession. Mystical ecstasies are our only means of escaping from the temporal world; and a mystic is always a man who wants to forget something: his Self, or more generally, language or formal representation. Faulkner wants to forget time: ". . . Quentin, I give you the mausoleum of all hope and desire; it's rather excruciatingly apt that you will use it to gain the *reducto absurdum* of all human experience which can fit your individual needs no better than it fitted his or his father's. I give it to you not that you may remember time, *but that you might forget it now and then for a moment* and not spend all your breath trying to conquer it. Because no battle is ever won, he said. They are not even fought. The field only reveals to man his own folly and despair, and victory is an illusion of philosophers and fools."⁴ Because he has forgotten time, the hunted Negro in *Light in August* suddenly achieves a strange and unnatural happiness: "It's not when you realize that nothing can help—religion, pride, anything—it's when you realize that you don't need any aid."⁵ But for Faulkner, as for Proust, time is above all that which isolates. We remember the lovers in *Les Plaisirs et les Jours*, holding on to their passions which they are afraid will pass, which they know will pass. The same anguish is found in Faulkner: ". . . people cannot do anything that dreadful they cannot do anything very dreadful at all they cannot even remember tomorrow what seemed dreadful today . . ."⁶ and ". . . a love or a sorrow is a bond purchased without design and which matures willynilly and is recalled without warning to be replaced by whatever issue the gods happen to be floating at the time. . ."⁷ Proust really *should* have employed a technique like Faulkner's; that was the logical outcome

4. *Ibid.*, p. 95. Italics mine.

5. *Light in August* (New York: Modern Library, 1950), p. 99.

6. *The Sound and the Fury*, p. 99.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 196.

of his metaphysic. Faulkner, however, is a lost man, and because he knows that he is lost he risks pushing his thought to its conclusion. Proust is a classicist and a Frenchman; and the French lose themselves with caution and always end by finding themselves. Eloquence, a love of clarity and a rational mind led Proust to preserve at least the appearance of chronology.

We can find the real reason for their similarities in a widely shared literary preoccupation. Most of the great contemporary writers—Proust, Joyce, Dos Passos, Faulkner, Gide, and Virginia Woolf—have tried, each in his own way, to mutilate time. Some have deprived it of past and future and reduced it to the pure intuition of the moment; others, like Dos Passos, make it a limited and mechanical memory. Proust and Faulkner have simply decapitated it; they have taken away its future—that is to say, the dimension of free choice and act. Proust's heroes never undertake anything: they foresee, yes, but their previsions, like day-dreams that put reality to flight, cling to them and therefore they cannot go beyond the present. The Albertine who appears is not the one we expected, and the interlude proves to be only a small, inconsequential agitation, limited to an instant. As for Faulkner's heroes, they never foresee: the car takes them away, as they look back. The approaching suicide which throws its dark shadow over Quentin's last day is not in the realm of human choice. Quentin cannot, for one second, conceive of the possibility of *not* killing himself. The suicide is an issue already determined, something which he approaches blindly without either desiring or conceiving it: ". . . you seem to regard it merely as an experience that will whiten your hair overnight so to speak without altering your appearance at all. . . ." Suicide is not consciously chosen, for it is inevitable. In losing its character of the possible, it ceases to exist in the future; it has become part of the present, and all Faulkner's art aims to suggest to us that Quentin's soliloquy and his last walk *are already* his suicide. I believe we can explain in this fashion a curious paradox: Quentin thinks of his last day as being in the past, like someone who remembers. But who is it that remembers, since the last thoughts of the hero almost coincide with the sudden eruption and destruction of his memory? The answer lies in the novelist's skill in choosing the particular moment of the present from which he describes the past. Like Salacrou in *L'Inconnue d'Arras*, Faulkner has chosen for his present the infinitesimal instant of death. Thus, when Quentin's memory begins to enumerate his impressions ("Through the wall I heard Shreve's bed-springs and then his slippers on the floor hissing. I got up. . ."), *he is already dead*. So much art and, in fact, so much dishonesty only aim to

compensate for the author's lack of any intuitive knowledge of the future. Everything, and in particular the irrationality of time, in Faulkner now becomes clear. Since the present is the unexpected, the unshaped future can be determined only by an excess of memories. We realize that duration is "man's own misfortune." If the future has reality, time moves from the past and draws near the future; but if the future is suppressed, time is no longer that which separates, which cuts the present off from itself: ". . . you cannot bear to think that someday it will no longer hurt you like this. . . ." Man spends his life struggling against time; and, acid-like, time corrodes man, tears him from himself and keeps him from realizing his humanity. Everything becomes absurd: "[Life] is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."⁸

But is the time of man without a future? I can see that the nail, the clod of earth, the atom live in a perpetual present. But is man only a thinking nail? If we begin by plunging him into universal time, the time of nebulae and of planets, of tertiary formations and of animal species, as in a bath of sulfuric acid, the answer is obvious. It is nevertheless true, if we believe that time can be imposed from the outside, that a consciousness thus tossed from instant to instant would be a consciousness *first* and temporal *afterwards*. Consciousness can be "in time" only if it becomes time by that movement itself which makes it consciousness; to use Heidegger's phrase, it must "become time." In that case, it is no longer possible to stop man at each successive moment and to define him as the "sum of what have you." On the contrary, the nature of consciousness implies that it is projected into the future; we can understand what it is only by what it will become; it is determined in its present being by its own potentialities. This is what Heidegger calls "the silent strength of the possible." You won't recognize in yourself the Faulknerian man, a creature deprived of potentiality and explained only by what he was. If you try to fix your consciousness and examine it, you will see that it is hollow; you will find only futurity. I am not even talking about your plans or expectations; but the very gesture that you notice in its passing has meaning for you only if you project its completion outside itself, outside yourself, into the not-yet. The cup with its bottom which you do not see but which you could see, at the end of a movement not yet made—this white sheet of paper with its hidden verso which you could see if you turned the sheet—these, and all the stable and massive objects which surround us, extend their most immediate and solid qualities into the future. Man is not the

8. *Macbeth*, Act V, scene v.

sum of what he has, but the totality of what he does not yet have, of what he could have. And if we are thus immersed in the future, is not the irrational brutality of the present diminished? The event does not pounce upon us like a thief, since it is by its very nature a future-that-has-been. And is it not the task of the historian who explains the past to inquire first into its future? I am afraid that the absurdity Faulkner finds in human life was originally placed there by him. Not that life is not absurd, but that it has an absurdity different from what Faulkner ascribes to it.

Why have Faulkner and so many other writers chosen this particular absurdity, which is so far from the creative imagination and from truth? We must look for the reason in the social conditions of our present life. Faulkner's despair seems to me to be anterior to his metaphysic; for him, as for all of us, the future is barred. All that we see, all that we live through, incites us to say: "It can't last much longer"; we cannot, however, conceive of any change but a violent one. We live in a time of incredible revolutions, and Faulkner uses his extraordinary art to describe a world dying of old age, with us gasping and choking in it. I like his art, but I don't believe in his metaphysic. A barred future is still a future. "Even if human reality has nothing more 'ahead,' even if it has 'closed its accounts,' its being is still determined by this 'anticipation of itself.'" The loss of all hope, for example, does not deprive human reality of all possibilities; it is simply "a way of *being* in terms of those possibilities."⁹