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Dilsey and the Compsons

by Malcolm Cowley

Faulkner's attitude toward the blacks had changed during the—what is it?—thirteen years between *The Sound and the Fury* and *Go Down, Moses*. In *The Sound and the Fury* his attitude is more or less that of the Southern landowning class toward the Negroes. That is, they feel a sense of responsibility, a sense of kindness, and at the same time a sense that the Negroes represent another race which should occupy an inferior position. They're willing to help to the extent of their power, so long as the position remains inferior. Now, that's a Northerner's way of putting it, but I don't think it's too unreasonable. And, at the same time, on the level of personal relations very close relations are formed as, for example, between the Faulkner family and Caroline Barr—born 1840, approximately, and died in 1940—who was buried from the parlor at Rowan Oak with Faulkner giving her funeral tribute. She was very, very close to the family; and one can say in this case that Dilsey is founded on an actual figure—something one can't say of any other major character in *The Sound and the Fury*. In *Sartoris* the background of the story had been that of the Faulkner family, as it would be more clearly in *The Unvanquished*, 1938. But the Compsons are a created family in which we should not look for links to people living. So, to change the subject a little, I'll make it "Dilsey and the Compsons," or again, "Dilsey and the Structure and Meaning of *The Sound and the Fury*."

The Sound and the Fury was finished at the end of 1928. It was finished at a time when *Flags in the Dust*, Faulkner's preceding ambitious novel, was still traveling around looking vainly for a publisher. Finally, Harcourt, Brace said they would do it if it were cut. Faulkner wouldn't cut it. Ben Wasson did the cutting, and it was published as *Sartoris*. It has been lately republished in its entirety. But while this book on which he had labored mightily was making the rounds, Faulkner began to feel that he was never going to be published again. And he said to himself, "Now, I can write," meaning, "I can write without any attention whatever to what the public or publishers want to have."

What he wrote in *The Sound and the Fury* has had a deep effect on the course of American writing. Let us go back to the story. Every novel is supposed to have a story, but in *The Sound and the Fury* Faulkner is dealing not with a story, but essentially with a situation. A story is a situation leading to a sequence of events as the result of which something is changed. The story is irreversible. The story is like life, like time itself. But in this case rather than telling a story, Faulkner is dealing with a situation presented from different angles in widening circles of comprehension. The situation is the collapse of the Compson family. First, we see it from the angle of the feeble-minded son, who has no sense of sequential time and confuses the past with the present. Then, from the angle of a time-obsessed son on the day of his suicide. Then, from that of a third son, who thinks clearly but is mean and shortsighted, and for whom time is simply hurry, hurry, hurry for the next thing without a true comprehension of its value. Finally, we have the voice of an objective narrator—objective, not quite omniscient, but able to bring events at the Compsons' home into daylight. There's also an appendix written many years after the rest of the novel that records the earlier history of the family and the fate of the survivors. I had something to do with that appendix. I've told that story. I was making up *The Portable Faulkner*, making it on the basis of Faulkner's writing about Yoknapatawpha County from the very beginning, from Indian days down to the present; and I was worried about a passage to include from *The Sound and the Fury*. Well, my favorite passage was the Dilsey passage in the fourth part. I told that to Faulkner, but I said, "Couldn't you write two or three pages summarizing the earlier story?" And he said he'd try to do that. And just after he left Hollywood, you know, for good, he sat down and wrote off this appendix, which is admirable writing and which also contains a number of inconsistencies with the novel published in 1929. The biggest one that worried me was how Miss Quentin got out of her uncle's room. Did she climb down a pear tree, as in the original novel—a pear tree in blossom—or did she climb down the rain-spout? Well, Faulkner had changed it to a rainspout. I thought—I didn't care which he said; he was the boss man—but I thought it ought to be consistent. So, he said it was all right to change it to a pear tree when the appendix was printed in *The Portable Faulkner*. But when he printed it in the Modern Library edition, it became a

rainspout again. There were also a few inconsistencies in dates. For example, Caddy is married in the appendix in 1910, which is after Quentin—Mr. Quentin—had committed suicide on June 2. In the novel she's married in 1909, actually. These are the changes that Faulkner was, you might say, careless about. He'd say, "Well, I know more about these people now." But we had a good deal of correspondence about reconciling the differences, and they wouldn't completely reconcile at the end. Another little one is Luster. Luster is twelve years old, I think, in *The Sound and the Fury* and fourteen years old in the appendix.

Now, once this Compson family had included a governor of Mississippi and a general in the Confederate Army. Once, the Compson domain had been a square mile in the heart of Jefferson. But by 1909 it had been reduced to a rotting mansion, its grounds, and a big pasture. The family now consists of Mr. Compson, a hard-drinking lawyer without briefs; Mrs. Compson, proud, stupid, selfish, whining; and their four children. The eldest of these, Quentin, is in love with his sister but more in love with death. Candace, or Caddy, is a warm-hearted young woman bent on her own damnation. Jason is calculating and spiteful. And Benjy, the idiot son, loves only three things, Faulkner said, but actually four—the pasture, his sister Caddy, who was good to him, and firelight. The fourth came later on; it was Caddy's slipper, which they'd have to give him to stop his bellowing.

Nevertheless, in back of the situation, as it develops, we see a story. And the story has outlines that are absolutely clear and definite in the author's mind at that time. Faulkner had a definite scheme for events in the family. Quentin was born in 1890. Caddy was born in 1892. Jason was born in 1894. Maury, later Benjy, was born in 1895. Grandmother, that's Damuddy, died in 1899. In 1900 Maury's name was changed to Benjamin, and so on with later events. Caddy's wedding was in 1909. Quentin's suicide in June of 1910.

Comes the year 1928 and in three catastrophic days the family goes completely to pieces. Those three days are Good Friday, Holy Saturday, and Easter, so that simply the dating of this story would lead one to infer a religious connection. And some of the critics who have worked so hard on Faulkner have developed the picture of Benjy as a Christ-figure. Of course, Good Friday in 1928 was Benjy's thirty-third birthday; and Christ was thirty-three when he was cru-

cified. It seems to me, however, that the analogy of an idiot-boy with Christ is a little far-fetched and a little, shall we say, ironic. Nevertheless, there is indeed a strong religious feeling in the Easter service in the fourth part, in the Dilsey section of *The Sound and the Fury*.

Let us return to some other events that mightn't be clear. After several love affairs, Caddy becomes engaged to a rich Northerner, although she is two months pregnant by another man. Quentin tells his father that he has committed incest with Caddy. It is a false confession, but he wants to be joined with his sister in proud isolation. Not believing the confession, Mr. Compson sells the pasture to a golf club in order to give Caddy a fine wedding and Quentin a year at Harvard. Quentin uses up the year in a dutiful fashion and then commits suicide on the second of June, 1910. The Northerner divorces Caddy after refusing to acknowledge paternity of her child. Though the child is a girl, Caddy has named it Quentin after her brother. Mr. Compson quietly drinks himself to death. Caddy leaves the child with her mother and promises Jason, now head of the household, to send a monthly sum for its support. In 1913 Benjy awkwardly molests a little girl and, Mr. Compson being dead by that time, Jason has him castrated.

Everything goes to pieces on those three days beginning with Good Friday. Jason mistreats Miss Quentin, now seventeen years old. Miss Quentin retaliates by climbing along the rain gutter, breaking the window of Jason's room, prizing open his strongbox (which is in a drawer in the original text of *The Sound and the Fury*, but it's in a closet, now—wait a minute; no, it's in a closet in the original text and becomes a bureau drawer in the epilogue). And she takes his hoard, most of which was really hers, since it was the money that Caddy had sent for her support. Then she climbs down the pear tree, or the rainspout, and runs off with the pitchman in the circus, and is never heard of again. She is one of the characters that disappeared completely from the Yoknapatawpha saga. On the next morning, which is Easter Sunday, Jason pursues her vainly while Mrs. Compson lies in a state of collapse. And Dilsey, Benjy's only protector now, takes him to hear a sermon in a Negro church, and then says, "I seed the first and the last," when she returns to the spectrally quiet house.

Now let us return to the writing of the novel or, no, its inception in Faulkner's mind. "It began with a mental picture," he says in the

interview that he gave to Jean Stein for *Paris Review*. That interview, which is the best thing about Faulkner that I have read, can be found in *Paris Review Interviews*, the first series; and it's also reprinted in *Lion in the Garden*, a volume published by Random House. Incidentally, Faulkner wrote that interview, as I found out. I was editing that book, too, the *Paris Review Interviews*; and Jean Stein came in with the interview, asked me if it was all right. And I read it and was full of enthusiasm. But I said, "There's one place here where it could be expanded. There's something left hanging." "Oh," she said, "I'll get Mr. Faulkner to write that in." So, she carried it away and the next week she came back with the interview expanded. And the lesson that I got was that Faulkner was writing the whole thing partly as a favor to Jean Stein.

In regard to *The Sound and the Fury*, he says then, "The whole thing began with a mental picture." It's to be noted that other Faulkner books began with a mental picture. He had a strikingly visual mind, so that a picture would represent to him a story and, as I have said in the seminar classes, a story reaches a climax very often in a picture. But this picture was—as Faulkner said, "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." Now, that original image seems to have pointed toward a family, the girl and her three brothers, with a dead grandmother in the background to represent the past, destroyed by a moral stain, that is by the girl's promiscuity. But *The Sound and the Fury* was not one of the novels that carry out an original design. It grew and changed in the writing, as Faulkner makes clear in what follows. "I had already begun to tell the story," he says, "through the eyes of the idiot child, since I felt 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."

Now, that fourth part of the novel, in which Faulkner himself is the spokesman, is the objective part. What sort of spokesman is he? And what are the gaps he is filling in? For the most part, in this fourth section, he is an objective rather than an omniscient narrator. That is, he tells us how the characters looked, what they did, what they said, but he penetrates hardly at all into their minds. His attention is focused on Dilsey, who remains completely a person to be observed. Thus, he does not say, "Dilsey felt sad but uplifted." He says as if looking at her, "Dilsey made no sound. Her face did not quiver as the tears took their sunken and devious courses, walking with her head up, making no effort to dry them away even." This is Dilsey seen from outside. As for the gaps that the objective narrator is filling in, the biggest of them results from the method followed in the three earlier parts of the novel. It was the stream-of-consciousness method in all three, with the proviso that the Jason section is closer to being a simple interior monologue. It is a question whether Jason had a deeper self to reveal in a stream-of-consciousness.

Now, the three sections differ from one another to such an extent that they mark effective limits of the stream-of-consciousness method in three directions. But the fact remains that each of them records the flow of impressions and memories in a single mind. The method was new at that time—new but not completely novel, because James Joyce had used it in *Ulysses* and notably in the famous soliloquy that ends the book. Faulkner had read *Ulysses*, and later he said of it that it ought to be approached on your knees as a hardshell Baptist preacher approaches the Bible. There is a distant effect of *Ulysses* here, an effect that is also to be noted in the case of Thomas Wolfe, who thought that he was directly following *Ulysses* when he wasn't. What *Ulysses* had done for Faulkner was to release his imagination, to give him a picture of what could be done by utilizing a new method. And in the first part, told by an idiot, the method carries stream-of-consciousness beyond what any one else had tried until that time—in fact, carries it so far beyond that I defy any but the most gifted readers, any but readers of absolute genius, to tell what the hell is happening in the first section until they've read the

other three. Later on, a number of scholars, including George R. Stewart out at Berkeley with his whole seminar group; went to work on the Benjy section, and they found that it was extraordinarily well-ordered. There are, according to Stewart, thirteen time levels in Benjy's mind; and the memories will center around Damuddy's funeral, the change of the name of Benjy, the time when Caddy was being sparked on the lawn and put perfume on and Benjy came up to her and wailed because she didn't have her usual smell, she didn't "smell of trees," so she went to the bathroom and washed off the perfume and gave the bottle to Dilsey. Then another event, of course, is Caddy's marriage in 1909, and still another is Benjy's awkward running after the little girl. The change in time is indicated by changing type in that first section: wherever it runs into italics, the time of the memories in Benjy's mind is changing. And finally, those changes come quick and fast, in the last part. But once you have read the other three parts, then this business begins to coalesce suddenly as the wilderness did when Ike McCaslin first saw the bear. Now, in the second part, as you know, we have Quentin's memories on the day of his suicide. In the third part we have Jason's stream-of-consciousness, such as it is on Good Friday.

Now, one characteristic of the stream-of-consciousness method is that the flow is associational rather than sequential, so that the author finds it difficult to establish a temporal pattern of events. Of course, this difficulty is greatest in the first section, where Benjy has no sense of time whatever. But there's also a difficulty in the Quentin section as he passes rapidly from memories to actions on that day in June. Even Jason, too foxy for his own good, sometimes leaves us uncertain about time. [At this point the tape ran out, and the operator—entranced by the lecture? or simply absent-minded?—neglected to insert a new reel. What Mr. Cowley said can be reconstructed in part from his Afterword to the Dilsey section of *The Sound and the Fury* as it appears in *The Lesson of the Masters* (New York, 1971). Here is the apposite passage, reprinted by permission.] In the fourth part, however, the objective narrator gives us events in their strict temporal sequence, so that the *situation* Faulkner has been presenting now becomes a *story*, that is, a structure existing in time.

Besides temporal sequence, the other big gap filled in is the *look* of the characters. It is something hard to convey by the stream-of-consciousness method. We cannot *see* Benjy or Quentin or Jason as

long as we are inside their minds. We do not even see the other characters in the aspect they might present to strangers. In the fourth part, however, Faulkner as an objective narrator can use his talent for intense visualization. We now see all the members of the household except Quentin, dead for nearly eighteen years, and the girl Quentin, who in vanishing has left behind one stocking that dangles from a drawer and "a darned scarf dusted with powder and stained with rouge" as visible tokens of her personality.

DILSEY: She had been a big woman once but now her skeleton rose, draped loosely in unpadded skin that tightened again upon a paunch almost dropsical, as though muscle and tissue had been courage or fortitude which the days or the years had consumed until only the indomitable skeleton was left rising like a ruin or a landmark above the somnolent and impervious guts. [There is more about Dilsey all through the passage, which centers on her.]

BENJY: . . . a big man who appeared to have been shaped of some substance whose particles would not or did not cohere to one another or to the frame which supported it. His skin was dead looking and hairless; dropsical too, he moved with a shambling gait like a trained bear.

JASON and MRS. COMPSON: . . . the one cold and shrewd, with close-thatched brown hair curled into two stubborn hooks, one on either side of his forehead like a bartender in caricature, and hard eyes with black-ringed irises like marbles, the other cold and querulous, with perfectly white hair and eyes pouched and baffled and so dark as to appear to be all pupil or all iris.

BENJY and LUSTER: Ben shambled along beside Dilsey, watching Luster who anticked along ahead, the umbrella in his hand and his new straw hat slanted viciously in the sunlight, like a big foolish dog watching a small clever one.

In the writing of the novel, Faulkner's judgment of the Compsons has changed. They are no longer a family destroyed by the daughter's moral stain, and in fact Caddy herself has receded from view, leaving the girl Quentin as a surrogate. Now the girl vanishes in her turn, and Mrs. Compson takes Caddy's place as the spoiler. Reading the Dilsey section, one comes to feel that the mother's inability to love was responsible for everything: for the father's drinking himself to death, for Quentin's suicide, for Caddy's promiscuity, for Jason's spitefulness, and of course not for Benjy's feeble mind, but for the

neglect of him by others. Dilsey, mistreated as she is by Mrs. Compson, has become the only mother figure in the household.

That suggests another change in the author's attitude toward the Compsons. Where at first they were one particular family destroyed by the guilt of one member, they here—and even more in Faulkner's "Appendix," written many years later—come to stand for a whole social order. A crucial point is their relation with the Negroes of the household. "You've got a prize set of servants," Jason says to his mother. "I have to humour them," Mrs. Compson says. "I have to depend on them so completely. It's not as if I were strong." Indeed she is weak except in selfishness, and it is only because there are three Negroes living in the cabin behind the mansion that she can maintain her pride of family.

The Negroes are better than the Compsons by Faulkner's standards, and their superiority is shown in two essential ways. The first is in their treatment of Benjy—always a touchstone for characters in this novel—and the second is in their religious faith. The Compsons don't go to church on Easter morning and don't want to let the Negroes go, for fear they will let the fire die out in the kitchen stove. Jason is godless, as is the girl Quentin; and Mrs. Compson, who lets the Bible slip to the floor, regards God as a convenient protector of Southern gentilefolk. "It can't be simply to flout and hurt me," she says of Quentin's suicide and the girl Quentin's disappearance. "Whoever God is, He would not permit that. I'm a lady." Dilsey is not a lady, but after Reverend Shegog's sermon, she weeps quietly "in the annealment and the blood of the remembered Lamb."

The sermon is a masterly piece of writing. Faulkner does not summarize what the preacher said; instead he shows him in the pulpit and directly quotes part of the sermon, so that the reader is under the illusion of having heard it all. After each group of phrases he gives us the response of the congregation in separate voices rising above a low concerted hum: "Mmmmmmm . . . Yes, Jesus! Jesus!" We are there in the weathered church, forgetting the hard seats. For us the real burden of the sermon is not the repeated phrase "I got de ricklickshun en de blood of de Lamb!" but rather another of Reverend Shegog's pronouncements: "Dey passed away in Egypt, de swingin chariots; de generations passed away. Wus a rich man, whar he now, O breddren?" There were Compsons once, but the genera-

tions have passed away. Now we know what Dilsey means when she murmurs over the almost cold stove, "I seed the first en de last."

As for Dilsey and her descendants, Faulkner tells us in his "Appendix": "They endured."