The South and Religion in William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*

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Abstract

This paper argues that Benjy and Dilsey, the narrators of the first and last part of William Faulkner's The Sound and the Fury, function as loyal embodiments of the image of the South and of the religious feelings and beliefs fostered by the author's particular vision of the South. Terms like the soul of the South, the mind of the South, pastoral grace, refinement, the Southern Belle, the myth of chivalry or tradition, used in relation with a literary and cultural movement called the Southern Renaissance, end up defining a world long after the realities that made that world were themselves obsolete. Even though Benjy lacks the possibility to express himself and Dilsey cannot explain what the beginning and the ending really are, it is Faulkner's intention to make them representative for his artistic creed.

Keywords: *William Faulkner, literary criticism, pastoral grace, myth, religion, the South.*

Dealing with the metaphors of Incarnation,[1] Faulkner brings up two distinct and serious literary themes**.** On the one hand, the author is faced with the intricate images of the South, and with his own projection of a fictional space, that of the Yoknapatawpha County. On the other hand, still related, but leading to another direction, there are the religious or mythical visions of the characters peopling this particular space, together with Faulkner's own religious beliefs. Even if these two themes are constantly interwoven, this paper is an attempt to argue that Benjy and Dilsey, the so-called narrators of the first and last part[2] of *The Sound and the Fury*

[1] "Faulkner seems to think of writing as a kind of consecration. And he seems to consider the characters in his stories as if they were performing a ritual, enthralled by the same sense of dedication as his own. The writing in relating to ritual is taking part in it, in a religious effort to justify the sense of consecration." (Arthos, 1954, p. 101) Also, "the word can be made flesh" is one of Benn Michaels's assumptions in discussing The Sound and the Fury (Michaels, 1995, p. 2).

[2] In Dilsey's own words, "I seed de beginning, en now I sees de endin" (p. 185).

function as loyal embodiments of the Faulknerian image of the South and of the religious feelings and beliefs fostered by this particular vision of the South.

Moreover, Faulkner claims, be it directly or not, for him the challenging status of a world-creator,[3] thus having the creative power of the word under intense scrutiny. Nonetheless, his consecutive narratives reveal a world in itself, a world having as its foundation both the projection and the retrospection of a loss. The outcome of such an endeavor is a challenge Faulkner does not hesitate to confront. Writing about loss, dissolution and fall brings about the author's vision of the South as a doomed reality, lacking proper ways of expression and, as a terrible consequence, unable to be created as such.

Cultural critics and historians often refer to the South as perceived by the Southerners as the embodiment of a "lost cause" which was provoked by their defeat in the Civil War. In fact, the war and, soon after, the Reconstruction efforts face the Southerners with difficult identity issues. As the generations are able to trace themselves back to the first colonizers, they seem now to lack the power and strength to replicate further. Everything they believed in comes to a halt and it is replaced by an illusion, because "[t]he author is concerned with the creation or recreation of a world specifically based on false dreams of departed glories" (Gresham, p. xii).[4] An investigation of these illusions will clearly expose the Southern myth.

Terms like the soul of the South, the mind of the South, pastoral grace, refinement, the Southern Belle, the myth of chivalry, tradition, etc., used in relation with a literary and cultural movement called the Southern Renaissance, end up defining a world long after the realities that made that world possible were themselves obsolete. Moreover, they are powerful enough to demarcate the past from the present, the old from the new. Even if they have never signified real entities, they are regarded as potent burdens by those incapable of reaching out to their forefathers deeds. When Richard H. King characterizes the "Southern family romance" as representative for the "South's dream", he accentuates the common belief that perceived "society as the family writ large. […] The actual family was destiny; and the region was conceived of as a vast metaphorical family, hierarchically organized and organically linked by (pseudo-)ties of blood" (King

[3] Faulkner himself considered his writing like a religious endeavor and referred to Sartoris as "the germ of my apocrypha" (Gwynn & Blotner, p. 285).

[4] Ascribing four themes (self, sex, race and religion) to four novels (Sartoris, The Sound and the Fury, Light in August and Absalom, Absalom!) Gresham's study concentrates on the romantic concept of "selfhood" (identity) as rendered by the prototype of the Cavalier, seriously damaged by sexual, racial and religious issues, which the Southern idealism could not hide nor solve.

250).[5] As expected, the father is the "presiding presence", a stereotype of medieval Cavalier, leading the war against the Yankees, whereas the mother is looking after the children and the slaves.

The acuity of this patriarchal pattern is totally subverted in the case of the Compson family. True to it in the past, the family seems to have lost the mythical structure, even though Quentin still strives to recapture it in his failed incestuous attempts. His death, his suicide, represents Faulkner's take on the dissolution of the myth of the South itself.[6]

In fact, Faulkner's attempt is to re-mythologize the South. His literary account of the South, both the old and the new one, blends history and religion in an effort to reconcile myth and history. Commenting on Richard King, John Irwin and David Minter, John Sykes argues that "Faulkner saw the cultural edifice of the South as a mythic construct which sought to evade history" and he disputes that the author of *The Sound and the Fury* "seeks to fashion a new myth through art in order to supply the imagination with the order lacking in history itself". Sykes, then, concludes that "Faulkner's project in the Yoknapatawpha fiction is a religious enterprise" (Sykes 15).[7]

Religion, like everything else in Faulkner's writing, is far from being unequivocal. Ambiguity, multiplicity and plurivocality undergo the test of the religious pattern in *The Sound and the Fury*. This is a fact clearly identified by William Mallard in his study *The Reflection of Theology in Literature*. In the chapter consecrated to Faulkner's novel, Mallard concludes that

[5] It is interesting to note that there are also critics who dismiss the acuity and relevance of a Southern myth. For instance, in her essay "Faulkner's American", republished in the critical edition of the novel, Carolyn Porter argues that instead of being a "remembrance of a glorious time passed" the Southern narrative served the interests of the "aspiring men" who reinvented the Old South for the pure economical reason of using its resources.

[6] In the essay "Faulkner's Fiction and Southern Society", also republished in the critical edition of the novel, Myra Jehlen discerns between two perspectives regarding the South, that of the farmer and of the planter, and contends that Faulkner was unable to fully approve of either of one. In Jehlen's view the "hopelessness of The South and the Fury is the author's failure to visualize the past in other than conventional terms", that is, in the terms of the patriarchal Southern family, whereas my belief is that Faulkner's vision of the past, far from being conventional, plays with the convention in order to construct an artistic distinctiveness capable of explaining the dissolution of the myth.

[7] Sykes argues that Faulkner's "ultimate hope, partially realized in Go Down, Moses, is to discover a myth which will reclaim history, but in the bulk of his great fiction the relation between myth and history is simply antithetical", whereas I contend that in The Sound and the Fury history and myth are not antithetical, since they are represented by Benjy and Dilsey, characters who are everything else but antithetical.

> *In the past, Christian commentary on Faulkner's work has suggested that the characters of Benjy and Dilsey are bearers of grace in the novel. But this is to give up the center of the novel to "sin and damnation" in order to find the redeeming Christian God in the book at some other point. Rather, Benjy and Dilsey share in the entire structure, which must be judged as a whole. A reminiscence of the Christian story is present: yet the theology is a reflection in which the lines between God incarnate and the general human condition are inconclusive*. (Mallard, p. 181)

While it gives good reasoning to the assumption that Benjy and Dilsey are also capable of redeeming their entire reality, Mallard's point also argues Faulkner's theological reflection as well.

Interestingly enough, commentators imposed various religious expressions on the author as well as on his work. A synopsis of all these aspects is realized by Alma A. Ilacqua in the article "From Purvey of Perversion to Defender of the Faithful". As far as the author is concerned, Faulkner was read, almost from the beginning of his prodigious career, as a traditional moralist and his religious vision consisted of "a series of related myths (or aspects of a single myth) built around the conflict between traditionalism and anti-traditional modern world in which it is immersed" (Ilacqua, 1981, p. 35). This conflict, and with it, the polarity good and evil, with Calvinist, Puritan or Nihilistic influences is considered to be the foundation of Faulkner's religious plight. The shift from the immorality of his world, as seen by early commentators when faced with the brutality, the skepticism and the inhumanity of Faulkner's writing, to the morality of his literary endeavor posits the author in a real religious perspective, in which sin and damnation are redeemable.

Religious symbols represent vehicles for conveying literary meaning and character contour. *The Sound and the Fury* uses innumerable Biblical symbols in an attempt to originally portray the fall of a family and, with it, the fall of a historical epoch. Blasphemy and orthodoxy interweave in Faulkner's novel in an effort to better express the author's vision of a both doomed and redeemable reality. Following the Biblical pattern of creating a world by the power of his word, Faulkner argues that the word has lost its creative power leaving the world to replicate itself. The historical time and its progression are featured in opposition with an original blend of mythical time and its constant repetition.

Benjy's apprehension of time is representative for Faulkner's idea of his major fictional design of the Yoknapatawpha County. That is, Benjy, as a character, simply exists, as the county itself has its own history, without having a clear definition of time and its progression. The fact that he turns 33 in the Holy Saturday of 1928 places him exactly between historical and mythical time, i.e. a day after Crucifixion and a day before Resurrection. Thus, Crucifixion represents

history, while Resurrection represents religion. Moreover, Benjy's inability to speak, that is to communicate and interrelate with the others and with the surrounding reality, clearly demonstrates his impossibility to integrate into a natural development. Even if he is physically turning 33 he is in no position of acquiescing this fact, leaving him outside history and religion. As Dilsey, Benjy is a witness, rather than an actor, of the fall, historically represented by the decline of the Southern society, and literary rendered by Caddy's loss of virginity.

Moreover, for Dilsey, the Crucifixion and the Resurrection represent the beginning and the end in an effort of restoring the natural order over the social one. It might be the end of history, represented by the fall of an epoch, clearly rendered by the impotence of all the three Compson male heirs, but, for Dilsey, the natural law, the unequivocal order of things, her own sense of religion make her feel that redemption is attainable at the price of sacrifice. The novel's use of the temporal structure ironically pairs Dilsey's beliefs. The fact that Benjy's section opens the novel partly represents the "beginning". The reader is introduced into a reality which is chaotic, a-temporal and representative for a Faulknerian sample of an uncreated world. Quentin's section brings along some sense of order, by imposing the myth of the Southern tradition over the yet uncreated world. Finally, the last two sections actually represent the full embodiments of Crucifixion and Resurrection, be it only for the reason that they are chronologically placed on the Good Friday and Easter Sunday. Thus the novel ends with Dilsey's natural revelations as counteracting Jason's social and familial repulsions.

The New South as Benjy

In *The Sound and the Fury* William Faulkner represents the fall of the South through the fall of a famous aristocratic family. The fall itself is expressed through a powerful series of losses: the loss of purity, the loss of authority, the loss of fortune, and, eventually, the loss of the Southern American pastoral innocence. The outcome of such a fall soon exhibits a sense of blurred reality which provokes the characters to make serious efforts to re-order it. For Benjamin alone this new sense of reality is the only available reality, and its order is his order. When Faulkner experiments with the new limited objective narrative of Benjy's section, he experiments with his own vision of the new South, because Benjy represents the new South, both as a doomed force and as a redemptive one.

After the Civil War and the Restoration this new South is on a search for a new identity. In his novel, Faulkner deals with this search in various ways. One of them pairs Benjy's vision of reality with the new Southern reality and his actions,

combined with the other characters' attitude toward Benjy shape this reality. When Maury's retardation is discovered, the family, Mrs. Compson especially, wants to change his name into Benjamin. "Benjamin came out from the bible" (p. 37) Caddy informs Dilsey, who does not understand the relevance of such an endeavor, because "name aint going to help him. Hurt him, neither" (p. 37). Dilsey is basically right, but she fails to understand that this baptism is going to help or hurt at a symbolical level those who have advocated this name change. Benjamin "it's a better name for him than Maury" (p. 37) for a couple of reasons. First, as soon as she realizes that her last born is going to be mentally retarded, Mrs. Compson needs a new name to replace the old one in order to exonerate her family's good name, because Maury would probably be a shame for her brother's reputation, Maury Bascomb.

Second, Benjamin is constantly referred to as a punishment for Mrs. Compson: "I thought that Benjamin was punishment enough for any sins I have committed" (p. 65). That is to say that Mrs. Compson is acknowledging her sins and is now accepting her son as a burden meant to redeem her. In fact, one of the Biblical translations of the name is "the son of sorrow" – "Benjamin the child of my sorrowful" (p. 109). The other one refers to "the son of my right arm", the right arm being the south, which makes Benjamin the "son of the south", hence Benjy being the South in Faulkner's vision.

As soon as Maury becomes Benjamin, the boy's status changes inside the family, as well as inside the development of the novel. For his mother, the name itself seals her faith, becoming in time an omen for the sacrifices she is supposed to endure by marrying "a man who held himself above me" (pp. 65-6). She willingly takes the blame for her family's misfortune by trying to play the role of a great tragic character. When she learns about Caddy's pregnancy, Mrs. Compson explains "I see now that I have not suffered enough I see now that I must pay for your sins as well as mine" (p. 66). This represents Mrs. Compson's confirmation of the sins she now has to redeem.

Moreover, the wages of sin make her slowly acknowledge herself as a burden for the family when she says: "I know I'm just a burden to you" (p. 139) and her long-projected death signifies for her redemption itself: "I'll be gone soon. Then you will be rid of my bothering" (p. 40). Even though her laments and wailings are treated with irony by her husband, and sarcasm by Jason, Mrs. Compson takes her sorrow in serious terms. That is why, for her, her sorrow and her self-proclaimed suffering are not to be questioned. Once they have been comfortably embodied in Maury's new name, everybody must acknowledge it. She fiercely scolds Caddy when the sister wants to take care of her helpless

brother: "You humor him too much. You don't realize that I am the one who has to pay for it" (p. 41). Everything outside her suffering is vulgar, common, and silly: "It was bad enough when your father insisted on calling you by that silly nickname, and I will not have him called by one. Nicknames are vulgar. Only common people use them. Benjamin" (p. 41). For the daughter, Benjy is a helpless human being in need of love, care and protection; for the mother, Benjamin is merely a name, an alibi for a self inflicted sorrowful faith.

Benjy's mental illness projects upon himself and upon the other characters a special kind of stigma, which functions as a powerful symbol. The fact that he is denied the power of speech implies that the others can always take action on his behalf, by trying to use Benjy as a signifier for two different realities. For Dilsey and Caddy, his real mother figures, and possibly for Quentin I and Mr. Compson, Benjy is an innocent soul, "the Lawd child", in need of love, care and attention. For Mrs. Compson, Jason, and Quentin II, as well as for some of the people in Jefferson, Benjy is just an idiot, a retarded person, a burden, whose place is in the mental institution in Jackson.

This constant balance between two different representations, between an innocent soul and a shameful and burdensome body, leaves Benjamin very limited options. In fact, all his movements are within confined areas. The fact that these areas can be divided into two contrasting sets of "prisons" does not abolish the reality of his entrapment. Moreover, he is always guarded. On the one hand, there are his real "prisons": his body, the kitchen, or the yard. In these places he is "fenced" all around. His castration and his eventual seclusion in the mad house leave him no way out. On the other hand, there are potential liberating "prisons". His pasture, the fireplace and the library, his cemetery, as well as the church are obvious hints to a possible sense of freedom. Even though the pasture is sold and he burns his hand in the fire, an eminent redemptive feeling allows Faulkner to portray the South after the fall as embodied in Benjy's doomed character, acknowledging his dispossession of property and his denial of knowledge as a new reality he is forced to cope with.

Perhaps, the greatest challenge of Faulkner's narrative of the new South as being a sign is that it does not have a voice, therefore it cannot communicate. For Benjy, both a soul and a burden, the impossibility of expression outside his own significance is the ultimate sense of confinement. Soul locked inside body, body trapped inside a limited space – these all represent the new reality of the South. Benjy's only communicative actions, his trials of breaking his limitations are rendered by constant wailing and bellowing, as well as by innumerable attempts to get out through the gate. But he is always guarded by three generations of the

family's servants, themselves prisoners on the Compsons' domain. He is hushed, whipped and, in the end, castrated. His only comfort is in toying with surrogates of unattainable dimensions. A mudded slipper represents Caddy's way out, by willingly choosing a new reality outside family and conventions; similarly, his graveyard represents another way out, in death, an exit chosen by both his father and brother.

His lack of expression invariably leads him toward his damnation. The first time he manages to get out of the gate alone is also the last: "I opened the gate and they stopped, turning. I was trying to say, and I caught her, trying to say, and she screamed and I was trying to say and trying and the bright shapes began to stop and I tried to get out" (p. 34). In this crucial scene, his intended action is misread. What is thought to be an attempted rape is in fact his ultimate effort to express himself, by asking the girl about Caddy. His lack of language conditions the loss of his manhood.

His limitation and lack of a voice thus represent Faulkner's vision of a new South which did not find its voice. But a reality without language is nothing but chaos. And yet, Benjy's constant attempts to free himself from his condition leave space for a possible order. Any fall is ultimately followed by resurrection. Redemption is embedded in doom.

For Benjy the fences that imprison him do not represent barriers. They keep him inside, but they also contain gates, passages, which might allow him to get through. It is true that at the beginning the gate represented Caddy's return form school, which symbolizes a return to love and maternal security, and, with this, a sense that whatever exists outside the gate might be freeing and liberating. That is why the three places he is allowed to leave for can represent redemptive journeys. Just by being outside his symbolic prison, these three places cease to represent maternal security, becoming more and more an ordered reality.

When Mrs. Compton takes Benjy to the cemetery (one of the places outside), and T.P. replaces Roskus as the carriage driver, Benjy has a clear sense of the passage: "We went through the gate, where it didn't jolt anymore" (p. 7). This means that outside the world is structured, lean and smooth, in complete contrast with the world inside. Moreover, it opens with a road, a way toward something, even if that something is the cemetery. A few lines further, Benjy gets a glimpse of freedom: "Then it was broader" (p. 7), meaning that there is possible way for action.

Similarly, when Dilsey takes Benjy to the church (the second place outside his confinement), by ceasing his moaning, Benjy realizes he is on a possible way out: "They reached the gate. Dilsey opened it. They passed out the gate. Ben

ceased" (p. 180). By contrast, when they return, he starts whimpering: "They reached the gate and entered. Immediately Ben began to whimper again" (p. 185). His going to the church is meaningful enough, but his idea of adopting a different behavior once he leaves through the gate signals that here is a place where he needs to try to overcome the stranded reality. Probably, it is time to try to start talking. Finally, the third place outside is at the branch. But this is not a real way out. Still, it gives Benjy a sense of the world outside just by going along the fence and passing through the "broken place" (p. 3) in it. The snagging nail is there to inform him about his confinement.

The way they are, these three places outside can signify a certain Biblical load to Benjy's attempts for redemption. Leaving aside, the church and the cemetery and other religious hints in the text, the branch can represent the river of Jordan and Benjy's baptism. His repeated going back to the branch has two meanings. On the one hand, this is the place where the Compson's falling was foreshadowed by Caddy's wetting her dress. On the other hand, this might be the place where the resurrection might be predicted, by Benjy being degraded embodiments of either Christ or John the Baptizer. Doom and redemption are thus combined.

The moment when Maury becomes Benjamin is a critical point in Faulkner's vision. Even if it has no relevance for the character himself, the name change succeeds in dividing the family into its original components: the Compsons and the Bascombs. Following the painful discovery of Maury's mental illness, the name change brings compassion and love for Benjy's innocent soul or shame and disgust for his retarded mind and useless body. Metaphorically, for the Compsons – Mr. Compson, Quentin and Caddy – Benjy represents a reality they cannot cope with, that is why they all choose to desert it, leaving Dilsey alone to substitute their care and attention for Benjy. For the Bascombs – Mrs. Compson, Maury Bascomb and Jason – Benjamin is a reality they would rather use or deny, for their own benefit. Thus, Mrs. Compson considers Benjamin a punishment for her sins and also, through self-induced suffering, a vehicle for salvation. The use of Benjy's ambivalence, sin-salvation, doom-redemption, is best reflected in Maury Bascomb's case. The adulterous letters that Benjy dispatches for his uncle perpetrate without a doubt a sinful affair. But when he fails to deliver the letter to Mrs. Patterson, when Mr. Patterson intercepts the letter, Benjy is in a position of exposing the affair, ending it and giving his uncle a chance for salvation. Benjy's eventual confinement into a mental institution will signify his ultimate negation. By doing that, Jason will not only deny a certain reality, but he will also deny a final chance for redemption.

This separation within the same family, between the Bascombs and the Compsons, between the mother's and father's side, represents Benjy's attempt to re-order reality. By not being a Bascomb or a Compson, Benjy is Faulkner's vision of the new South. Both innocent and full of sin, the new reality is in search for a way of expression, constantly denied, but presumably there, in Benjy's repeated attempts to exit the gate.

The New South as Dilsey

Language and its power of action play an important role in the last section of the novel as well. But contrary to Benjy's futile efforts of apprising language, in Dilsey's case language is no longer a goal. At the same time, language is no more than a means of communicating the world. For Dilsey, language is a way of assessing identity and transcending the social order into a natural and mythical one. In her mind, as well as in her beliefs, she does not have to relate to language as Benjy does. Moreover, she does not have to influence it, like Quentin uselessly tries to, in his efforts to create a reality out of his verbal fantasies. All she has to do is to re-act to language and simply assert her presence into a world which finds itself written, i.e., created, from the beginning until its end.

When Caddy informs her about Maury's change of name, Dilsey clearly expresses her natural beliefs in the preeminence of religious expression, represented by her presence in the Book, and accepts with stoicism the "wearing out"[8] of her name in this world:

> *Benjamin came out of the bible, Caddy said. It's a better name for him than Maury was.*
>
> *How come it is, Dilsey said.*
>
> *Mother says it, Caddy said.*
>
> *Huh, Dilsey said. Name aint going to help him. Hurt him, neither. Folks don't have no luck, changing names. My name been Dilsey since fore I could remember and it be Dilsey when they's long forgot me.*
>
> *How will they know it's Dilsey, when it's long forgot, Dilsey, Caddy said.*
>
> *It'll be in the Book, honey, Dilsey said. Writ out.*
>
> *Can you read it, Caddy said.*
>
> *Wont have to, Dilsey said. They'll read it for me. All I got to do is say Ise here.* (pp. 37-38)

[8] In the appendix written long after the publication of the novel, Faulkner refers to Dilsey with an integrating and intriguing phrase: "They endured!" (p. 215).

As it is, this childlike[9] dialogue has unexpected influences for the consequent development of the novel.

First of all, it indirectly instills in Caddy a strong belief that her future deeds are beyond her control and that she can eventually assume responsibility for her actions, but she cannot be blamed for them, since everything she will do has already been written out. Then, the dialogue clearly unites Benjy and Dilsey under the auspices of religious symbolism. While Benjy "comes from the bible", Dilsey has her name "writ out in the Book". The difference between the "bible" and the "Book" is that between the social order or history and the natural order or Faulkner's vision of religion. As shown before, Benjy represents the realities of the new South as an entity that lacks expression, but it is on the verge of acquiring religious significance due to Benjy's resemblance to a Christ figure. As it remains to be shown, Dilsey represents Faulkner's projection of natural order and religiousness, due to Dilsey's emphasis, in her dialogue with Caddy, on the importance of every people's significance over their names, considered to be mere signs. Moreover, when significance and sign melt down into a perennial identity, like in Dilsey's name "writ out in the Book", it is obvious that this Book is Faulkner's creation of his apocrypha.

The interplay between the sign and its significance also constitutes a major achievement in Faulkner's depiction of the sermon Reverend Shegog is giving to Dilsey's congregation on the Easter Sunday. Donna L. Potts argues that Faulkner's perspective resembles the folk art which is characterized by faulty vision and emphasis on pattern and detail. Thus, the church is on a scene which is "as flat and without perspective as a painted cardboard set upon the ultimate edge of the flat earth"; the church is a room decorated "with sparse flowers from kitchen gardens and hedgerows, and with streams of crepe paper"; "a battered Christmas bell" hangs above the pulpit (p. 182); the men are "staid, hard brown or black, with gold watch chains and now and then a stick"; the children wear "garments bought second hand of white people" (p. 181). The reverend himself is an "undersized insignificant looking man" (p. 182).

Once the sermon begins, everything changes. The flat earth gains symbolical perspective, the "tortured crucifix" counterpoints the Christmas bell and Reverend Shegog transcends his "shabbiness and insignificance" (p. 183). Even though the preaching is a mere rehearsal of major critical points in the Bible which resemble

[9] "[T]he family romance also claimed that blacks were «childlike» and thus permanent members of the metaphorical Southern family." (King, 1994, p. 254).

the thematic patterns of naïve folk art, the impact of the word is beyond control.[10] By wearing himself out, "he was like a worn small rock whelmed by the successive waves of his voice" (p. 183), and by being incarnated into the word, "with his body he seemed to feed the voice that, succubus like, had fleshed its teeth in him" (p. 183), Reverend Shegog enters Dilsey's vision and reaches significance. In fact, the whole congregation is consumed by his voice:

> *and the congregation seemed to watch with its own eyes while the voice consumed him, until he was nothing and they were nothing and there was not even a voice but instead their hearts were speaking to one another in chanting measures beyond the need for words, so that when he came to rest against the reading desk, his monkey face lifted and his whole attitude that of a serene, tortured crucifix that transcended its shabbiness and insignificance and made of it no moment, a long moaning expulsion of breath rose from them.* (p. 183)

This whole transformation happens only when the Reverend gives up his white man's language and this signifies a transition from the white man's bible, from history, to Dilsey's Book and religion. The reading desk is there, the Reverend rests against it like a "tortured" but "serene" crucifix and Dilsey is ready, if asked for, to respond "Ise here".

After the sermon, on the way home, Dilsey lets Frony know that she has seen "de first en de last" (p. 185). But these words, Dilsey's "I've seed de first and de last", with the variation "I seed de beginning, en now I sees de endin" (p. 185) are

[10] Dealing with the relevance of Reverend Shegog's Easter sermon, in a chapter discussing the American nativism in his book "Our America", Benn Michaels argues that in The Sound and the Fury a certain fantasy about the language doubles a fantasy about the family. His suggestion is that the sign "might function, in effect, onomatopoetically, without reliance upon a system of syntactic and semantic conventions" and that the family "might maintain itself incestuously, without reliance upon the legal conventions that turn otherwise unrelated persons into husband and wife" (p. 2). While Benn Michaels's take is rather complex and draws upon the relations the Compson brothers have with their sister (as in Quentin's case) or with her substitutes (Benjy with the caddie and Jason with Quentin the niece) in order to present "identitarian claims" based on "difference" and not on "inferiority", two of his basic assumptions give substance to my paper. First, the notion of transubstantiation, "once the sign becomes the thing it need no longer function as a thing" (p. 5), gives credit to Faulkner's attempt to present Dilsey as his religious vision of the South, since Dilsey's transformation is achieved during the Easter sermon. Second, Benn Michaels writes that "every chapter in The Sound and the Fury involves the effort to replace arbitrary or social relations with natural ones, which is to say that every chapter imagines the disappearance of the of the sister, Caddy, as the introduction of the arbitrary, and so every chapter involves some attempt to keep her from going or to imagine her brought back" (pp. 5-6). This is basically true and there is no doubt about the fact that Caddy's sexuality brought the fall of the natural order, hence the recurrent efforts of bringing her back and thus restoring the world as before the fall, but I contend that Dilsey, as Faulkner's representative of religiousness, is able to bring back a certain sense of the natural order, without the need for Caddy's recovery, since Caddy, along with her sexuality, is comprised within the natural order.

a doubling of Reverend Shegog's visionary sermon, the way his "I got the ricklickshun en de blood of de Lamb" (p. 184) is a doubling of the previous white-voiced "I got the recollection and the blood of the Lamb!" (p. 183). Explaining this address, Benn Michaels questions its significance: "Does the bread and wine eaten and drunk "in remembrance" of Jesus *symbolize* Jesus (and thus remember him while acknowledging his absence) or does it *embody* him ("This is my body") (and thus remember him by making him present)?" (p. 4). He then answers that "in Reverend Shegog's sermon […] language appears to achieve the identity of word and thing" (p. 4). Thus, with a second degree referent, Dilsey is able to see the beginning and the end in Reverend Shegog's sermon. Unable to read, Dilsey *sees* everything in the Book: "de light en de word", the Calvary, "de resurrection en de light" again. Redemption is finally possible: "I sees the doom crack en de golden horns shoutin down the glory, en de arisen dead whut got de blood en de ricklickshun of de Lamb" (p. 185). In the end, Dilsey herself is *seeing* the teachings of the Book.

The sermon is over and Dilsey cries without sound as a consequence of her transformation, making her daughter ashamed of her mother's tears. When Dilsey tries to explain her revelation, Frony bluntly questions her "Firs en last whut?" (p. 185). The reply returns with "Never you mind" and this is Faulkner's way out of his plight by positioning Dilsey's religious beliefs beyond words. Like Benjy, who "sat, rapt in his sweet blue gaze" (p. 185), Dilsey is witnessing an experience she cannot put into words. Analyzing this "verbal impotence", Alexander J. Marshall notes that

> *The sermon evokes the ultimate nonverbal response, a "concerted" "Mmmmmmmmmmm!" from the congregation, "and still another, without words, like bubbles rising in water". Even one member's attempt at analysis finds language insufficient – "He sho a preacher, mon! He didn't look like much at first, but hush!" – the concluding imperative a colloquial inexpressibility topos. The entire sermon has been towards this silence, the effective death of the word. It is Faulkner's religious paradox: only through its apparent death can the finite signifier hope to transcend its limitations; the death of the Word is the precondition of its resurrection. Like the soul that comes from God and only through death can return to everlasting life, the word comes from the silence of the writer's creative imagination and can only find meaning in the silence of the reader's re-creation.* (p. 187)[11]

[11] A few lines further, Marshall provides an interesting reading of the novel narrative technique as being summarized by Reverend Shegog's sermon which "recapitulates in reverse the narrative strategies of the novel itself, from the cold, rational "white man's language" of Jason to the irrational language of Quentin to the meaningless yet meaning-full moan of Benjy. The sermon is an eloquent example of transcendent, nonverbal communication in a world of verbal impotence".

Marshall is right and considering the fact that the characters also come from the "silence of the writer's imagination", both Benjy and Dilsey are capable of finding meaning in their silence, natural in Benjy's case, supernatural in Dilsey's.

Conclusion

In the end, the assumption that Benjy represents Faulkner's projection of the new South and Dilsey fulfills the author's vision of the religious beliefs undergoing the new reality is reinforced by the relations the two characters have with Mrs. Compson. Her hypochondria and senseless behavior make her a destitute image of the old South. A bad mother for all her children, including her grand-daughter for whom she wants to be a real mother[12], but fails miserably, as well as a whimsical and neurotic master, Mrs. Compson helps the development of the two characters in representing Faulkner's vision. She is the one who changes Maury's name into Benjamin and her deed, considered the consequence of a superstition, sets forth Benjy's transformation. With no links to the past, symbolically represented by Mrs. Compson's brother's name Maury, Benjy comes to embody the new reality. Thus, the new South, entrapped in Benjy's image, is in search of a new identity and of a new way of expression. More than that, the religious element also originates in Mrs. Compson's attitude toward religion. Not only that Benjamin "comes from the bible", as Caddy informs Dilsey, but, for Mrs. Compson, her son is a "burden" and a "punishment", as the new reality certainly is for those who cherish the old one. But this is a paradox, since Mrs. Compson relates to religion more out of constraint than out of belief. For example, she tells her brother that "nobody knows how I dread Christmas" and that "I am not one of those women who can stand things. I wish for Jason's and the children's sakes I was stronger" (p. 6); and Jason, her son, bluntly questions her "You never resurrected Christ, did you?" (p. 174). By contrast, Dilsey, who does not dread Christmas and resurrects Christ, ends up playing the role of the real mother figure for the Compson family.

This fact is, above all, accentuated by Dilsey's religious beliefs, in natural order, and the protective duty of nature. The difference between Dilsey and Mrs. Compson, between their own personal religious feelings is conclusive once the two women are presented together, like in this short encounter from the Easter Sunday:

[12] The way Mrs. Compson relates to Quentin, Caddy's daughter, lays down two intriguing interpretations. Either that Mrs. Compson considers Quentin to be Caddy, thus trying to treat her like a daughter, or she considers herself Caddy, thus trying to escape a Southern tradition, and like Caddy to oppose it.

"You might hand me my bible."

"I give hit to you dis maning, befo I left."

"You laid it on the edge of the bed. How long did you expect it to stay there?"

Dilsey crossed tot the bed and groped among the shadows beneath the edge of it and found the bible, face down. She smoothed the bent pages and laid the book on the bed again. Mrs. Compson didn't open her eyes. Her hair and the pillow were the same color, beneath the wimple of the medicated cloth she looked like an old nun praying. "Don't put it there again," she said, without opening her eyes. "That's where you put it before. Do you want me to have to get out of the bed to pick it up?"

Dilsey reached the book across her and laid it on the broad side of the bed. "You cant see to read, noways," she said. "You want me to raise de shade a little?"

"No. Let them alone." (p. 187)

Everything, from the position of the Bible, "face down", and the attitude, wanting the Bible, but not reading it, to her depiction as an old nun praying with her eyes closed, makes Mrs. Compson a false pretense of motherhood and religious feelings. In opposition, Dilsey is helpful, active and determined. This encounter, following Dilsey's participation to the Easter sermon, with her family and Benjy, describes her religious experience and sense of redemption, by the way she handles the Bible and by her willingness to raise the shades so Mrs. Compson can read. Dilsey is a messenger Mrs. Compson denies.

Mrs. Compson's refusal of light (so she can read the Bible) represents her inability to relate both to her son and servant, who, unlike her, have seen the light. The Easter sermon functions as a transition from "bible" (narrating the realities of the old South) to the "Book" (the new South), from historical order to a religious order. In fact, Reverend Shegog's sermon links the Genesis to the Revelation in an effort to redeem and restore the natural order, as represented by Benjy and Dilsey. The Compsons history, as representative for the Southern society, is passing to a new level. All the critical points of their story are matched with counterparts from the biblical saga. Thus, "Dey passed away in Egypt, de swinging chariots, de generations passed away" (p. 184) represents the Exodus, an in Faulkner's account of the Compsons four characters choose to pass away, Jason and Quentin in death, Caddy and Quentin in the world; "I sees the Calvary" (p. 184) is the symbolic illustration of Benjy's distress; finally, "I sees the resurrection en de light; sees de meek Jesus sayin Dey kilt me dat ye shall live again; I dies dat dem whut sees en believe shall never die" (p. 185) this is the promise of deliverance, which so intricately moves Dilsey, that the old servant is convinced that the world has a divine significance and that time and order coincide on an universal scale.

Two things finally meet in conforming Faulkner's vision: the power of the language and its capability of representation. Even though Benjy lacks the possibility to express himself and Dilsey cannot explain what the beginning and the ending really are, it is Faulkner's intention to make them representative for his artistic creed. Thus, he looks, "through the fence, between the curling flowers", into a world "created" by a mentally retarded person and "saved" by an illiterate woman.

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