Of Art, Complacency, and Decay (William Faulkner)

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OF ART,
COMPLACENCY,
AND DECAY.
"There go the loves that wither,
the old loves with wearier wings;
and all dead years draw thither,
and all disastrous things;
dead dreams of days forsaken
blind buds that snows have shaken,
wild leaves that winds have taken,
red strays of ruined springs."
It is rather difficult to gain insight into the temper of an artist's mind and the ideals he is trying to affirm on the basis, or perhaps the presumption, of one novel alone. In Faulkner's case, I am going to attempt to use Of Sound and Fury as a yardstick to measure the quality of ideals, the artistic handling of a favorite theme, and the typical dream-like haze which surrounds the characters, rather than as a quantitative measure combining in it all of the themes, variants, and formulas which he evidently employed.

Faulkner belongs to the "Glory that was Greece" school of novel writing. I mean by this that he presents his assumption of the new way of life in contrast to his vision of what the old must have been. The Compsons are eternally opposed to the Snopeses in a bloodless, commercial duel in which the Compsons are always forced to yield and retreat. Faulkner is interested in the existing continuity of the antebellum ideal with its class distinctions, family honor and pride, and easy formal grace of aristocratic living. As others, who have sought deeply and genuinely to interpret a region, he obviously does not hate the South; he merely denounces what has become of his ideal.

The South appears as a symbol of a way of living which Faulkner feels to be intrinsically "good" but which, unfortunately, has passed away. He is trying with a fury resembling desperation to restore for himself the picture of vanished splendor. He fails. No amount of art, no tapestry can ever employ a rich enough suffusion of shadows and mist, fancy and dream to produce the vision that he seeks. His only vision is one of a non-human extension of life which, when coupled to reality, becomes an unreal, poetically bloated desire for a world that is forever lost and whose successors are unworthy of the tradition they inherited. He labors incessantly over the creation of an artificial
atmosphere that is heavy and musk-laden. It overshadows characters who have neither will nor volition and seem endowed with purposes secondary to the atmosphere they are supposed to be an extension of but never are.

The crux of the situation seems to be that there is a difference between what the characters should be, both in action and thought, in order to live up to the ideal Faulkner wants to create and to blend into the fog of atmosphere and lushness of the background, and what they actually are. The characters appearing in the intellectually highly-stylized atmosphere are the last descendents of the "founding fathers" fumbling (futile) in a mad, alien world of "trash" Snopeses, casual drummers, New York bankers, and distant apparitions of flouted honor. The first families have ceased being "first families". They are degenerate, resolute, hypocrites secretly hiding a crescive internalized mass of ignorance.

I rather doubt if Of Sound and Fury was intended as an "exposure" of life that is basically rotten and disease whose causes lie beyond the hope of any of the characters to discover, and even too obscured for the author to delve into; the disease is constant, appearing with, and as a part of the characters and their settings.

The "stream of consciousness" mode of attack is used in part and with it individual lives and community standards appear as seen through the eyes of community contemporaries and the characters themselves. This method is especially insidious as it presents life not as the author describes it but as the characters experience it. This only intensifies the picture of the South that I am left with, and I wonder if it is the picture that Faulkner intended to present. Instead of the glory of cherished ideals and honored tradition, the
scene is one of the collective cumulative viscidness of characters who seem to stand as stereotypes of those tradition-ridden spectres of humanity who Have made the South what it is today: an impoverished, hate-filled, prejudice-reinforcing swamp of miasmic exhalations breathed on a nation struggling to uphold its moral decency in a world that sees only its internal disequilibrium.

The central theme of *Of Sound and Fury* is the interaction of the various members of the Compson family within the space of three days culminating in the theft of Jason Compson's carefully sequestered and illegally gotten hoard by his niece who probably refrained from killing him because of physical weakness alone. This action in time-sequence of three days is the inevitable result of the whole preceding Compson tradition and Faulkner really has no interest in the event as such. He wanted to saturate himself in the life-history of each individual as a determinable product of known ancestors and evolve a critical situation out of the warped souls and perverted minds of each one. The three days are seen through the eyes of Jason Compson, and his idiot brother, Benjy. Jason is described as the first "sane" Compson. More exactly, he fails as a picture of sanity and a human being because of the manifest impossibility that such meanness, such bigotry and ignorance are possible in one person. Jason is simply illogical as are all of the characters who are either cast in the image of the stereotyped, small-town inhabitant, completely integrated into the life of the town, suffering from morbid pride, unreasoning stupidity, and crassly ignorant, rigid conformity to the village norms and standards; or they are without any resemblance to the community around them, and live in a vacuum where ordinary values are lost in the moral insufficiency.
of their lives. These two polar types of characters have absolutely no common ground and because of this are merely prototypes prematurely doomed to unreality.

Faulkner's use of mimicry, the deliberate capturing of the Mississippi rhythms of speech is another part of the background which creates the artificial atmosphere in which all life becomes a picture of doomed traditions, and stubborn, worn-out ghosts angry in the cold light of a modern world.

As an artistic endeavor, Faulkner's impressionistic vision has a beauty transcending its unreality. As a novel purporting by its very method to have some bearing upon life, it either fails or becomes a fable whose moralistic implications compensate for its physical implausibility.

In sum, Of Sound and Fury is a book which depicts spiritual poverty, intellectual vacuity, and physical wretchedness of an extreme degree. The collective moral degradation arising from these factors is a marvel of self-contained and self-perpetuating ferocity.

Owne-written in the extreme. The words and sentences draw so much attention to themselves that it is often hard to see what you mean. —Richard H. Dana, M.D.