William Faulkner’s Benjy Compson and the Field of Consciousness

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Many critics consider The Sound and the Fury to be Faulkner’s greatest work. Through the “voices” of three members of the prominent Compson family of Jefferson, county seat of Yoknapatawpha County in Mississippi — Benjy, an idiot; Quentin, his suicidal brother incestuously obsessed with their promiscuous sister, Caddy; Jason, the oldest brother who is a cheap sadist and congenital liar — and Dilsey, the majestic mammy who devotes her life to the family, Faulkner explores the Compson’s moral and social disintegration. The compositional center of the novel is the Benjy section. This, the first section, from which the other three evolve, extends over the thirty or so crucial years in which the tragic unraveling takes place. Benjy is a stroke of genius, a megaburst of creative energy activated by close observation. In the Deep South, owing mainly to incest, many rural areas and small towns have their quota of idiots. Faulkner in his own Oxford neighborhood had for years passed a home with an idiot enclosed by an iron fence much like the one enclosing Benjy on the Old Compson Place. Doubtless, this unfortunate and others like him served as models for Benjy as well as for Ike Snopes, the idiot-as-lover in The Hamlet. Once Faulkner spoke of Benjy as being

[w]ithout thought or comprehension; shapeless, neuter, like something eyeless and voiceless which might have lived, existed merely because of its ability to suffer, in the beginning of life; half fluid, groping: a pallid and helpless mass of the mindless agony under [the] sun, in time yet not of it save that he could nightly carry with him that fierce, courageous being who was to him but a touch and a sound that may be heard on any golf links and a smell like trees, into the slow bright shapes of sleep (Blotner, 1974, pp. 567, 571).
On April 7, 1928, Benjy's thirty-third birthday, we follow him from early morning until bedtime as he moves around in the community. Lacking any sense of sequential time, devoid of the cognitive processes, unable to make moral or social distinction and, at various times, accompanied by a succession of body servants Luster, T.P., Versh, by Caddy, by Dilsey, and others Benjy takes us first to the town golf course, which in better times had been part of the Compson property and now lies adjacent to it. He is accompanied by Luster, who is looking for a lost quarter, and hears a golfer yell, "Caddie!" The name immediately evokes an image of his sister long since departed the county — *His Caddy*, and he begins to moan. The moaning occurs often, as Benjy, omitting all transitions for changes in time and place runs after a fleeing child, attends services at a Negro church, is a child sniffing at a perfume bottle, one unable to put his cold hands into his pockets, listens to a toilet flush . . . We are almost as confused by these actions as Benjy: for clarification we can turn to phenomenology.

The chief contributions of the objective phenomenologists to literary criticism are their efforts to formulate an operative definition of consciousness and, more importantly for this essay, their efforts to define perception, one of the most abused terms in the English language. This consciousness has become a catchall for other consciousnesses. Its misuse is particularly notable in comments on Benjy Compson. Confusing perception and cognition, a critic writes that "we assent to this judgement involved in Benjy's perception that [Caddy] smelled like trees," and then compounds the error, writing that "only in his section of the first three in the book can we be perfectly sure that what the mind perceives actually occurred" (Waggoner, 1959, pp. 45–46). Failing to consider that Benjy, like Ike Snopes, was "blasted empty and clean forever of any thought," (Faulkner, 1940, p. 98), a critic writes that an idiot's "'thoughts' are a good deal more fragmented and incoherent than Benjy's" (Howe, 1962, p. 162), and others compare him favorably with characters like Ike McCaslin, Sarty Snopes, and Bayard Sartoris as well as with the angels in Heaven and Jesus Christ. These critics who endow Benjy with intellectual, moral, and religious powers beyond his capacity have accepted the false premise that Benjy’s world was present to him the way it is present to other human beings. His world is different from ours not only in the quantity of material at his disposal but also in the phenomenological structure of that material. His effort to bring order to the world was pathetic but unsuccessful, and however much we pity this being, who