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Lynn Ramsey
University of South Florida

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“An Indescribable Sound”
in William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*

by

Lynn Ramsey

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
Department of English
College of Arts and Sciences
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Major Professor: Phillip Sipiora, Ph.D.
Sara Munson Deats, Ph.D.
Suzanne H. Stein, Ph.D.

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Dedication

To Buck and Hafida, whose support encouraged me to “try to say.”

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ABSTRACT

The Sound and the Fury is a noisy book. Through the audible, the barely audible, and the silence, William Faulkner supports his narrative design with sound beyond dialog to inform and inflect the destabilizing narrative voices. This essay explores Faulkner’s use of the sound and noise of the novel as another narrative voice. Faulkner’s rich use of sound as a recurring motif, almost a persona or narrator itself, functions not merely to animate the action, the characters, and the title; it also speaks in the “hush” and the freighted “stiffly sibilant” whispers of those who dare not speak, or are “trying to say,” while simultaneously running as a voiceless current beneath the disjunctive narrative. The range and quality of sound wavers throughout, from the musical to the “indescribable,” as the past and present repeatedly segue forward and back to this soundtrack. Like the otherworldly racket of Macbeth, the noise of the novel plays beneath the surface, begging to be heard.

Much scholarship has been devoted to exploring Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*, yet the text continues to reveal layers of meaning and resonance to yet another generation. This study seeks to interrogate the nature, function, and musicality of the sound, noise, and silence of the text as adumbrated in the rhetoric of Reverend Shegog’s Easter sermon, Luster’s valiant attempts to play on the saw the “inaudible tune,” the

ubiquitous bells, and Dilsey's determination through it all to sing. This study hopes to enter into the conversation on Faulkner's enduring work by listening to what the text is "trying to say."

Chapter One

Introduction

“An Indescribable Sound”

In the fourth section of William Faulkner’s novel, the Dilsey section, during the famous Easter sermon scene, the congregation fails to notice the entrance of the keynote speaker, Reverend Shegog. The realization and “insignificance” of his appearance elicits a concerted response, “an indescribable sound,” which “went up, a sigh, a sound of astonishment and disappointment” (182). Faulkner obviously attempts to qualify the depiction, but this non-description camouflages the trope that the author has done nothing but describe sound throughout *The Sound and the Fury*. The moment acts as a focal point in the novel, like a temporal rift in the text through which the Easter sermon passage springs. The “indescribable sound” opens, punctuates, and closes the novel. The use of sound in Faulkner is more than bellowing and bells which signal and symbolize. It throws the subjectivity of the narratives into relief, and belies the text’s claim of sound that, “It was nothing. Just sound” (179).

The narrative technique of Faulkner’s fiction has generated seemingly endless criticism, and with regard to *The Sound and the Fury* in particular, much attention has been given to narrative theory, Lacanian, psychoanalytical, biographical, cultural, and literary critical approaches, as well as Faulkner’s language, to name some of the predominant lines of inquiry. The generosity of the text to the multiplicity of readings attests to the novel’s rightful position as one of the greatest works of American fiction,

while the availability of extratextual sources makes for an even richer and more challenging study. The novel allows “myriad” interpretations, kaleidoscopically presenting yet other designs, rendering it fascinating and accessible to the initiate and the scholar alike. Faulkner’s complex use of sound as an aspect of *The Sound and the Fury* “speaks” to both Faulkner’s technique and theme within the novel, and I hope to explore in this essay the dichotomy between sound and expression which finds its nexus in the phrase, “an indescribable sound.”

The soundtrack to *The Sound and the Fury* accompanies the four narratives variously, to different effects. Sound and silence, with shades in between serve in turns to amplify and propel the operation of the four distinct narratives. On a traditionally symbolic level, the cumulative effect of the noise of the novel functions as the enunciation of the extended death rattle of the Compson family, while the bells, the squinch owl, and the screeching jaybirds inevitably recall the “temple-haunted martlets” of Macbeth, foreboding King Duncan’s vicious murder. This undercurrent pervades the novel, while “speaking” over and around the human voices. The effect is one of all creation groaning in response to the cosmic hurtling of the Compson family to their inevitable doom.¹

¹ “For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us. For the earnest expectation of the creature waits for the manifestation of the sons of God. For the creature was made subject to vanity, not willingly, but by reason of him who hath subjected the same in hope, Because the creature itself shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and travails in pain together until now. And not only they, but ourselves also, which have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body. For we are saved by hope: but hope this is seen is not hope: for what a man sees, why does he yet hope for it? But if we hope for that which we see not, then do we with patience wait for it.”—Romans 8:18-23.

Others "Trying to Say"

Stephen M. Ross, in seeking to ascertain the "power" of Faulkner's fiction, maintains that despite his exploration, he has yet to discover or "account for the impact" or "source" of this power, this "inexhaustible voice" (x). Ross inadvertently reifies the theme of "trying to say" within Faulkner, and observes that sound functions as a "phenomenal voice" (18). He generalizes that Faulkner's use of sound is not a positive movement (54), yet an examination of *The Sound and the Fury* demonstrates that the trope is far more subtle and textured than merely a malevolent accompaniment to the disorder of life and living.

Melba Cuddy-Keane explores the development of the use of sound as an expression of modernist subjectivity and reaction to the encroachment of technology, particularly the city, within the writings of Virginia Woolf. Her study is useful in attempting to define terminology which expresses the distinctive function of sound outside of dialog in modernist literature, as sound moved from a "narrativized" or thematic use, to a mimetic response to the changing world of the modernist "soundscape" (382-83).

Resisting the temptation to anthropomorphize the persistent aurality of the text is admittedly difficult. In his study on the muse within Faulkner's work in his article, "The Power of Sound in Faulkner," Karl F. Zender rightfully identifies Faulkner's "deeply equivocal depictions of sound" (90), yet Zender utilizes terms such as "animate," "humanized," and an "almost tangible force" to describe the imbedded power of sound which Faulkner employs in his fiction (89-90). Zender usefully associates yet another

idiom for concretizing sound by identifying “images of sound” as a “main vehicle for expression” in Faulkner’s fiction (89).

Hearing and Listening

The narrators in turn hear, listen, and intuit sound to varying degrees. The reader finds Benjy’s “recollection[s]” skittering back and forth on the malleable plane of sound. Quentin hears too much noise: his ear is constantly at the ground, alternately listening to and trying to “hush” the voices within, while listening to time pass. For him, listening turns into hearing. He no longer needs to listen; he is like an exposed nerve, quivering to the slightest external stimuli, until he becomes so turned in upon himself that he “hears [him]self saying” (101). Jason listens for silence, only hearing, most notably, that “there was no sound.” The potential cacophony climaxes into resolution in Dilsey’s section; for Dilsey Gibson and her family, the sound culminates in an exclamation of recognition, recollection, and release.

The aural quality of the novel signaled in the title functions as more than an allusion to the cacophonous devolution of Macbeth, but also as a subtext elucidating the synesthetic effect of sound combined with voice. The dialogic texture of Faulkner’s text renders sound inseparable from spoken voice, and enhances the subjectivity of the narratives, as well as draws the reader in. Faulkner illustrates this dialogic operation of hearing and listening in Jason’s narrative. Like a hunter waiting in the woods for the presence of his quarry, Jason sorts out the sounds he hears from the sounds he does not hear, and the sounds he expects to not hear. From out of the ambient cacophony, he must

distinguish between the essential and the superfluous in order to track his prey, in contrast to Quentin, who hears everything and nothing.

Chapter Two

“The whole sense of the book might be summed up in the following words: what can be said at all can be said clearly, and what we cannot talk about we must pass over in silence.”
—Wittgenstein, *“Tractatus”*

“Trying to Say”

One of the themes of the novel finds expression in attempting to communicate, in “trying to say.” The multivalence of “trying to say,” woven throughout each of the four narratives, inheres the indescribable with the inexpressible. The four “narrators” take their turns at trying to describe the thing they cannot say, and dare not say, or try not to say, while navigating the import of the silence. Benjy’s narrative voice evinces a synesthetic relationship with his world, in which Faulkner crafts him as a sort of metaphysical poet who views the world through the curling flower spaces. In the sensory *mélange* of Benjy’s world, where he can “smell the clothes flapping,” the reader must navigate a sort of code in order to “read” his world (9). “Caddie smelled like leaves,” “Quentin smelled like rain,” and “flowers rasped and rattled” all indicate expressions of equilibrium and comfort for Benjy. He orders his bright world through his senses. Even Luster’s name, as erstwhile caregiver evokes the light of Benjy’s adult world, while fire functions as another comforting aspect of his world. The only comforting Compson touch he has known is Caddy’s and Dilsey’s. He hears Dilsey’s singing in the kitchen, and watches for Caddy, the one whose name dare not be spoken. The narrative repeats snatches of seemingly random, impressionistic dialog which the reader soon learns to “translate” into relevant information about key elements of the novel. It is in what the text

does not say which creates the effect of subjectivity, drawing the reader along to peer through, and put the ear to, the figurative fence with Benjy: “Uncle Maury was putting the bottle away in the sideboard in the dining room” (4). The reader then becomes complicit in both “trying to say” and “trying not to say.”

The very first line of “dialog” opening the narrative, Benjy’s “narrative,” ironically articulates Benjy’s loss: “Here, caddie.” Faulkner puts the reader in the position of being painfully aware and translating what the other characters cannot: the source of Benjy’s longing. We are the omniscient reader who must decipher Benjy’s “language” to make sense of the text and the character. The palpable, powerful losses articulated individually by the Compson family members loom large over the story. Caddy’s absence is a prime mover for many of the actions of the siblings: Quentin’s torturous thoughts and eventual suicide; Jason’s perceived loss of a career because of Caddy’s actions; and Benjy’s “recollection” for Caddy.

Benjy’s moaning and wailing “verbalizes” the pain of the crumbling Compson family. Faulkner frames his novel with Benjy’s vocalizations as the audible expression of and response to the decay of equilibrium and order: moaning, bellowing, and roaring, until the end, when “order” is restored. Benjy’s posture of permanently awaiting the long-absent Caddy, the only family member who loves him, the only family member who has behaved anything like family—or a mother to him—articulates his search without words. Benjy has no words, only sounds, with which to express his longing; his animal-like utterances reinforce the visceral nature of his memory of love, and his need to love and be loved by the absent Caddy. His bellowing enunciates “the grave hopeless sound of all voiceless misery under the sun” (197); it is his very inarticulateness which so eloquently

voices the basic longing of humankind. The name that cannot be uttered contributes to the powerlessness of voice to articulate the basic longings of all the Compson family. The decree against mentioning Caddy's name, as instituted by Mrs. Compson, rather than removing Caddy's influence, serves as the omnipresent proverbial "elephant in the room."

Hush

Between the sound and the silence exists the sibilance of the "hush" throughout *The Sound and the Fury*. One of the most persistent movements in the novel is "hushing," and the stifling of sound. The incessant command to "hush," so often repeated, knots the narratives of the novel together, and speaks to the attempt to contain the primeval cry of a disintegrating family, as if quieting could "make it better," or conceal the reality of their non-collective consciousnesses. Luster's first command to Benjy, to "hush up that moaning" is futile and repeated three more times on the first page alone. His first words to Benjy are to "listen at you, now," and the reader must also "hush" to navigate Faulkner's narrative, as if listening and hushing are necessary to enter the disturbing, atavistic Compson landscape. The "hush" later finds its voice in Quentin's narrative, as he furiously attempts to silence his voices, while simultaneously listening to the frenzied ticking of the ever-present timepieces.

The "hush" operates on several levels: at the linguistic level it functions as a regionalism, and aurally, as an onomatopoeic representation of the spoken word. Faulkner's use of the word so often, primarily in the Benjy and Dilsey sections, acts as a voiceless current, running beneath the surface; it is what the voice does as it reads. The ubiquitous hush, while ostensibly an expression of annoyance, attempts to tamp down the

growing angst of the Compson family, which threatens to billow out of control at any moment, and ultimately does. Not only does the constant presence of the hush attempt to stifle the full-blown expression of decay, but it also works to facilitate the ability of the characters to hear and to listen.

The characters of the novel participate in a “hushing” free-for-all throughout the novel. They take turns hushing one another, but Benjy is the unified target whom all the characters try to hush; his utterances are a constant reminder of the pain of their existences for the family. Dilsey’s family treats Benjy’s expressions of pain and disorientation stoically, in tacit acknowledgement of the world as it is, not as it could be or might have been. This dichotomy between despair/stoicism and toleration/love finds its nexus in Caddy. Later in Benjy’s narrative, we hear him “trying to say,” but the only one who can “hear” him “vocalizing” what is too painful to say is the reader. The multivalent quality of the “hush,” repeated on almost every page in the Benjy section, and peppered throughout the novel, intensifies the pathos of the disintegrating Compson family, as every character takes his or her turn at hushing Benjy. At times, it is sibilantly comforting coming from Caddie; it is practical when spoken by Dilsey’s family, although Luster at times voices a youthful frustration expected from one who must care for Benjy constantly; Dilsey repeats it almost habitually and absently, “from time to time,” as in when they are departing for church (180). Mrs. Compson expresses annoyance through the hush, reminded of the “failure” and burden which is Benjy. Mr. Compson’s flat “hushes” are reinforced by the “hush” Benjy “reads” on his father’s face: “the way he looked said hush” (39); the observation represents an anomalous interpretative action in Benjy’s narrative, which calls attention to the “hush” by virtue of coming out of

character. It reinforces the problematic, distant relationship of the father to all the sons. The brothers' voice their animosity toward Benjy in their soulless commands to hush, and their atavistic thoughts which Faulkner later reveals to the reader in Quentin's and Jason's narratives. Benjy is a physical representation of what they cannot say, and dare not say: they are drooling, bellowing human failures, futilely thrashing at unnamed terrors.

The Sound of Time

Quentin's narrative is punctuated by the measured ticking of the moments of his life, pictured by the ever-present timepieces and references to time. He endeavors to "hush" his watch by removing the hands, yet its continued clicking signals the ominous march which accompanies his destiny. Even though he "had all the other sounds shut away" (53), the works of the watch, the wheels, relentlessly turn toward the destination: time is dying as it passes. Each moment is no more. Time dies. Born to die, he helps it along. Quentin repeats the mis-remembered refrain of the "reducto absurdam of human experience" (57), learned from his father, recollecting as well his father's declarations that "clocks slay time" and that "time is dead as long as it is being clicked off by little wheels; only when the clock stops does time come to life" (54). Quentin's fruitless quest to silence the ticking points to the futility of a life "slightly off the horizontal" (54), presciently recalling Shakespeare's *Sonnet 60* as he makes toward his watery end:

Like as the waves make towards the pebbled shore,
So do our minutes hasten to their end;
Each changing place with that which goes before,
In sequent toil all forwards do contend (1-4).

The “sound and the fury” conjoin in Faulkner’s portrayal of Quentin. He hears and listens to the sounds that will not hush, wanting to silence the voices, the ticking, the bells, and the detritus of his existence. The bells which resonate with hope on Easter Sunday mockingly reinforce the passage of cruel time for Quentin.

Quentin attempts to hush the self, and finally does, seeking silence in order to drown out the “loud world” while simultaneously listening to it (109, 112). He does not know if he hears or listens; speaking of the watch in the second paragraph:

It was propped against the collar box and I lay listening to it. Hearing it, that is. I don’t suppose anybody ever deliberately listens to a watch or a clock. You don’t have to. You can be oblivious to the sound for a long while, then in a second of ticking it can create in the mind unbroken the long diminishing parade of time you didn’t hear. Like Father said down the long and lonely light-rays you might see Jesus walking, like. And the good Saint Francis that said Little Sister Death, that never had a sister (49).

Faulkner grounds Quentin’s relationship to time in sound, which mirrors the tension between the objective and his subjective world. Listening implies purposeful action, while hearing cannot be totally controlled. Quentin moves from intentionally listening to redefining it as hearing. He must sort through the ambient noise in order to find the sound which resonates with his subjective self. He cannot control the voices within, the sounds which mimetically mock him, like the water “whispering and clucking,” and gives himself over to the transience of time. The structure of the paragraph progresses from listening to hearing, to being “oblivious to the sound,” as he disentangles himself from

the temporal in anticipation of the “cool eternal dark” (111). Quentin’s sensitivity to sound is so acute that he anticipates and feels the vibrations of sound in the air, forever “dying away,” both “meaningless and profound” (86):

The hour began to strike It was awhile before the last stroke ceased vibrating. It stayed in the air, more felt than heard, for a long time. Like all the bells that ever rang still ringing in the long dying light-rays and Jesus and Saint Francis talking about his sister” (50).

Unlike Jason, whose acute aural “vigilance” keeps him objectively poised to pre-emptively react to the external stimuli of human interaction, Quentin absorbs the sounds which engulf him, as he subjectively turns in upon himself, rather than direct the results outward.

If Jason can be described as vigilant, Quentin practices an aurally voyeuristic posture, as he progresses from hearing to listening to Shreve’s movements “through the wall” (49, 50), listening to bedsprings and slippers “hishing.” Faulkner employs yet another register between sound and silence in the “fine sound” of Quentin’s narrative. The persistent hearing/listening to the sibilant sound of footfalls reinforces the relentless passage of time; they “hish” and “whisper” and diminish in the long “parade of time” in the darkness and shadows, “waking in the lost feet in whispering battalions in the silence” (110). Quentin hears that the fishing boys’ “bare feet made no sound” (77). The motif is so tightly woven into the narrative as to be virtually inseparable from Quentin’s voice. Of his watch, he “step[s] on it the dark,” simultaneously stepping on “time” and “sound.” The layering of sound and sibilance with meaning enables the reader to hear

Quentin's voices *chuchoter* in the shadows without listening, and "misstep in the darkness" with him (110).

Silence: "There Was no Sound"

Like the pauses of musical "rests," silence looms large in the novel as a contrastive element to the "sound and the fury." From Benjy's lack of language to the momentary muteness of the Easter worshippers "beyond the need for words," silence operates as a sound, with the sound imagery that accompanies it. Faulkner unites the narratives with implications of silence in the persistent refrain, "There was no sound." The pervasive, ironic phrase echoes relentlessly throughout the text. This movement is particularly powerful in Quentin's and Jason's sections. If Quentin's narrative can be characterized by the motif of "listening," Jason's narrative can be qualified by hearing—or not hearing. Jason's section is remarkable for what he does not hear. He does not hear the parents. He repeatedly listens for the mother, but hears no sound. While Mrs. Compson haunts the house "hear[ing] every sound" (148), Jason's relationship to his father is spelled out in what he does not hear: Jason "couldn't hear him," only his father's "bare legs in front of the sideboard" (126). Expressed in the negative, he clearly listens, but hears nothing. Faulkner associates a touch of pathos with Jason, as if the habit he now has of listening/hearing was developed over long years of vainly waiting to "hear."

Chapter Three

After silence, that which comes nearest to expressing the inexpressible is music.
—Aldous Huxley

I don't care much about music. What I like is sounds.—Dizzie Gillespie

I would say that music is the easiest means in which to express, but since words are my talent, I must try to express clumsily in words what the pure music would have done better.—William Faulkner

Trying to Play: The Musicality of it All

Faulkner's French translator Maurice Coindreau likened the structure of *The Sound and the Fury* to that of the "movements of a symphony" (31). There is a musical quality imbedded in Faulkner's use of sound imagery and language which goes beyond an accompaniment to the actions of the novel. Despite the unsettling narratives with their themes of pain and psychic loss, the reader hears and listens to the musicality of the text in its cadences of voice, language, and sound, further underscored by Faulkner's use of musical imagery. When Dilsey admonishes young Jason in Benjy's section with the benign idiom, "Now you got to tune up" (17), Faulkner hints at a concert of sorts in which the featured instruments include ticking, bellowing, bells, a saw, "screaming jaybirds," and, of course, singing, and the reader begins to get a sense of the musicality of the book. The collective sound of the novel functions as one "voice," like an orchestra, yet individual voices can be detected from amidst the whole. Quentin will do this; like a mother who can discern her own child's cry from a crowd of crying infants, he is attuned to those tones which mark the passage of time until he meets his watery end. Quentin's

final long unpunctuated “death rattle” is framed by the first and last note: “the first note sounded” (111), and “the last note sounded. At last it stopped vibrating and the darkness was still again” (113). Until the end, Quentin is hounded both textually and thematically by the sibilance of the whispers and the silence.

As Faulkner contrasts the two families’ approach to their relative losses in life, the reader “hears” the orderly musicality of Dilsey’s family, and the comparative “rattling” and jangling of the Compsons. Dilsey’s and her family generate the real music in the novel. While Quentin, Jason, and their parents constantly work to “hush” the sound which plagues their lives, Dilsey and her family produce and embrace sound. She sings in the kitchen, the nerve-center of the house; near the end of the novel, after the Easter sermon, she sings the same two lines over and over to herself as she prepares the meal. It is all she knows—yet it is still music. It is not much—like her life—but it is something, and something worth singing about. Like Benjy “trying to say,” Dilsey is trying to sing, to make melody; the song will never end, but she keeps on singing, nonetheless. Nothing is going to change, so she may as well sing. Her singing apparently soothes Benjy, as his narrative frequently mentions Dilsey in conjunction with singing, and she hushes him later with the promise that, “We gwine to hear de singin’” on their way to the Easter Sunday meeting (180). They do indeed hear the singing, as well as the musicality of Rev. Shegog’s Easter sermon, a musical quality commented on by Bleikasten and Coindreau (*Melancholy* 140-41).

Luster’s Saw

Throughout the novel, Luster sneaks away to the cellar to attempt to learn the play the saw, which he heard at the show. After Luster hears the saw player (10-11), Dilsey

later catches him trying to imitate the unique sound, testing out various implements in order to replicate the haunted wobbling of a played saw. Luster's surreptitious subterranean efforts to imitate sounds resembling coherent notes on his saw attempts to cobble the disjunctive pieces of the story into something resembling order. A saw works as a fitting metaphor, "a sluggish twang" for "trying to say," and tuning a world gone awry. Unlike the waves of a tuning fork which eventually resolve in comfort and relief, the saw cannot be brought into tune; its eerie quality depends upon its aural elasticity. With the saw, Luster attempts to make music out of the disharmony of life at the Compsons, and he must do it furtively in his cellar practice room; like the "subterranean rumblings" of Queenie's hooves in the final scene, the nascent tones underscore the rhythms and disharmonies which cohere the narrative (195, 198). The eerie quality suits as no other can in accompanying the tension between order and chaos. The skill rests in finding the proper tool to draw out the potential sound of the saw, to manipulate the notes into organized sound and a coherent tune. Luster experiments with whatever implement he can find. Dilsey discovers Luster in the basement with his saw on Easter Sunday morning; he has co-opted her kitchen mallet, unable to find "de right thing" to reproduce the "inaudible tune" in his head. Luster uses the tools available to make "music" in his attempt to organize his world and the world of the novel. The eerie quality of a played saw accompanying the text, like a Mississippian aeolian harp, suits as no other instrument can to "vocalize" the tension between order and chaos. The saw bends sound, just as Faulkner bends the conventions of his text and narrative, texturing it with the "tools" of his region to craft a unique voice. Faulkner repeats the motif of the saw's plaintive voice in the other narratives. In Quentin's section, the saw echoes in the sound of Louis

Hatcher's call to the hunting dogs; for Jason, it reverberates in the "hah hah hah sound" of his breath as he fights with the old showman in his pursuit of Miss Quentin (193), and of course, most eloquently of all, in Benjy's low moan.

Singing: The Sound of Enduring

The reader experiences a sense of relief after navigating the first person narratives of the brothers. It makes narrative sense for Faulkner to write the Dilsey section in the third person: her family stands in stark contrast to the Compson family. Dilsey's family is everything the Compsons are not. In fact, Faulkner, in the appendix to the novel, in which he offers descriptions and motivations for his characters, describes the rest of the characters thus: "And that was all. These others were not Compsons. They were black" (215). The brevity of the descriptions of the black characters contrasts with the rambling, overblown accounts of the members of the Compson family tree.

Faulkner demonstrates opposing responses to the vagaries and vicissitudes of life through the two families. Despite her burdened, straitened circumstances, Dilsey sings in the kitchen throughout the novel. If enduring had a sound, it would sound like Dilsey singing. One of the themes running throughout the novel is the attempt to establish order and equilibrium to make life bearable, like water seeking a level place. Dilsey's narrative section reflects her outward perspective of life, her world, and her role in it. Because she is oriented outward and not inward, as are the Compsons, she maintains an objectivity which enables her to "endure," Faulkner's word for her. Her constant chore, her life mission, has been to hold the family together, to be a family together. She is the one who stays; everyone else has deserted Benjy—the only one who cannot leave. Caddy runs off, abandoning her daughter, as well; Quentin commits suicide; Jason, though

physically present, is emotionally stunted and unable to interact on any meaningful level with another human being, and watches “his invisible life” unravel “out about him like a wornout sock” (195). Mrs. Compson, while constantly threatening to depart this world, has in reality left it long ago; Mr. Compson exited via the bottle, leaving his family to fend miserably for itself.

The text of Dilsey’s willful sacrifice is written on her face, and crystallized in one dense sentence during the Easter sermon scene:

Dilsey sat bolt upright, her hand on Ben’s knee. Two tears slid down her fallen cheeks, in and out of the myriad coruscations of immolation and abnegation and time” (183).

The portrait Faulkner sketches of Dilsey’s epiphany, with “tears” which “slid[e] down her fallen cheeks” captures her unacknowledged world-weariness; the passive trajectory of those tears—her wrinkles—so minutely and tenderly described, flow “on and out of the myriad coruscations” caused by self-denial to the point of immolation over the years. Dilsey has literally offered herself up to the service of the Compson family, regardless of their worthiness. She embodies the selfless love of which the Compsons are incapable. She is the soul of both families. Despite the pain and ugliness, she accepts her lot and “endures.” She has had to hush and be hushed in order to rise above the emotional squalor of the Compsons.

The Peremptory Bells

The ringing bells unite the sections and order the lives of the characters. The bells mark the quotidian existence of the blacks of the Dilsey section, while Quentin and Jason are in turn shadowed and pursued by the implications of the bells. They punctuate the

passage of time for Quentin, haunting him as he waits to die, and the bells track Jason, haranguing him in the rush toward his inevitable end.

Cuddy-Keane, in her study of Virginia Woolf's *Kew Gardens*, identifies the presence of London's Big Ben and "parish church bells" as "soundmark[s]," analogous to visual landmarks, and the sense of community possessed by those "born within the hearing of the bells" (387). To borrow Cuddy-Keane's terminology, which is admittedly in its infancy, the bells in *The Sound and the Fury* function as soundmarks in the "soundscape" of each of the four narratives. As Jason speeds off from the filling station in pursuit of the fugitive Quentin while everyone else is at church; he "drove on out of the bells and out of town" (190). The reader is reminded of John Donne's poignant lines as the bells follow Jason back after his failed attempt to apprehend Quentin with his money.²

Quentin drowns out the ordered sound of the omnipresent bells; bells fill Dilsey's section and mark the movement of the Easter Sunday service; the same bells which dogged the subjective worlds of Quentin and Jason now tunefully order the social and spiritual world of the community. The bell in the church, representing the announcement of the good news of Christ's birth, is now "faded" and "battered" from years of use and reminding. The voice of the "peremptory bells along the broken air" announces the finality of the Compson legacy. Even the very air, the atmosphere is shattered in "bright disorderly tatters of sound" (187-88). They echo as harbingers in Jason's pounding headaches, leaving the reader to hear and visualize: if pain had a voice, it would sound like this.

² "Perchance he for whom this bell tolls may be so ill as that he knows not if tolls for him; and perchance I may think myself so much better than I am, as that they who are about me and see my state may have caused it to toll for me, and I know not that" (Meditation XVII, 1277).

The Birds

A prophetic strain is foreshadowed in Benjy's section during the few words muttered by Dilsey's mostly invisible husband, Roskus. He, like the Compson father, hovers on the periphery of the novel and the lives of the characters. Neither seems to make more than the basic contributions to the lives of their families: Roskus works, despite his encroaching rheumatism, and says little, while Mr. Compson seems to appear intermittently like a cardboard cutout, thrust into the odd scene with no purpose other than to utter fallacious sententiae to Quentin, and to reinforce his inadequate, alcoholic relationship to the rest of the family. Yet, Roskus lacks the egocentrism of the Compson father, and the lack and abundance are passed on to the respective progeny and spouses.

Roskus perceives a bane on the house of Compson, and his repeated mutterings of, "Taint no luck on this place," prefigures Dilsey's own revelation, and prompts the recognition that the reader, too, has seen this before. Roskus has "seen the sign . . . seen it at first but when they changed his name I knowed it . . . I seen the sign" (19). This sense of foreboding is obscured by the seemingly banal description surrounding the first 'appearing' of the birds. In Benjy's section, as Roskus milks and moans, Benjy observes that, "Some birds sat on the barn door and watched him" (18). T. P. hears the folkloric "squinch owl," reminding the reader famously of Lady Macbeth's startled response to the "owl that shrieked" (2.2.3). In the beginning of the Dilsey section, five "screaming" jaybirds which have appeared "from nowhere" hover in the wind outside the kitchen door (166). Their aural assault on the thick morning parodies the holiday, and portends the fall of the house of Compson.

Birds figure prominently for Quentin as well. They flitter intermittently throughout the narrative, like his thoughts, but also as precursors to his eventual “flight” from life. During the scene in which Quentin endeavors to take the little Italian girl home, the harbinger appears again:

There was a bird in the woods The bird whistled again, invisible, a sound meaningless and profound, inflexionless, ceasing as though cut off with the blow of a knife, and again, and that sense of water swift and peaceful above secret places, felt, not seen not heard (86).

Faulkner’s economy expresses sound without words; just the statement of the presence of the bird implies sound. He describes the whistle, as of the bird “trying to say” something both meaningless and profound; such oppositions serve to highlight the motif of indescribable sound.

Chapter 4

Trying to Pray

*O Silence! are Man's noisy years
No more than moments of thy life?
Is Harmony, blest queen of smiles and tears,
With her smooth tones and discords just,
Tempered into rapturous strife,
Thy destined bond-slave? No! though earth be dust
And vanish, though the heavens dissolve, her stay
Is in the WORD, that shall not pass away.
—Wordsworth, “On the Power of Sound”*

Easter Sermon: Prayer, Recollection & Longing

In the Sunday-go-to-meeting passage of the Dilsey section, Faulkner brings together the sonorous elements of the novel: the hush, the silence, and the contrasts between the two families to give the reader exquisite detail for the first time, almost lovingly executed, as opposed to the harshness and visceral subjectivity of the brothers' sections. Here, he tells the reader what the book is about, not only in the rhetoric of the sermon itself, but also in the strikingly detailed description of the parishioners on their way to the church.

As the worshipers make their way to the church for the Easter Sunday service to the accompaniment of the bells, Faulkner synesthetically describes their demeanor and attire with charming detail caught in the “women a little stiffly sibilant” (181). The intersection of appearance with sound catches perfectly the crinoline picture of their dress, echoing the enforced “hush” of their lives and the hushed tonality of the novel, but also intersecting with the white world, capturing the whispered snatches of conversation

about Ben. The repartee between the children about “tech[ing]” Ben further conjoins the black and white worlds. In the every-man-for-himself Compson economy, only Ben remains by default, and his presence in the novel serves as the unifying current between the world that is and the world that endures. He functions as the link and symbol in which the two worlds interface: he is a white they can touch, however tentatively, and he docilely partakes in a tacit acceptance of their community.

Faulkner’s change in diction becomes almost tender as the congregants top the hill to view the bucolic scene of the church, “like a painted backdrop.” The “windy bells” are tolling, and within the church “a battered Christmas bell” hangs iconically over the pulpit. The worshippers, too, are brought to life in movement interlaced with sound, with “stiffly sibilant” women and girls with pigtails “bound with scraps of cloth like butterflies.” Faulkner closes his description uncharacteristically before the sermon begins with the congregants passively emitting “an indescribable sound . . . a sigh, a sound of astonishment and disappointment” (181-82). The marked shift in tone causes the reader to pause to consider the rhetorical value of describing something as “indescribable.”

The reaction of the congregation to this insignificant presence folds back upon them as the realization of community dissolves into recognition. They see what they missed, they see what they have been waiting for, and it is not a powerful representation of God in preacher man, but rather an “insignificant” presence—Everyman—and it could be any one of them. A similar effect is produced upon the reader upon laying eyes on the characters of the novel in the beginning of the Dilsey section. Just as Bleikasten notes the “shock of recognition” upon the reader in Faulkner’s first physical descriptions of Ben, Jason, and Mrs. Compson in the Dilsey section (*Failure* 179), the worshippers experience

an analogous sensation: their response is involuntary and corporate, an expression of surprised expectations.

The phrase “indescribable sound” functions as a pivot point in the text; here the ragtag assemblers and personalities blend into a cohesive unit: the congregation. After the procession of the two ministers into the church, when the congregation as a unified whole has failed to mark the entry of the featured speaker, the “indescribable sound went up” (182). As one voice, they express the textured sigh of the letdown of anticipation, expecting a commanding, perhaps flamboyant presence to address them in keeping with the import of the holiday. Shegog’s entrance is so unremarkable that they miss it. His very collective “insignificance,” as Faulkner reinforces through the monkey imagery, enables Shegog to consequently assimilate with the worshippers, as in turn they absorb him into their collective consciousness: “until he was nothing and they were nothing and there was not even a voice” (183). The “hushing” throughout the story has finally culminated in more than silence: “beyond the need for words,” the quiescent assembly is transformed.³ The minister addresses them again: “Brethren,” in a “harsh whisper,” to which the single woman’s obligato, “Yes, Jesus!” repeats, “hushed yet” (183). The interplay in three successive lines of dialog described by the “harsh whisper,” “hushed yet,” and “his voice rang again, with the horns” underscores the mesmeric quality of Shegog’s rhetoric (183). It is the sound of his voice, rather than the content of his message which functions as the vehicle for unifying the congregation. As Noel Polk

³ Romans 8:24-26: “For we are saved by hope: but hope that is seen is not hope: for why does one still hope for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we eagerly wait for it with perseverance. Likewise the Spirit also helps in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered.”

observes, the worshippers “don’t need to say,” since they have coalesced into communion and community (135).

The introduction to the sermon passage is framed by Dilsey’s injunction for Ben to, “Hush, now. Dey fixin’ to sing in a minute.” Not only must Ben listen, but with the repeated statement, the reader as well is enjoined once again to stop and listen, as if to say, “Hush, I will now tell you what this story is about.” The name of “Rev’un Shegog” sibilantly picks up where the hush leaves off in a tempting gloss of *hush*—*God*. As he launches into his sermon, the congregation, listening “at first through curiosity, as . . . to a monkey talking” (183), succumbs to his rhetorical acrobatics. He “sounded like a white man”: Faulkner transitions the reader from the white Compson world to their familiar world where their hope is in the world to come. Like Shegog, they have a primeval “ricklickshin” of seeing something beyond the present.

Faulkner embodies in Shegog’s appearance “the foolish things of this world that confound the wise.”⁴ His insignificant “monkey” appearance, which at first glance appears demeaning, emblemizes the foolishness and weakness of the human condition—their condition. Faulkner incongruously draws the Rev’un Shegog as a rhetorical physical representation of “insignificant,” puny humanity, while giving him the artificial, elevated, studied diction of the false humanity pictured in the Compsons: he begins on his own power, relying on his trained rhetorical abilities, like a “monkey talking.” After he begins in earnest, he becomes an empathetic image of the state of the characters in the novel: “a meager figure, hunched over upon itself like that on one long

⁴ 1 Corinthians 1:27-29, “But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise . . . the weak things of the world to put to shame the things that are mighty; and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, that no flesh should glory in His presence.”

immured in striving with the implacable earth.” He is Dilsey, he is Benjy, he is Everyman.

Not only does Shegog’s physical appearance change, but his voice transforms as well. His level of diction alters as he warms to his subject. The voice once “level and cold” shifts from a representation of the remoteness of the white Compson’s and the coldness of their lives, to the warmth of the parishioners, especially Dilsey, whose own transformation occurs when she comes to see “the beginning en de end”; here, image and sound reflect one another in Dilsey’s epiphany. The entire passage hinges then on the disembodied enunciation, “Brethren.” Faulkner has built up to this moment in the preceding paragraph as he describes “the congregation sigh[ing] as if from a collective dream.” The story has segued from the individual to the community as the “sonorous echoes” of the familial word “sin[k] into their hearts . . . in cumulate echoes,” acknowledged as the voices of the congregation fuse in tuneful response. After the ripples of the address resolve, Shegog powerfully draws the family bond tighter, in articulation of one of the novel’s themes: “Brethren and sisteren” (183).

The faded paper “Christmas bell” beneath which Shegog stands echoes the gift of Christmas, of divine birth, and of hope, linking it to the Resurrection of Easter which Shegog articulates, “I got the recollection and the blood of the Lamb!” Time again is fluid between the recollection of the birth/crucifixion and the promise of the Resurrection:

And the congregation seemed to watch him with its own eyes . . . 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 it of no moment, a long moaning expulsion of breath rose from them, and a woman's single soprano: "Yes, Jesus!" (183).

Shegog's transformation occurs in this single, long sentence, punctuated by the lone woman's exclamation. The reader exhales at the end of it along with the congregation. As the minister continues his sermon, and his diction becomes more "negroid," the ambient tension within the congregation increases: "I got de ricklickshin en de blood of the Lamb." Many critics have noted that the congregation's moaning response recalls Benjy's moans at the beginning and throughout the novel (Polk 134). His moans, whimpers, and wails articulate the longings of the "ricklickshin;" "de blood" recollects family, related by blood, and also the relation of all humanity. Yet, it is not the "blood" of human relationship which conjoins Ben with Dilsey's family. Ben's "rapt" aspect, the transfixed gaze, is reminiscent of something beyond the temporal, "wrapped" in recollection and longing achieved: "In the midst of the voices and the hands Ben sat, rapt in his sweet blue gaze" (185). He is part of the community of believers; his voice is their voice, as theirs is his. They have all experienced a glimpse into eternity, and that is enough.

The presence and absence of "voice" functions as another feature of the extranarrative voice. The theme of the absence of "voice," to reflect back to the musical motif in the novel, provides the integral rests or pauses which shade the story, foregrounding the noisy melody. As if weighted fermatas hanging in the air, the

voicelessness suspends the moment until acknowledgement of the “ricklickshun” dissolves into the “low concerted” assent of “Mmmmmmmmmmm. . . .,” serving as a basso continuo to Shegog’s message. They become “de arisen dead whut got do blood en de ricklickshin of de Lamb!” (184). The wordless enunciation does not express a prayer of petition, but rather a prayer of worship, recognition, acceptance, and anticipation. For one suspended moment, the recollection of heaven becomes anticipation, becomes reality—they have seen “de first an’ de last.” They, including Ben, are in this instant no longer looking “through the fence” as “through a glass darkly.”⁵

After the abrupt end in the text of the sermon scene, the “dispersing congregation” heads home, breaking off once again into their separate existences; one worshipper intones: “He sho a preacher, mon! He didn’t look like much at first, but hush!” The line is punctuated with the “hush,” which, more than merely a colloquial apostrophe, captures the essence of the preceding event, an echo of the fusion they have just experienced—the awe of glimpsing the recollection and the longing. The reader has come to recognize that there are no wasted words in this text. The “hushing” is indeed a way of life for them, but it is also necessary to hush in order to “see” in response: ““He seed de power en de glory’ ‘Face to face he seed it.’” Dilsey, who “made no sound,” declares through her tears, as the others question her weeping on the way home, that she has “seed de first en de last de beginning, en now I sees de endin” (185). Dilsey understands, and will endure. She has seen the first and the last of the Compsons, their beginning and their end; they have no heritage to pass on. She has also seen the past, present, and future, and has the power to choose her response to it, but she has also seen her own past and future, and knows she will “prevail,” as Faulkner liked to say.

⁵ 1 Corinthians 13:12.

Coming Home

Ben remains silent on the surrey ride back from the church until the group nears the gate to the Compson property, as if they are crossing through the portal from serene community to the otherworldly consciousness of their unpleasant reality. The gate, a truly pivotal representation in the novel, operates as the physical hinge: between isolation and community, between the two families, between the present and portending scene of Quentin's flight—in short, between a heaven and hell. Ben's whimpering expresses the guttural anxiety of returning to the presence of absence resident in the Compson family; he is inarticulately conscious of the difference, and verbalizes it in the only way he can. Faulkner captures this consciousness—the awareness of their imperfect, difficult world tangled in one sentence: “Immediately Ben began to whimper again, and for awhile all of them looked up the drive at the square, paintless house with its rotting portico.” (185). Contrast this forlorn view of the Compson property with that of the pastoral “painted backdrop” in which the church is “as a painted cardboard set upon the ultimate edge of the flat earth” (182). The physical descriptions of place further emphasize the comparative rift between the interior, subjective world, and that of the objective community.

As the group enters the house, “there was no sound” (186). This same lack of movement permeates the text, adding force to the silence. They know something is amiss, like Benjy smelling death; Dilsey's daughter Frony confirms it, as she “heard him [Jason] first thing dis mawnin” (185). The ensuing scene, precipitated by Quentin's flight and robbery, plunges the remaining Compsons into a spiraling trajectory of final resignation. This is the end of any meaningful life for them. Mrs. Compson's final appearance takes

place in her darkened room, the Bible next to her, which Dilsey has retrieved from the floor. The book's descent iconically marks her resignation and despair; closeted in her darkened room, she cannot read in the darkness of her life. Dilsey listens at the foot of the stairs, as the text echoes, "but there was no sound" (195). The kitchen clock chimes, out of sync with its face, but Dilsey knows the time, both literally and figuratively. She sings placidly, knowingly, but beneath the benignity of the scene of her the lunch preparations, the tragedy of the ruined Compsons plays out. Birnam Wood approaches, and time is out of joint: a temporal rupture akin to the cannabilizing horses in *Macbeth* signals the "breach in nature:" the "strange" and "unnatural" Compson family has psychically cannibalized one another.⁶

Ben intuits the impending cataclysm. After the worshippers enter the house, he begins to whimper and moan, "a little, as to himself," echoing the "mmmmmmmmmmmm" of the congregation earlier, while Dilsey sings the same two lines of a hymn during the lunch preparations (187). After the meal, the tension of the day's events register in Ben's incessant whimpering, which builds to fever pitch until the end of the novel (195). Luster's attempts to hush him over three pages of text are futile. It is as if Ben is birthing himself from the Compson's to his "new" family, as he "wail[s] in his hoarse, hopeless voice"—"Hush. Dilsey got you" (196-97).

Benjy is oblivious to the artificial name change which his mother had attempted to attach to him, while the Dilsey section signals an Abrahamic change—the diminutive form has been changed by the narrator of Dilsey's section to the more mature-sounding "Ben." He has left the land of his fathers, and is headed to the figurative promised land.

⁶ *Macbeth*, 2.4.1-18.

The episode at the church signals Ben's epiphany as well as Dilsey's; [he is able] to intuit the import of returning to the Compson home, and the finality of his own loss. He can only articulate in one ultimate roar, "the grave hopeless sound of all voiceless misery under the sun," as he requires temporal equilibrium in order to "endure" (197). Dilsey's efforts to comfort Ben are futile as well, and she suggests the surrey ride in an attempt to placate him. In a poignant and pointed scene, Luster retrieves for Ben a broken, "single narcissus" (197). After the narcissism of the rest of the Compson family who have shut Ben out, the broken flower comes to symbolize his break with the family. Luster tenderly attempts to splint the broken flower, picturing in miniature what Dilsey's family has been doing all along: trying to repair and keep the Compson family viable.

During the final scene of the novel, as Luster attempts to show off his driving skills in the Jefferson town square beneath the gazeless statue of the Confederate soldier, he guides Queenie opposite of the usual direction, shocking Ben: "For an instant Ben sat in utter hiatus." His mounting apprehension since the morning finds its expression in "bellow on bellow," of "horror; shock; agony eyeless, tongueless, just sound" (199). Faulkner reaches for words to describe the "indescribable sound." As Jason angrily intercepts and corrects the wagon's direction, he strikes wildly at Luster and Ben, breaking the fragile, splinted narcissus in the process. Ben's roaring ceases with the rhythm of Queenie's hooves. Queenie's "subterranean rumblings," like that of the church scene, have eddied into a rhythm (trying to play?); the tension of Ben's bellows too, have dissipated into quiescence. It is as if the Compson fate has settled on Ben's consciousness—they were headed in the wrong direction. The righted wagon symbolizes Ben's link and place with Dilsey's family, and comparative safety in endurance. Ben no

longer endures the Compsons. He is heedless of the state of his flower: its condition is of no matter to him—that he has it is all that matters, and it is his. The rest is silence—or at least a return to the routine of enduring.

Conclusion

“Then the story was complete, finished. There was Dilsey to be the future, to stand above the fallen ruins of the family liked a ruined chimney, gaunt, patient and indomitable; and Benjy to be the past. He had to be an idiot so that, like Dilsey, he could be impervious to the future, though unlike her by refusing to accept it at all. Without 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 all 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”—(Faulkner, Introduction 231).

The final two words of Faulkner’s appendix to the novel, added sixteen years after its publication, says simply of Dilsey, “They endured.” There is something of triumph in those two words. They did not simply endure, but they rose above their seemingly futile existences to eke out lives of meaning and dignity. The book is a song, really, of deliverance. They are not looking through a temporal fence for something lost and irretrievable. Their cries, like Ben’s, acknowledge and attempt to connect, however fleetingly, to the source of their earthly sustenance. Theirs is not a Pollyanna-ish faith which helps them to just get through. Faulkner elucidates a deep Christian faith and power not dependent on the individual, but on the collective recognition that they cannot meaningfully exist without it; through their “fence” they glimpse a world to come, and an understanding articulated in the old spiritual, “this world is not my home/ I’m just passin’ through.” It is a novel of love—its perversion and its potentiality.

The final two words of the novel, “ordered place,” articulate the search for sense and meaning in a fallen world, and “trying to say” what is indescribable. Faulkner’s story has found its “ordered place” despite the cacophony and the “reducto absurdum of human experience” anatomized in the Compson family. Faulkner has crafted a story deeply rooted in a Southern heritage, and characters who, in acknowledgement of their humanity, seek to endure and ultimately “prevail.”

Afterword

After the Hush

One of the pleasures and difficulties of undertaking a study of Faulkner's writings is the abundance of contemporary commentary by the author himself. At the end of the appendix to *The Sound and the Fury*, Faulkner sketches the back stories of the Compson family some sixteen years later after the novel's publication. Caddy's after-story is mediated through the Jefferson librarian, who caches a dog-eared magazine photograph of Caddy in her desk, pondering it before showing it to Jason and then Dilsey. It makes for interesting contemplation of Faulkner's intertextuality that it is in the personage of the librarian, the keeper of the books, toiling in a place of hushing and sibilant pages. The librarian keeps Caddy's likeness locked away in the quiet, silent place (208-12). This is where Faulkner's "beautiful one" rests, with the books. The remainder of her story can only be told in hushes and whispers.

Faulkner's "Urn"

It is almost impossible in a study of Faulkner's use of sound, limited in this case to only *The Sound and the Fury*, to avoid the well-titled Faulknerian trope of his fascination with John Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn," which finds its expression throughout Faulkner's works. The temptation is strong to consider the aural possibilities of "heard melodies are sweet, but unheard melodies are sweeter." Like the pipers and harpist who pursue the maidens, in quest of the ultimate prize, forever pursuing, and

forever uncaught, their music is frozen in time and space, forever heard and forever silent. It is tempting to overlay onto the urn motif Benjy's pursuit of Caddy's memory, Quentin's frenzied pursuit of death, Jason's pursuit of Quentin, and Dilsey's resolve to endure. The urn endures, capturing the imagination in what it is "trying to say," and as scholars, readers, and debutantes we attempt to analyze, discuss, and become part of the metaphor of "trying to say."

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