



PROJECT MUSE®

---

## Vision's Immanence

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

Vision's Immanence: Faulkner, Film, and the Popular Imagination.

Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004.

Project MUSE., <https://muse.jhu.edu/>.



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/60332>

---

Access provided at 15 Sep 2019 17:37 GMT with no institutional affiliation



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

## Modernism, Jail Cells, and the Senses

Caddy smelled like trees.

— BENJY in *The Sound and the Fury*

Vision, mass culture, imprisonment: my discussion has identified these as the pervasive tropes and dominating subtexts of Faulkner's writing of the thirties. Beginning with the Negro murderer in the original version of *Sanctuary* in 1929 and ending with both Wilbourne and the Tall Convict in Parchman Prison in *If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem* in 1939, Faulkner uses the figure of the jail cell to communicate something specific about the circumstances of writing in this decade. Within this frame and through a range of strategies, including parody, imitation, and critique, he also makes use of materials from popular art and what he saw as its dominant mode of sense perception: vision and the attending social and psychological impact of the look.

That vision became a dominant element in Faulkner's novels of this decade is hardly surprising if we consider its role in the cultural life of the period as well as what this emphasis on visual experience signified. As Faulkner understood, and as several theorists contend, a central component of modernity was a diminishing of authentic experience and understanding due to the influence of the new technology media. My discussion has endeavored to detail Faulkner's response to these developments in texts often considered distinct from

the realm of popular culture—above all, the high-modernist novels he produced in his mature period. Immediately prior to Faulkner's sustained involvement with popular art in the thirties, however, are moments in Faulkner's writing that differ meaningfully from it. A glance at those moments, as well as another question about the motives for his figurative approach to mass culture—in particular his recurring image of the prison cell—suggests a final way to understand the historical quality of Faulkner's modernism.

In assessments of Faulkner's career, critics have often noted the singular importance of *The Sound and the Fury* as well as of Faulkner's own account of this novel in his development as a writer. As Eric Sundquist has pointed out, it is perhaps Faulkner's famous celebration of the novel and its "lost" figure, Caddy Compson, more than the book itself that has compelled consideration of it in this way. Retrospective efforts to understand the relationship of Faulkner's novels after *The Sound and the Fury* frequently make use of Faulkner's emphasis on his experience of writing around and from the story's originating point of loss and yearning.<sup>1</sup>

The idea that *The Sound and the Fury* possesses signal importance for understanding Faulkner's writing after it—that there are issues "latent" in it that Faulkner would later confront in greater depth—obtains in considering the novels I have treated in this study. In particular, aspects of Benjy's experience and Faulkner's manner of depicting it suggest another area of loss that, like Faulkner's statements about the "beautiful and tragic" Caddy, appear significant in light of his later work. Benjy helps close my argument about the thirties, mass culture, and vision because of the role in his section of *The Sound and the Fury* of sensory perceptions other than vision, as well as the meaning of Faulkner's emphasizing them.

The importance of sensory experience in this context is what it signifies historically, both in terms of the cultural history I have been detailing and in a broader, materialist understanding of consciousness and identity. As media that emphasized vision in new and unexpected ways, photography and film had a demonstrable effect on people's experience of the world around them through its representation—including and especially representations of gender, race, and the historical past. If modern subjectivity was influenced by visual experience of the sort emphasized by film, as cultural historians and theorists of modernity have argued, as well as by advertising, commodity fetishism, or acts of social organizing, we may also note that, historically speaking, this has not always been so. Benjy and his place both in *The Sound*

and the Fury and in Faulkner's modernism show the meaningful differences between a fullness and range of sense perception, and the singular emphasis we see in the thirties novels on sight and on vision's political and economic uses. Benjy helps to see how sensory perception, as theoretical accounts of it have argued and as it has been affected by shifts in technology, culture, and social experience, may itself be historicized.

Like many characters in Faulkner's fiction, Benjy is irretrievably focused on his past. Though this longing is ultimately narcissistic, referring him to his possessive longing for his sister, it nevertheless removes Benjy from an attachment to his contemporary circumstances in Mississippi in 1928. This temporal "displacement" combines in *The Sound and the Fury's* first section with a uniquely vivid rendering of Benjy's sense perception, a combination that implies Faulkner's recognition of historical change. As a purely sensory character, Benjy is at odds with a modern social reality and, we might add, with an economic system that placed greater and greater emphasis on processes of abstract, rational calculation.

Unlike the characters of Faulkner's later novels, Benjy demonstrates an extraordinary depth, as well as range, of sense perceptions. As opposed to characters like Quentin, Horace, or Harry Wilbourne (or in different ways the anonymous Jefferson crowd or various agencies of surveilling power), he is not defined by the exercise of sight. Benjy also repeatedly evokes a remembered and, for him, a more fulfilled period from his childhood. Kevin Railey sees *The Sound and the Fury*, and the novel's first section in particular, as the mark of Faulkner's "birth into history." His motives for doing so reveal Railey's explicitly materialist reasoning: "In Benjy, Faulkner creates a character who closely relates to an earlier time period. In tune with sensory experience, Benjy does not possess any of the qualities and abilities so definitely valued—too valued Faulkner would say—in this twentieth-century capitalist world—those of calculation, classification, and prediction. Faulkner seems to be completely in unison with Marxist critiques of capitalist society, implying that the need to own things and the skills necessary to obtain them in this society diminish the ability to perceive through the senses" (*Natural Aristocracy*, 52).

The move from Benjy to Marx is, admittedly, extreme. But Railey's attention to Benjy's status as "an 'idiot' in touch only with his sensory experiences" (51) suggests something important about Faulkner's understanding of the historical quality of the senses. Specifically, Benjy represents an alternative to the increasing diminishment in modernity of individuals' sensory capacity and

emotional life. As such, he suggests the problems posed to a human, affective sensibility by changes in economic and social reality.<sup>2</sup> Modern capitalistic values do not produce a complete disavowal of sensory activity; vision, as we will see, functions effectively as those values' correlative. And Benjy's life and chapter are themselves also informed to a degree by his acts of looking.<sup>3</sup> Yet Faulkner's rendering of Benjy ultimately emphasizes his greater fullness of sensory activity and what that fullness reveals about the limitations of modern capitalistic abstraction.

Benjy's sensory capacity, his simple, repeated assertion that "Caddy smelled like trees," as well as other poetic utterances in his section—"I could smell the bright cold" (4); "the flowers rasped and rattled against us" (3); "The ground was hard, churned and knotted" (3)—register an immediacy of experience and quality of sense perception that for Faulkner's characters of the thirties becomes harder and harder to find. Even a cursory gloss on Faulkner's characteristic manner of conveying Benjy's world reveals his affective wholeness: "*The bed smelled like T.P. I liked it*" (19). "The bowl steamed up to my face, and Versh's hand dipped the spoon in it and the steam tickled into my mouth" (17). "Then they all stopped and it was dark, and when I stopped to start again I could hear Mother, and feet walking fast away, and I could smell it" (22). "A door opened and I could smell it more than ever" (22). "The trees were buzzing, and the grass" (24). "I fell off the hill into the bright, whirling shapes" (34). "Then the dark began to go in smooth, bright shapes, like it always does, even when Caddy says that I have been asleep" (48). Without the capacity to name things or identify his experience, as in this last example of dreaming, Benjy nevertheless powerfully communicates that experience's felt quality. Though this particular example makes use of a visual impression, many of Benjy's most vivid assertions about his world rely on other sensory apprehensions, often and particularly the sense of smell. (Vision, in this last example, is qualified too by touch, as Benjy refers to the "bright *smooth* shapes.") Like Benjy, characters such as Horace or Quentin feel alienated from their present and helplessly cut off from their past. Unlike Benjy, however, they have little compensatory experience to make up for it, nor do they have his ability to so fully and powerfully *feel*.<sup>4</sup>

The stunted affective and sensory potential of Horace, Quentin, or Wilbourne that I am contrasting with Benjy is not limited to Faulkner's characters. I suggest that Benjy's section is forceful not only because of how immediately his inner life and sensory capacity are drawn, but because he is a reminder of a

quality of experience that for many people was lost—or was in the process of being lost—in the period in which Faulkner was writing. After *The Sound and the Fury*, Faulkner emphasizes not touch, smell, or hearing, but sight. The results of that shift are clear in Faulkner's writing of the thirties, as I hope my analysis demonstrates. Viewed in this way, Benjy offers perhaps a last glimpse of a culture or world that organized itself differently than does that of characters like Horace, Popeye, Quentin in *Absalom, Absalom!* and Harry Wilbourne. As such, he stands as one of a very few examples in Faulkner's fiction of what we might call a "premodern," nonreified consciousness. In light of the almost exclusive emphasis on vision that we find in the thirties and of what it connotes about modernity, Benjy's richer and better-integrated sensory life is instructive.

I am not proposing here that Benjy stands as a fully realized historical subject. Far from it. As noted, his consciousness, however linked to the past, is not productively, actively so. Benjy clearly does not offer a model or a project for historical awareness or change. Yet I think that we may nonetheless allow Benjy and even his more limited cognitive capacity to express something, if only suggestively and by way of contrast, about the impoverished nature of a modern, rationalistic subjectivity. Particularly as that subjectivity is manifested in Faulkner's thirties novels—both in their characters, and in the consciousness and operations of the novels themselves, as it were—we may find in Benjy an alternative position that informs our understanding of Faulkner's later treatment of sensory life. Benjy's mental limitations prevent reading him nostalgically and as part of an impulse for an earlier, "purer" time or mode of being. If he offers a positive alternative to the affective, sensory, and emotional shortcomings of Horace, Quentin, Sutpen, or Wilbourne, he does not exactly represent a state to which Faulkner urges us to return. He does, however, mark the orienting point of a concern Faulkner increasingly voiced in the novels that followed, as well as an example of a character who lacks the particular afflictions we see in so many of Faulkner's thirties protagonists.

Elsewhere, and in a more general manner, Fredric Jameson has strenuously asserted the need in cultural criticism for a historicizing of sensory life. In *The Political Unconscious*, he describes the way sense perception has altered in different historical epochs and in response to various modes of production, especially cultural production and expression. In doing so, Jameson refers to Marx's statements about the historical disconnection between human sensory life and the status of objects or commodities: "The *senses* have therefore

become *theoreticians* in their immediate praxis. They relate to the *thing* for its own sake, but the thing itself is an *objective human* relation to itself and to man, and vice-versa” (Marx quoted from *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* in *The Political Unconscious*, 62). Though in this discussion Jameson treats the shifts between the romance novel and realism, his thinking is useful for a consideration of Faulkner’s historical modernism. In a statement that might apply to the “primitive” or affective aspect of Benjy that I am here raising, Jameson goes on to claim, “The scandalous idea that the senses have a history is . . . one of the touchstones of our historicity; if, in spite of our thoughts about history, we still feel that . . . primitive peoples, were very much like ourselves and in particular lived their bodies and their senses in the same way, then we have surely not made much progress in thinking historically” (229). As rendered by Faulkner’s novelistic experiment, Benjy’s experience offers a version of a different, and perhaps *historically* different way of living the senses.

As other theorists of the novel form and of modernism point out, sense perception and the way we “live our bodies” had been undergoing changes well before Faulkner imagined Benjy or wrote *The Sound and the Fury*. In advance of Jameson’s consideration of the senses and the transformations of the novel, Georg Lukács described this historical and affective shift in his early meditation on the genre, *Theory of the Novel*. Referring to the advent of the lyric voice in prose (for him the origins of the novel genre), Lukács wrote,

In lyric poetry, only the great moment exists, the moment at which the meaningful unity of nature and soul or their meaningful divorce, the necessary and affirmed loneliness of the soul becomes eternal. At the lyrical moment the purest interiority of the soul . . . solidifies into substance; whilst alien, unknowable nature is driven from within. (63)

Benjy’s section may be said to express in several moments this “meaningful unity of nature and soul,” particularly in references to his natural surroundings and their profound effect on him. His awareness of his sister’s presence and her affinity with trees; the smell of rain or of the cold outside; his intense responsiveness to the sound of insects in the grass or the flapping of birds’ wings—all of these suggest Benjy’s powerful connection to his physical environment. Following Benjy, and throughout the thirties, we find a sustained treatment of the “divorce” of the unity of nature and the soul and its historical causes as well as the attendant effects on characters of a newly “unknowable” nature.<sup>5</sup>

The close of *The Sound and the Fury*'s last section perhaps shows an indication of the direction Faulkner was to turn after it, the "divorce from nature" and from perceiving it directly that begins with Horace and Popeye (in their mechanical, detached scene in the forest clearing) and reaches its apogee in a color-blind Harry Wilbourne. Having maintained something of Benjy's affective vivacity in *The Sound and the Fury* with Quentin (in the smell of honeysuckle and in the focus on Quentin's interiority), with Jason we arrive at a more fully exteriorized experience as well as the beginnings of an emphasis on sight. In addition to highlighting Jason's relentless and controlling observation of Miss Quentin, the novel's account of him includes its famous double "cue" to the act of looking that is associated with Jason and his overly cerebral experience: the graphic depiction of the eye in the sign at the Mottson gas station, "Keep your  on Mottson" (193). Throughout Jason's monologue we find an emphasis on calculation, commerce, and profit, concerns that would reappear obsessively in thirties characters such as Thomas Sutpen and Harry Wilbourne (and to a degree during this period, as his correspondence reveals, in Faulkner himself).

In the fourth section and with the arrival of Dilsey and her family at church, we find some of the earliest intimations of the turn that Faulkner's perspective in the thirties was to take not only to an emphasis on vision but also to its related effects. Referring to the country setting, at the end of Dilsey, Frony, and Benjy's walk the narrator offers a description that hints strongly at a diminished perceptual ability:

The road rose again, to a scene like a painted backdrop. Notched into a cut of red clay crowned with oaks the road appeared to stop short off, like a cut ribbon. Beside it a weathered church lifted its crazy steeple like a painted church, and the whole scene was as flat and without perspective as a painted cardboard set upon the ultimate edge of the flat earth, against the windy sunlight of space and April and a midmorning filled with bells. (292)

Throughout this passage are references to vision, but in particular, to a notably shallow perspective. In addition to the repetitions ("as flat," "flat earth"), there are indirect suggestions of two-dimensionality and foreshortening in the "painted backdrop," "painted church," and "cut ribbon." Sense perception is almost entirely reduced to vision, yet a vision that is severely limited.<sup>6</sup>

Here, at the end of *The Sound and the Fury*, we see the effect of something Faulkner went on to show was central to the experience of characters (and

potentially of his readers) in the thirties: the loss of a sense of immediacy and contact with the world such that Benjy had demonstrated. The visual but flattened image of the church in Dilsey's section stands out against Benjy's synesthetic locutions and his simple but moving association of his sister with trees. It also stands out, interestingly, against language in the passage that describes the "windy sunlight of space and April" and the sound-bearing, palpable "midmorning filled with bells." In such moments, Faulkner contrasts the impression of openness, space, and a concretized sound with a series of depthless, abstract, and two-dimensional images. It is as if, at the novel's end and at the very moment Faulkner also intimates the reifying, "flattening" effects of vision—effects he went on to catalogue throughout the novels that followed—he reminds readers of the material fullness and sensory richness of the premodern, nonconsumer cultural world.

With these remarks, I do not mean to imply simply that with *The Sound and the Fury* or the first section we find a purer, "premodernist" Faulkner. Yet in important ways, *The Sound and the Fury* both does and does not include what I describe as some of the most specifically modernist aspects of Faulkner's later texts. As he attested, this novel gave Faulkner a sense for what he could do with his writing that he had not yet experienced and, following which, he was not to experience again. After writing *The Sound and the Fury*, Faulkner said, "I believed that I knew then why I had not recaptured that first ecstasy, and that I should never again recapture it" ("Introduction" to *The Sound and the Fury*, 227). Faulkner's treatment of Benjy, his immediate, powerful connection to a range of sense perceptions as well as to his emotional life and natural world, differs radically from the combination of modernist literary practices and popular cultural influences that mark the thirties works and characters' experiences in them. In creating Benjy, Faulkner gives us a character who is truly arrested in his development. In his possession of certain qualities that were lacking in most of Faulkner's later characters, however (and arguably in many of his readers), as well as in his longings for an irrecoverable past, Benjy suggests something important about Faulkner's historicizing of the senses. By way of contrast, we might think of Wilbourne's deadened state at the end of "Wild Palms," or the potential extension of that mind-set in a broad cultural melancholy in the modern period. With Faulkner's preoccupation with vision and its various manifestations in the thirties, he repeatedly shows both a cause and an effect of modern social and cultural experience.

Carolyn Porter stresses a similar role for vision in her reading of *Absalom, Absalom!* Porter's specifically materialist, approach to Faulkner and to American literary history is compelling, and it offers terms that suggest another way to see Benjy's place in Faulkner's modernism. In addition to describing the "transcendent," encompassing quality of Sutpen's design, Porter seeks to redress earlier readings of Sutpen that see him as an example of a uniquely southern economics. She points out that throughout the novel Sutpen demonstrates habits of abstraction and calculation that Marxist cultural theory attributes more generally to Western capitalism. His design, in Mr. Compson's words, works by a "code of logic" and resembles a "formula and recipe of fact and deduction . . . [a] balanced sum and product" (*Absalom, Absalom!* 227). Commensurate with that calculating approach to his world is Sutpen's predominating perceptive mode, vision. We have noted the way in which to Quentin, Sutpen and his story appear as a series of moving images similar to those of film. By extension, Sutpen's cold, inscrutable stare, his eyes "at once visionary and alert" (26), and his far-reaching gaze down the "undivulged light rays" (216) align Sutpen himself with a calculating and detached act of looking.<sup>7</sup>

These qualities that characterize Sutpen—vision, rationalization, and calculation—distinguish him thoroughly from Benjy. They also mark for Faulkner, as for others, a particularly modern consciousness and experience. As Jameson puts it, "The very activity of sense perception has nowhere to go in a world in which science deals with ideal quantities, and comes to have little enough exchange value in a money economy dominated by considerations of calculation, measurement, profit, and the like. This unused surplus capacity of sense perception can only organize itself into a new and semi-autonomous activity, one which produces its own specific objects, new objects that are themselves the result of a process of abstraction" (*Political Unconscious*, 229). It is precisely Sutpen's calculation and "production of new objects" in other people like Rosa or Milly Jones that impoverishes him ethically and effects the "semi-autonomous" emphasis on sight that defines him. As Porter and others have shown, Faulkner's critique of Sutpen's design is part of an extended examination of the role of a market economy in both southern and American social experience and history.<sup>8</sup> As the sensory mode most readily associated with detachment, analysis, and cognition ("re-cognition" connoting both an act of seeing and of thought), vision comes under scrutiny in Faulkner's treatment of

modern American consciousness—in Sutpen, specifically, but more generally as vision was influenced by commercial and technological culture in the early twentieth century.

My study has endeavored to illustrate the ways that Faulkner's critical awareness of the new mass media and its influences animated his most modernist, supposedly "anti"-popular cultural novels. Chief among the effects of those media were the deleterious workings of cinema, that supremely visual and, in the early part of the century, most reifying of forms. The connections of Faulkner's critique of popular culture to his shift in the thirties to an ever stronger emphasis on vision—what Jameson called the "semi-autonomous activity of sight"—were not incidental. They in fact enabled one another. The seeds of this historical shift, however, began much earlier. Jameson shows how, well before Faulkner, novelists were already seeing a connection between visual experience and changes in social and economic reality. He refers to this connection as "the new ideology of the image, on the one hand, and the objective fragmentation of the outside world, or of the objects of perception, on the other" (*Political Unconscious*, 232). Jameson's model for treating this development, significantly, is Conrad, arguably Faulkner's greatest literary influence. Specifically, Jameson pursues this point through Conrad's *The Nigger of the "Narcissus,"* one of Faulkner's favorite novels and which provided one of the epigraphs for this study. For Jameson, Conrad's stylistic emphasis on perception and particularly on vision in this novel marked an awareness of specific effects of capitalism at the end of the nineteenth century. He means his point about a new "surplus capacity" of the senses literally: as a descriptive account of a period of historical transition in which, as he puts it, "the 'rational,' quantifying functions of the mind become privileged in such a way as to take structural precedence over older functions" (228) such as sensory life. With "nowhere to go" in a new world of economic abstraction and exchange-value, the senses take on a life of their own that is both a response to, and a symptom of, the shift to an industrial, instrumental order. This sensory autonomy and its production of "new objects" then appears for Jameson as a way of understanding Conrad's uniquely visual style, above all its production of radically new textual effects: a weird, otherworldly "refracting" of lighting or color in descriptive passages suggestive of "some new planet in the sky" or even "the presence of nonearthly colors in the spectrum" (231). Despite his own vivid and evocative language, Jameson means to offer these statements evenly: "This . . . is my justification in characterizing Conrad's stylistic production as an *aestheticizing*

*strategy*: the term is not meant as a moral or political castigation, but is rather to be taken literally, as the designation of a strategy which for whatever reason seeks to recode or rewrite the world and its own data in terms of perception as a semi-autonomous activity” (230).

Jameson’s claims about Conrad’s aestheticizing have particular relevance to what I see develop as a similar, if somewhat more castigating, strategy in Faulkner. For Jameson, these effects are measurable in Conrad’s “displacing” of the standard nineteenth-century trope of theatricality, his undermining of it through an appropriation of the metaphor of perspective and an emphasis on vision within the language of Conrad’s style. The result, he claims, is something decidedly more modern. “Conrad displaces the theatrical metaphor by transforming it into a matter of sense perception, into a virtually filmic experience” (*Political Unconscious*, 232). Before the advent of cinema, Jameson argues, Conrad displaced the standard nineteenth-century trope of theatricality into a textual effect, one that historicizes sensory activity and its influence by capitalist developments and that, to Jameson, resembles film.<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps in Faulkner’s reading of Conrad, but more likely in his own experience with movies and the film industry, he increasingly saw evidence of the abstract and reified consciousness Jameson identified. Film epitomized these negative aspects of a modern sensibility and system, based on audiences’ detached and, in Faulkner’s early experience, silent consumption of images, as well as by the studios’ ever more rigorously calculated profit. As such, film and its related effects compelled Faulkner’s attention, appearing in the consciousness that he attributed to his characters and informing his depiction of Yoknapatawpha’s social world. Historicizing Faulkner’s modernism as I have tried to do—showing his critique of vision and popular culture to be part of his complaint against an overly rational and increasingly capitalist society—lends credence, I think, to assessments of Benjy as a vestige of an earlier historical period. If *The Sound and the Fury* and Benjy’s chapter mark one precipitating moment in that complaint, I submit that much of what follows in the thirties represents a way of tracing that moment’s development. An impulse originating, in this analysis, in Benjy becomes, in the thirties, Faulkner’s broader cultural and social critique.

I have been at pains throughout this discussion to show how Faulkner’s writing of the thirties, while sharply critical of various effects and forms of popular culture, avoids precisely the kind of transcending and disavowal of its histori-

cal moment described by traditional accounts of modernism. Closely involving himself with the modes of representation of cultural forms he disdained such as film and popular fiction, and including them in his “high-art” novels, Faulkner managed both a striking approximation of those popular forms and a trenchant critique of them. As we have seen, he did not always do so easily or with full control of his appropriations of mass culture, as in *Light in August*, or without ambivalence about those uses, as in *Sanctuary*.

In several ways, and in spite of my characterization of the immanent, engaged quality of his criticism, Faulkner strove at points to fortify himself against the more “sordid” realities of the popular cultural world. This act, repeated symbolically at various points in the decade, allows a final, summary reading of Faulkner’s “mass cultural” decade. It also offers a way to understand what I have identified as the thirties’ other predominant trope. As indicated earlier, Faulkner begins and ends the period of writing I’ve treated with the image of a man in prison. That jail cell, as I’ve noted in my chapters, appears inviting to the characters who inhabit it, and even to one who does not. It is appealing to Horace, to Harry, and to the Tall Convict—and above all, it appears, to Faulkner.

At this point it seems reasonable to ask what the basis of that appeal was. One explanation is by way of another reference to Benjy and the privileged place I am lending him in Faulkner’s career. In the terms I am pursuing, at the other end of the spectrum from Benjy stands, not Jason Compson, whom Faulkner referred to as Benjy’s foil and an agent of pure “evil,” nor the visionary Thomas Sutpen, but the ruthlessly calculating, mercantilist-minded, and exploitative Snopeses. Harbingers of the social and economic systems for the new century, the Snopeses signal the rise not only of a new bourgeois class and economic way of life in the South, but of a new and more modern form of “being.” As Faulkner knew well, that mode of life made itself felt not only in the twentieth-century South but in a broader American cultural and economic life, including especially the parts of it that most nearly affected him. The Snopeses are not themselves purveyors of mass culture; they are not Hollywood studio executives or short-story magazine editors. (They are certainly not emblems of the New York publishing world that included figures and institutions like Harrison Smith and Random House.) They are, however, examples of the managerial class that, in contexts outside the South—and in the entertainment and cultural industries in which Faulkner also worked—came increasingly to influence and dominate the work of artists and writers.

One episode from the first Snopes novel strikingly illustrates this view. It recalls scenes from an earlier novel—Wilbourne’s “peep show” of Charlotte’s body and his viewing of it while in prison—as well as Faulkner’s sense of the pornographic nature of the film product and the culture industry generally. Lump Snopes’s aborted effort in *The Hamlet* to display Ike’s sessions with the cow in Mrs. Littlejohn’s stable, and eventually to charge “admission” for it, sounds like an urban nickelodeon displaced from the cities to the rural countryside. Complete with a captive, paying audience drawn to illicit acts of voyeurism, it includes as well a managing theater owner or “distributor” in Lump. Just as importantly, however, the scene at Mrs. Littlejohn’s also includes Faulkner’s characteristically pointed critique of it and, as with his earlier novels, his always immanent method. When he stops the men’s activity of watching, Ratliff does so in a manner that, for him, is uncharacteristically angry: he imagines attacking the crowd of onlookers. “When they looked around at [Ratliff], he already held the loose plank, holding it as if he were on the point of striking at them with it” (*The Hamlet*, 913). Ratliff does not attack the men at the stable physically. But his scorn is obvious. Despite his anger, though, when Ratliff speaks to the group, he condemns not only the men involved for watching Ike, and Snopes for aiding them, but the entire apparatus of a managed, profit-turning spectacle of desire. Surprised by his re-nailing the plank through which they’d been looking, one of the men says to Ratliff, “I notice you come to have your own look too.” To which Ratliff replies “sardonically,” “not even in outraged righteousness,” “‘Sholy . . . I aint cussing you folks. I’m cussing all of us’” (913). In a manner that might describe Faulkner’s cultural critique of the thirties, one that included his recognition of his own position in the culture industry and in the modern culture of which he was a part, Ratliff includes himself—“all of us”—in his damning.

*The Hamlet*, though, also includes a powerful alternative to the Snopeses and what they represent as well as to Ratliff’s (and Faulkner’s) “cussing.” For outside of that scope lies a character and an experience that offers a striking rejoinder not only to the Snopes episodes and narrative that frame it but to Faulkner’s broader focus on mass culture and vision as well. The passage earlier in the book describing Ike waiting for the cow in the creek bottom is notable for its attention to a range of potent sensory stimulation, effects that resemble those we noted with Benjy. Because of what these effects say rhetorically about sense perception in the context of *The Hamlet*’s rapidly commercializing world, and because they manifest themselves in some of the most vivid and rapturous prose Faulkner wrote, I quote the passage at length:

Then he would hear her, coming down the creekside in the midst. It would not be after one hour, two hours, three; the dawn would be empty, the moment and she would not be, then he would hear her and he would lie drenched in the wet grass, serene and one and indivisible in joy, listening to her approach. He would smell her; the whole mist reeked with her; the small malleate hands of mist which drew along his prone drenched flanks palped her pearled barrel too and shaped them both somewhere in immediate time, already married. He would not move. He would lie amid the waking instant of earth's teeming life, the motionless fronds of water-heavy grasses stooping into the mist before his face in black, fixed curves, along each parabola of which the marching drops held in minute magnification the dawn's rosy miniatures, smelling and even tasting the rich, slow, warm barn-reek, milk-reek, the flowing immemorial female, hearing the slow planting and plopping suck of each deliberate cloven mud-spreading hoof, invisible still in the mist loud with its hymeneal choristers. (883)

Perhaps the most important detail of this remarkable passage is the fact that in the midst of a truly teeming array of other sense perceptions, the cow remains "invisible." Sight plays little part of Ike's anticipatory ecstasy, though every other sensory activity does as the empty dawn fills with his myriad impressions. Smell figures perhaps above all. The sense of smell provides, not the first indication Ike has of the cow's arrival, but the fullest and most powerful. The cow's scent pervades the entire scene ("the whole mist reeked with her"), and references to Ike smelling her predominate, in which Ike's olfactory experience mixes with his sense of taste: he "smell[s] and even tast[es] the rich, slow, warm barn-reek, milk-reek." Touch figures importantly as well, as Ike feels the caressing "hands" of the mist "shap[ing]" both him and the cow. Hearing works forcefully, as it provides Ike with his first sign of the cow's approach, then furnishes the onomatopoetic "plopping" of the hooves in the mud as well as, finally, the euphonious, mist-filtered "hymeneal choristers." The outcome of all this fullness of immediate sense perception, figuratively, is one we have seen Faulkner champion before—marriage, and in a moment in another novel in which he also stressed the primacy of a sense besides seeing: the "marriage of speaking and hearing" experienced by Quentin and Shreve in *Absalom, Absalom!* Like the uniquely close relationship Quentin and Shreve forge by listening (and not only by looking detachedly at pictures), Ike and the cow, as the passage above stipulates, are also, significantly, "already married."

This emphasis on sensory perception, including as it does Ike's innocent, pure love and the scene's pastoral setting, serves as a stunning rebuke of the

values represented by nearly all the other characters in the book. Flem's ruthless calculations, Lump's amoral pursuit of Houston's money—all transpire in the developing mercantilist culture of Frenchman's Bend. The significance of this aspect of the book, of course, relies on the fact that, although published in 1940, with it Faulkner describes events from an earlier historical period. *The Hamlet* dwells on a rural scene that was in transition to modernity. Against that rising urban and commercial milieu, Ike's depth of feeling and dazzling sense of affect seem all the more unique. His affection also contrasts sharply with the debased scenarios of romantic and erotic activity that surround it: Flem's arranged marriage to Eula Varner, for instance, or Labove's assault on her. As with Benjy, I would argue, this quality of feeling expresses Faulkner's protest over the mercantilist commercial society that surrounded both him and his characters in their respective contexts. And also like Benjy, it furnishes Faulkner some of the most arresting moments of his writing. Like Benjy's portion of *The Sound and the Fury*, Ike's experiences with the cow and Faulkner's manner of depicting them evoke a tenderness and poetic sense that their world did not support, a world Faulkner described throughout his writing in the period of the thirties.

Flem's exploitation of the Varners or of Frenchmen's Bend, like Lump's of Ike, rely on a calculation and rationalization that, although it defined the encroaching world of the Snopeses, does not obtain in the experience of characters like Ike and Benjy. The appearance of the passage of Ike and the cow in *The Hamlet* thus allows Faulkner and his readers an alternative to social and economic developments of modernity that, as Jameson and others have suggested, threatened to further and further delimit sense perception, and with it the capacity for human contact and feeling. Connecting Ike back to Benjy helps mark even more definitively the places in which those losses are expressed in Faulkner's writing, in both his fiction of the thirties and in the novels that followed, and in which that loss manifests itself in an increasing, tendentious emphasis on vision. Characters like Ike and Benjy and the protest Faulkner registers through their fully engaged sensorium appear in this light as extensions of the larger critique Faulkner leveled at consumer society throughout the thirties and his focus on sight.

If Snopesism may be said to resemble the exploitations of a market economy and of the culture industry, it may also contribute to an understanding of Faulkner's jail cell metaphor. As I have described it here, Faulkner's "writing decade" of the 1930s began and ended with a parallel image: a prison cell occupied by a solitary, isolated, but not altogether frustrated man. That the

decade I describe as most revealing of Faulkner's relationship to popular culture should begin and end with these images of imprisonment is provocative. As I argued at the close of the last chapter, the jail cell offers an apt metaphor for the position of both the producer of popular art and its consumer. Wilbourne both records and "films" images of Charlotte's body, then views them onanistically in Parchman Prison. The imprisoned black man in the Jefferson jail cell in *Sanctuary*, however, offers slightly different possibilities for interpretation. Earlier, we noted Horace's wistful perspective on the jailed murderer: safe from the petty judgments of the townspeople and the frustrations of the trial, removed from the difficulties of his marriage, the jail appears to offer Horace a longed-for sanctuary. We might say that jail cells for Faulkner, as for Horace, offer a sanctuary from the encroaching world of Snopes and Snopesism in the form he understood it most painfully: the world of commercially packaged, mass-market culture and writing.<sup>10</sup>

In addition to the scenes of the condemned Negro murderer in *Sanctuary* and, of course, Parchman Prison, jail cells or their approximation also appear in *Light in August* and *Absalom, Absalom!* In the latter case, they also provide a space in which to pursue acts of imaginative—even modernist—creation. Joe Christmas, of course, spends the early part of his life in the prison-like orphanage. In *Absalom*, Quentin is held captive, first in Rosa's parlor. Then, for a much longer period with Shreve, he is captive both within his and Shreve's "tomb like" common room and to the sustained activity of producing the Sutpen narrative. Faulkner's most celebrated scenario of narrative invention and of characters' acts of "telling," similar to his own creative acts with his novels through the thirties, occurs within a figurative prison. We might say, then, that both the textual "space" and experience of writing—and the spaces that experience produced, such as the Compson household, Sutpen's Hundred, and both literal and figurative prisons like Parchman and Quentin's dorm room—offered Faulkner similar attractions. All these spaces are defined by their separation from what Faulkner obviously saw as a chaotic, depleted modernity. I suggest that jail cells were interesting to Faulkner throughout the thirties because they offered what he—like Horace, like Joe Christmas, like Quentin, Wilbourne, and the Tall Convict—all sought: respite and protection from an alien, hostile world.<sup>11</sup>

The jailed Negro's lament in *Sanctuary* is a curious one, but it is also suggestive for what I am saying about Faulkner's position throughout the thirties. "Aint no place fer you in heavum!" he sings, with his face to the window.

“Say, Aint no place fer you in hell!” In writing *The Sound and the Fury* earlier, Faulkner had, by his own account, discovered something of his writerly “heaven”—that “ecstasy” of writing for himself and without regard for publishers. His momentary heaven of writing this way allowed the formal daring that led him to both a sense of himself as a writer and a recognition of the incredible suppleness of the novel form. That position and pleasure, however, increasingly felt compromised as Faulkner sought to capitalize on the reading market. His short story submissions and screenwriting work, we can recognize, were not satisfying to a writer who in the same period produced such enormously ambitious novels of social and historical questioning as *Light in August* and *Absalom, Absalom!* Throughout those works and others of the period, then, are manifest the frustrations Faulkner felt due to his position competing—not only with the producers of an increasingly dominant mass culture, but with himself and his own position beholden to the culture industry.

After modernism’s initial flourish in the twenties—the early masterworks such as *Ulysses*, *The Waste Land*, and *The Sound and the Fury*—and after the market crash of 1929, occurred a shift in both the perceived efficacy of modernist writing and the position of literary artists. Increasingly, authors like Faulkner (and Nathanael West and Scott Fitzgerald) saw the need, and were given the opportunity, to engage the kinds of audience that in prior moments of personal fulfillment or “ecstasy” had not figured in their experience of writing. Throughout this period Faulkner still, however, sought to produce fiction that operated differently from popular fare, as well as from the proletarian and social realist movements of the thirties. The result of these efforts is perceptible in those examples of his high-art novels of the decade, novels that were extremely demanding formally and aesthetically—purposefully high-modernist—yet at the same time aware and inclusive of the reality that existed outside Faulkner’s secluded (modernist) jail cell.

Nowhere is the split between Faulkner’s two writing “spaces” and the kind of text it afforded more visible than at the precise midpoint of the thirties. Bracketed on either side by the long period in which he wrote *Absalom, Absalom!*, *Pylon* offers a strange, fascinating illustration of issues that informed Faulkner’s writing of the decade. Considered a minor and less successful novel than his other books of the period, while at the same time a more serious literary effort than the more overtly pandering *The Unvanquished* (1938), *Pylon* offers a synecdoche of Faulkner’s approach to his writing in the thirties, a quality we can detect through a glance at the novel’s ending. At the book’s

close, we find the reporter's two aborted versions of his air show story. The first of them is hopelessly romantic; the other "savagely," to use Faulkner's term, ironic. It is significant, I think, that Faulkner is precise about the readers for both stories. Particularly with the first version, he shows the ambitious young copyboy first restoring the article, then reading it avidly and, at its end, evincing a desire to finish writing it himself. Somewhat mockingly, Faulkner refers to him as "a bright lad, about to graduate from high school; he had not only ambitions but dreams too" (323). Apparently those include literary ambitions, because in addition to hoping Hagood will let him finish writing the story, the copyboy sees it as "not only news but the beginning of literature" (323).

Although Faulkner is hard on the copyboy, I suspect he recognized in him some of his own youthful literary ambitions and more romantic leanings. Immediately following his thrill at the prospect of being able to finish the piece, the copyboy encounters Hagood and, in the same moment, reads the very different version of the story that the reporter felt constrained to provide his editor. Scathingly bitter about the "precision pilots" who missed Shumann's body by three-quarters of a mile, replete with "news" and information that the reporter finds unseemly (such as the amount of the plane's horsepower), and brutally frank about the "abandoning" of the search effort, the reporter offers, not literature or even really news copy. Rather, he offers what Faulkner, in his "Introduction" to *The Sound and the Fury*, described as the modernist writer's predicament: "a savage indictment of the contemporary scene" (229). That indictment, I contend, grew out of Faulkner's enormous frustration—but stubborn will—about writing in his period. The contemporary scene for Faulkner included not only an organ of mass readership like the newspaper (or popular forms like pulp fiction or film), but the readers of the 1930s who sought the elevations of "literature." Those very longings, however lofty, Faulkner increasingly saw as naïve. For in this period, as Faulkner learned over and over again, there was no comfortable place for either the producer of literary art fiction, nor, if you possessed ambitions such as his (or the copyboy's), was there comfort in being a practitioner of commercial writing or "hack."

Faulkner's thirties position, then, resembled both a sanctuary and a jail cell. With novels like *Sanctuary*, both the original and the 1931 versions, as well as *Light in August*, *Absalom, Absalom!* and, perhaps above all, *If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem*, Faulkner demonstrated his deeply conflicted sense of his position as a writer. Aware of the workings of the culture industry, occupying a posi-

tion, grudgingly but pragmatically, both within those workings and outside them, Faulkner wrote novels that maintained some of the autonomy he enjoyed with his first burst of freedom with *The Sound and the Fury*. Yet importantly, in the books that followed, Faulkner moved beyond the “closed space” of the Compson household and aesthetic formalism. Broadening his treatments of southern history and identity, Faulkner also, throughout the decade, incorporated into his novels the methods and materials of the popular culture he had seen around him growing up, then imbibed while working in the culture industry. In doing so, he allowed “in” to his novels those examples of popular culture he denigrated. The importance of this gesture is that it reveals a vital component of Faulkner’s larger project in his mature fiction: addressing the historical transformations of modernity. Over the course of the thirties, Faulkner increasingly saw the limits of a writerly position that allied itself only with the visionary “transcendence” of *The Sound and the Fury* or high modernism. Instead, he adopted a writing practice that included both his modernist ecstasy *and* his recognition of the realities of modern cultural life and writing.

As this discussion demonstrates, Faulkner’s tone toward mass art became increasingly bitter as the decade progressed. Much of this was due to its further and further encroachment on American cultural consumption and production, as well as on Faulkner’s own literary production. In closing, I submit that this bitterness was directed at figures like Harry Wilbourne or the Tall Convict but also at Faulkner’s circumstances. On the one hand, those circumstances included Faulkner’s short-story writing and screenplay work in Hollywood. Like his characters, caught in prison cells but exploiting, at least partly, their positions as producers of a certain kind of narrative—visual, entertaining, or even pornographic—Faulkner, in his commercial writing, made the best of a situation in which he felt trapped. On the other hand, and at the same time, he also found productive ways in his art fiction to use his observations about a burgeoning consumer culture. Longing for the lost, perhaps illusory pleasure of complete modernist autonomy, but recognizing the realities of modern cultural production, in his novel writing of the thirties Faulkner reconciled many of the conflicts that defined his writing position. The result, as these several examples demonstrate, are some of the most powerfully modernist and, arguably, the most engaged, historicized novels Faulkner wrote.

Throughout assessments of Faulkner’s literary career (including Faulkner’s own assessments) are considerations of his historical placing. Faulkner’s decla-

ration that with *The Sound and the Fury* he “shut a door between [himself] and all publisher’s addresses and book lists” (“Introduction,” 227) offers a useful final window onto Faulkner’s writing vocation of the thirties. It is precisely the idea of a “timeless” space for Faulkner’s writing away from the contingencies of contemporary commercial life and culture, suggested in such comments and advanced by earlier critics, that this essay has questioned. What I hope to have shown is that the more “purely” literary dimensions and deliberate formalism of Faulkner’s thirties fiction can be traced to cultural and historical phenomena that existed well beyond Faulkner’s novels’ aestheticized space. That aesthetic quality is, of course, insistently present in these works, as it is in *The Sound and the Fury*. It is manifest in Rosa Coldfield’s densely lyrical speaking voice and Quentin and Shreve’s historical vision in *Absalom, Absalom!*; in passages describing Temple Drake’s subjectivized sense of time, or poetic descriptions of Clarence Snopes in *Sanctuary*; in the heightened, imagist language surrounding Joe Christmas’s death scene; in Faulkner’s uncanny, dream-like evocations of the flooded Mississippi River and its metaphor for the film screen in *Jerusalem*; in the generic, stylistic, and narrative experiment of each of the novels I’ve examined.

What is also in these works, as recent Faulkner and modernist criticism has begun to prove, is not only the presence of specific historical developments and material but the connection of those materials to Faulkner’s conception of an otherwise timeless mode of writing. As I’ve described it, Faulkner’s modernism was indeed created by its unique, chaotic inventiveness and beauty and from inside the protected jail cell of Faulkner’s acts of writing. It was also, though, created by the ugly or troubling realities outside it.