And every word, when once it is written, is bandied about, alike among those who understand and those who have no interest in it, and it knows not to whom to speak or not to speak; when ill-treated or unjustly reviled, it always needs its father to help it; for it has no power to protect or help itself. (Plato, *Phaedrus* 275E)

From the moment of its publication, Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*, one of the most exemplary modernist novels, has been notorious for the difficulty that it presents to the reader. Even professional critics and literary scholars admit the challenge Faulkner’s narrative technique poses for them as readers. The reader’s difficulty corresponds to the author’s “anguish” in writing it: Faulkner repeatedly said that in this novel he most earnestly tried for the impossible, and failed. His impossible goal can be defined as *ideal communication*, a struggle to overcome the grammatical and pragmatic limits of language and annihilate the distance between the writer and the reader. This paper explores *The Sound and the Fury* as a peculiar, contradictory, and idealistic communicative gesture. Moreover, I will argue that this text epitomizes the communicative situation of the modernist novel in general, which according to Walter Benjamin is an attempt to convey an incommunicable experience. The novel’s opening narrator, the non-speaker Benjy, sets and figuratively represents the novel’s situation vis-à-vis the reader. Benjy also strongly links the novel to Plato’s metaphor of the written text as a helpless orphan, thrown on the unfamiliar and unpredictable world after the author’s “death” (passing the text on to the readers). Understood in this way, *The Sound and the Fury* may be seen as a quintessential embodiment of

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Plato’s allegory. Ironically, this remains true in spite of Faulkner’s continuous efforts to accompany his novel on its way through the world, spinning around it a web of paratexts aimed at preparing and persuading the readers to lend the novel full and appreciative attention.

Despite the attitude of gloomy withdrawal (combined with idealistic demands for more than common understanding) with which this text confronts the first-time reader, *The Sound and the Fury* also reaches out to, and actually has found in reality, good-enough readers who are not ideal but are willing to lend their open, unprejudiced and careful attention to what the text is “trying to say.” By the 1950s, there emerged in the United States a strong community of readers attuned to and appreciative of modernist writing, with Faulkner as one of the central authors of the new modernist canon. The core of this community was the expanding population of the English departments, whose hallmark New Critical methods of reading were well suited for such texts as Faulkner’s. Faulkner’s work, and *The Sound and the Fury* in particular, became one of the “crystallization centers” of postwar American literary studies.

Most of the existing reader-oriented criticism on *The Sound and Fury* was published in the 1990s, and much of it is concentrated in the collection *Approaches to Teaching Faulkner’s The Sound and the Fury*. Arnold Weinstein’s description of the relationship between the reader and the text in this novel is particularly close to the analysis proposed here, and will be related to further in more detail. This article aims at reviving the discussion about the novel’s relationship with its readers, with a view to making a larger theoretical statement on the reader-text-author relationship, especially in the case of an innovative (in this case, modernist) text for which no established reading conventions exist at the moment of its publication.

To analyze *The Sound and the Fury* as a communicative gesture made by the author and interpreted, with greater or lesser success, by the reader, I will employ several methods. First, I examine some responses of real first-time readers, such as early reviewers and literature students who first encounter the novel in a classroom. The actual readers’ responses to the novel will be pitched against the “implied reader,” in Wolfgang Iser’s sense, which in this novel imposes a contradictory “reader-role” (Walter J. Ong’s term) that no real first-time reader can assume. Next, I look at the inscribed readers (certain characters in the novel that serve as figures for the reader) and, drawing on Peter Brooks, I examine the way in which *The Sound and the Fury* encodes its own communicative situation in the scenes of telling it describes. The instances of “telling” are either failed, like Benjy’s central “trying to say,” or successful beyond what can be expected of a regular communicative utterance, like Reverend Shegog’s important sermon. The figure of Benjy as an impossible narrator both sets and figuratively represents the whole novel’s communicative plight. Moreover, neither of the other two first-person narrators is actually telling his story to anyone; they have no
possible narratees in the novel and thus reinforce the pattern of non-telling set by Benjy’s section.

Walter J. Ong’s early article “The Writer’s Audience is Always a Fiction” (1975) is highly useful for this study, because it shows how the “reader-role,” a system of cues implicit in the text, interacts with real readers on the one hand and encodes the audience imagined by the real author, on the other hand. Ong’s concept of “reader-role” allows him to shift his focus between the real readers, the text, and the real author. Thus, Ong provides a model for my discussion of Faulkner’s novel as a communicative gesture that takes place in the real world, by means of the fictional text. Ong’s “reader-role” is both similar to and different from Iser’s category of the implied reader inscribed in the text. Iser is concerned with a purely text-based procedure of defining the conditions under which the text will be read most adequately (e.g., in “The Reading Process”). Ong, however, does not draw a strict line between the reader role(s) as encoded in the text and an imaginary audience that the writer has in mind while writing, an “audience’ that fires the writer’s imagination” (10). Ong’s approach thus validates inclusion of biographical details and extratextual input from the author himself, which I will use to reinforce the sense of communicative plight in which The Sound and the Fury initially found itself.

The reader-role implicit in The Sound and the Fury is a very strange and contradictory one. It is an implied reader that no real reader can quite match, at least not upon first reading and without methodical aid. On the one hand, the text seems to deliberately drive the reader away—but on the other hand, it also challenges the reader to be exceptional, to be able to do without what it positions as “common” and “vulgar” pragmatic props that regular communication requires.

REAL FIRST-TIME READERS

To gauge the extent of the difficulty faced by a reader upon his or her first encounter with The Sound and the Fury, I will consider two groups of readers: contemporary reviewers who commented on the novel upon its publication, and students, for whom special methodical tools have to be devised, since these two groups are most genuinely “first-time” readers, who don’t yet have at their disposal the critical apparatus developed in the academy for reading this novel. One could also say that these readers are not (yet) part of the community of readers that Faulkner’s and other modernists’ works have formed, the community that has adopted suitable conventions and habits of reading modernist texts. In contemporary reviews of the late 1920s and early 1930s, when modernist literature was still in the process of creating such a community of readers, most of the critics pointed out the inaccessibility of Faulkner’s new work: one critic even unequivocally
condemned *The Sound and the Fury*, along with the rest of modernist literature, for its refusal to communicate. In the words of one early review,

Max Eastman recently wrote an essay on the modernistic school of writers—Joyce, Cummings, Stein, and colleagues—in which he contended that the purpose of literature, primarily, is to communicate. Of course. And the chief indictment against the modernists is their utmost complete lack of communication. Under this indictment young Mr. Faulkner must fall. His novel tells us nothing (Scott, in Bassett 82).\(^5\)

“Communication” seems to stand here for transmission of information or content by means of a shared code. The reviewer charges Faulkner with a breach of this code: “rambling, often capital-less or periodless or puncture-less…prose” produces a “jumbled, confused and wandering” effect (81). I argue, however, that in another, intersubjective sense, Faulkner’s novel is a very intense, even desperate attempt at communication, reaching out (if without much hope) toward some ideal interlocutor who would comprehend the whole mental and emotional reality from which the text emerges. It is not surprising that press reviews in the late 1920s fall short of such complete empathic understanding—not only because of the lack of shared conventions for reading modernist texts, but also because of the novel’s morally problematic content (dysfunctional family, mental illness, incest, suicide, to name the most obvious), which seems far beyond the reach of empathy on the part of a morally normative middle-class reader. Most reviewers, even those who recognize the novel’s power and importance, insist that it is “almost unreadable” (Fitts, in Bassett 87),\(^6\) “an ambitious, intricate, and often unintelligible work” (Swinnerton, in Bassett 91),\(^7\) and “not a book for every novel reader; indeed,…Mr. Faulkner should consider himself lucky if he finds a hundred discerning readers in this country” (Crickmay, in Bassett 90).\(^8\) The indignant repudiations of other, especially Southern critics, who branded Faulkner for grossly misrepresenting the Southern morality were of course more extreme. If this indignation indicates that they found the novel less impenetrable than other critics did, it still was not quite the kind of understanding that the novel reaches out for.

In spite of the eventual recognition of Faulkner as one of the major writers of his time, and the inclusion of *The Sound and the Fury* in the academic canon, the initial encounter of the novel with a new reader is still fraught with difficulties and a high risk of rejection. Instructors who undertake to teach *The Sound and the Fury* must take special measures to make the novel accessible to students. Robert Dale Parker uses the following strategy:

Although I do not like to reveal things about novels ahead of time, for *The Sound and the Fury* that seems excusable and almost necessary. Excusable, because *The Sound and the Fury*, unlike most of Faulkner’s novels, proceeds as if readers were already beyond a first reading: it
assumes a knowledge of its plot much more than it trades on the sus-
pense that can come from gradually unrolling that plot. And necessary,
more or less, to help first-time readers who might be frightened off by
the novel’s difficulty and by its unfamiliar kind of difficulty (Parker 27).

It follows from Parker’s words that the novel actually constructs its
reader as a second-time reader, in other words, as already an “insider” to
the text—while a first-time reader is by definition an “outsider,” who con-
fronts the text as an “other.” To such a reader, *The Sound and the Fury*
pre-
tsents an inhospitable terrain. One early reviewer of the novel, Dudley Fitts,
adopts that in opening his narrative the way he does,

Faulkner has been courageous, but I question the practicability of his
device. The deliberate obscurity of the opening pages repels rather than
invites; and when the reader perseveres, he struggles out at the other end
of Benjy’s maulderings with no clearer an idea of what has happened, or
may be expected to happen, than he had when he entered (Fitts, in
Bassett 88).

Fitts further proposes a solution to this problem:

[Let the reader start the book at page 93 putting off the introduction until
the end. In this way he will not only reassemble the chronology of the
narrative, but, thoroughly acquainted with most of the characters, he will
better appreciate the significance of Benjy’s meditations. In the event of a
reprinting I recommend this arrangement. (ibid.)

This suggestion was eventually carried out, to the point of exaggeration,
when in 1946 a Random House edition of the novel affixed Faulkner’s
explanatory Appendix (written for Malcolm Cowley’s “Modern Library” ed-
tion earlier the same year) *in front of* the text, at the author’s own request.
The Appendix remained there in subsequent editions until 1966, when it
was moved to the back of the book, to stay there until Noel Polk’s 1984
“Corrected Edition” finally dropped it (Burton 2001). As Stacey Burton states,
“The contrast between the experience of reading *The Sound and the Fury*
beginning with Benjy’s section and that of reading it beginning with the
Appendix could hardly be more pronounced” (616). Burton argues that
the 1946 arrangement, as well as the Appendix itself, where each character
is presented with dismissive conciseness and static clarity, constitute a
betrayal of the innovative, challenging, heteroglossic way in which the novel
is written. She cites James Meriwether’s statement that such an arrangement,
by relieving the readers “of the burdens which [the novel] was originally
designed to impose upon them” (Meriwether 29), changes completely both
the implied reader-role and the experience of actual reading. For our
purposes it makes *The Sound and the Fury* a different book.
BENJY AS AN IDEAL “WRONG” NARRATOR FOR A MODERNIST NOVEL

When the reviewer Dudley Fitts suggested moving Benjy’s section to the end, he was proposing a solution that Faulkner had already thought about. As Faulkner says in one of his classes at the University of Virginia, his decision to put Benjy’s section first

was part of the failure. It seemed to me that the book approached nearer the dream if the groundwork of it was laid by the idiot, who was incapable of relevancy. That’s—I agree with you too, that’s a bad method, but to me it seemed the best way to do it, that I shifted those sections back and forth to see where they went best, but my final decision was that though that was not right, that was the best way to do it, that was simply the groundwork of that story, as that idiot child saw it. (Gwynn and Blotner 63).

One can witness in the apologetic and tentative phrasing of this answer a small-scale reenactment of the “anguish” that Faulkner so often said The Sound and the Fury had cost him. The nature of the task he set for himself in writing this novel required “a bad method,” the material of the story would not admit of any easier, happier, more common-sense or efficient way of telling. In fact, Faulkner suggests here that Benjy’s section of the narrative, the least intelligible of the four sections, epitomizes the novel’s communicative situation—pragmatically out of joint, “incapable of relevancy,” a communicative “failure”—and therefore it had to come first.

Plato’s allegory of the written text as an abandoned helpless child seems especially relevant to Faulkner’s The Sound and the Fury, since this text is “helpless” in the face of its potential readers to a superlative degree. It starts out in the most disadvantageous way, pragmatically: “Through the fence, between the curling flower spaces, I could see them hitting.” The reference of “them” does not become clear until much later, unless the reader is familiar with the game of golf and can gather from the description of what “they” are doing that they are golf players. But even having guessed that the opening describes a game of golf, the first-time reader (the one whom the text has to face, since a second-time reader has already become to some extent an in-sider) must rely as far as possible on his own resources to figure out why the game of golf is important to the narrator. The text is not in a hurry to show the reader that for the narrator the most important thing in the game is the word “caddie” pronounced by one of the players:

“Here, caddie.” He hit. They went away across the pasture. I held to the fence and watched them going away.
“Listen at you, now.” Luster said. “Ain't you something, thirty three years old, going on that way. After I done went all the way to town to buy you that cake.

Hush up that moaning... (Faulkner 3)

The narrator does not seem to be aware that he is “moaning”—he has only registered that he has been holding onto the fence and watching the players going away. This blurs the very connection between the scene the narrator has been watching and his mournful response to it, even if the (first-time) reader has been clever enough to start making such a connection.

To complete the baffling effect, a number of names are introduced over the next few pages, without any illuminating introduction of the characters to whom these names refer. It is as if the reader is assumed to be already familiar with all the members of the narrator’s household. As if this lack of clarity were not enough, the reader is shown, by alternating passages in italics and plain type, that these characters take part in different episodes, at different moments in family history. The first-time reader is naturally ignorant of what these italics imply, and not helped along by other cues, as if it were assumed, again, that he is familiar with the household and the events that shaped it. One of the few things that can be gathered for certain from the first section of The Sound and the Fury is that it is being told by a mentally retarded person who is taken care of by others, and that, moreover, he is not exactly a “narrator” since he cannot speak. In other words, one can see that the communicative situation of Benjy’s part of the novel is paradoxical and extreme: it is both created and figuratively represented by the impossible figure of Benjy as a narrator. Benjy is a person whose experience of the world is for the most part incommunicable, both because he lacks speech and because his perception of the world is less consistent and harder to transmit than the kinds of perception that lend themselves to a more conventional, readable representation in narrative (perceptions that are more shaped and governed by language in the first place).

According to Walter Benjamin, the modernist novel after World War I reflects the general situation in Western society where people (primarily war veterans) become “not richer but poorer in communicable experience” (Benjamin 84). “What ten years later was poured out in the flood of war books was anything but experience that goes from mouth to mouth” (ibid.). Benjamin argues that the new, previously unheard of realities of economics and warfare did not lend themselves to representation in the traditional codes of storytelling or understanding via the traditional “wisdom” that was always at the core of oral storytelling. Under these conditions, the essentially modern genre of the novel turned out to be a more adequate means of representing the new reality, since from its beginnings the novel was less
dependent on the old shared codes of oral communication and allowed more space for expressing the author’s personal subjectivity:

The novelist has isolated himself. The birthplace of the novel is the solitary individual, who is no longer able to express himself by giving examples of his most important concerns, is himself uncounseled, and cannot counsel others. To write a novel means to carry the incommensurable to extremes in the representation of human life. In the midst of life’s fullness, and through the representation of this fullness, the novel gives evidence of the profound perplexity of the living. (Benjamin 87)

Benjamin suggests that, rather than proposing conventional resolutions to familiar problems, the way oral storytelling does, the novel uncovers new, unique, “incommensurable” problems and complexities—in other words, attempts to communicate individual experiences that had previously remained beyond the scope of communication.

Faulkner’s novel is an excellent example of this tendency, even though it does not explicitly deal with the war. Hugh Kenner, in his book on American fiction, A Homemade World, entitles his chapter on Faulkner “The Last Novelist.” Placed next to Benjamin’s characterization of the modernist novelist, Kenner’s title applies to Faulkner very well. As the author of The Sound and the Fury, and especially its first section, Faulkner really seems to be the “last,” or the ultimate, modernist novelist in Benjamin’s sense, because it is hard to imagine how one could go much further in trying to convey in language an incommunicable experience, in trying to show how incommunicable it is.

THE IMPLIED READER OF THE SOUND AND THE FURY

One of the inevitable features of trying to convey in writing something that cannot be communicated is requiring and constructing an implied reader who can find no match in reality. If constructing such a reader can be thought of as a technical problem, then putting Benjy’s section first is actually a brilliant solution to this problem: no real first-time reader can function as a second-time (or third- or fourth-time) reader that the text requires him to be. Paradoxically, the narrative strategy of Benjy’s section at once excludes any real first-time reader as an outsider, and demands that the reader take on the role of an impossibly intimate insider, virtually present on the scene, who doesn’t wonder who Luster or Caddy or Dilsey might be, and doesn’t need an explanation of the relationships, dependencies and passions connecting the members of the Compson household. The message to the reader is contradictory; it can even be read as an ultimatum: either stay away, or plunge and lose yourself in the disorienting world of the text.
Picking up on the Platonic allegory of the text as an abandoned child, the absence of clear directions to the reader or of a realistic reader-figure can be seen as equivalent to “abandoning” the text to find its reader by chance, rather than providently “passing it on” to a specific audience. The “good-enough reader” can come only by chance, as an “accidental” reader, one of the “hundred of discerning readers” that one of the earlier quoted reviews conjectured the novel might find in the whole country.\(^9\)

I further argue that not only Benjy’s section, but the novel as a whole, meets the unprepared first-time reader with “closed doors.”

As the narration passes on to the other narrators (Quentin, who is an intelligent, articulate Harvard student, then Jason, apparently the most conventional, socially integrated member of the family, then finally a third-person narrator mainly focalizing through the old black servant Dilsey, probably the sanest person in the household), one might expect that an explanation, a key to Benjy’s perplexing “tale” will finally be provided. And indeed many things do become clearer as crucial events of family history and identities of the characters are filled in. But in fact all four sections construct the implied reader as an insider and exclude the real first-time reader, though in more subtle ways. In Quentin’s section, as in Benjy’s, there are pronouns with unclear reference, for example, “Thinking it would be nice for them down in New London if the weather held up like this” (77). Only much later do we learn that Quentin’s friends planned to go sailing there, and could be referred to by “them”—if we even remember this loose hanging pronoun by that time. Caddy is referred to as “she” several times before her name is mentioned—though in her case it is somewhat easier to figure out the connection, if one has figured out Quentin’s obsession with her while reading Benjy’s narrative. Often, much like Benjy, Quentin’s narrative begins to switch among different times, and, as in Benjy’s part, it is only the author’s italics that indicate the switches. Quentin’s narrative often lacks punctuation, is complicated by syntactic jumbling and fragmentation, which unrealistically implies a reader who is an insider not merely of the Compson family and of the Harvard campus, but of Quentin’s own head as well. One might object that being an “insider of the narrator’s head” is what any stream-of-consciousness narrative requires of a reader. But Quentin’s stream of consciousness is syntactically and logically problematic even as stream of consciousness—and it certainly makes sense as a technique, because it should be more difficult to follow the stream of a deranged mind on its final countdown to suicide.

Jason’s part of the narrative looks like a relief at first: he seems to be actually narrating, shaping his sentences as if addressing a real listener, taking care to mark different characters’ utterances with “I says,” “she says,” and “he says,” whenever conveying a dialogue. Jason’s part starts out with a dialogue he has with his mother: “Once a bitch always a bitch, what I say. I says you’re lucky if her playing out of school is all that worries you” (180).
Even if here, too, the pronouns “you” and “her” precede their referents, the mother and Quentin junior, their referents are much easier to figure out, and on the whole, it is considerably easier to follow such a dialogue than Quentin’s, not to speak of Benjy’s monologues. The narrative style of Jason’s section is closer to first-person narration rather than stream of consciousness, it is regularly punctuated and capitalized, there are no loose pronouns without reference, no enigmatic metaphors as in Benjy’s section, and in general the narration is more coherent. Yet it probably wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say that few readers can accept or understand Jason’s moral world, which is extremely mean and cruel. Faulkner, too, repeatedly pointed this character out as his “unfavorite” one and as “completely inhuman” (Gwynn and Blotner 132). Jason is probably the least trustworthy narrator in the novel, since his perspective is distorted towards oversimplifying and flattening out the complexities of the inner life of the Compson household and each of its members. He is the only one of the four narrators who makes jokes, but he has no poetic strain at all, and this sets him apart from the three other narrators. Once the reader has become attuned to Benjy’s and Quentin’s poetic modes of telling, he may find it difficult to adjust to Jason’s drier and more cynical mode. Also, tracing out Jason’s rather intricate machinations, such as his pocketing of the money that Caddy sends to her mother for little Quentin, may require considerable mental strain and make the reader feel once again like a puzzled outsider to the experience represented.

As for the last section, it is certainly the clearest and most coherent one. The third person narrator finally provides some exposition, for example, on the faces and clothing of characters long familiar to the reader by now (if, of course, the reader has kept to the linear order and has not started at the end, the way I eventually did, not having been able to go through the book in its given sequence). But a certain element of being closed to the first-time reader persists even here. In the last section there are several moments where the sound of speech (or cry) is central: first of all Reverend Shegog’s Easter sermon, and the description of Benjy’s wail (discussed in more detail later in the paper as examples of ideal communication represented in the novel). I would argue that in these descriptions written communication itself is positioned as insufficient: the text tells us that the quality of sound in these utterances is what conveys the most important part of their meaning. I would even say that the way English orthography is changed to convey the local African American English pronunciation also emphasizes the insufficiency or “unnaturalness” of written communication. A first-time reader (unless s/he is well practiced in local color representations of African American characters in nineteenth-century American novels, e.g., by Harriet Beecher Stowe or Mark Twain), is likely to stumble on words spelled as “jes,” “bofe,” or “twel,” before figuring out what they correspond to, phonetically and in the normative spelling. Therefore, one can say that all four parts of The
*Sound and the Fury* cast the implied reader as a more or less intimate insider, present on the scene, and as a result, have a tendency to exclude most or all real readers as unwelcome to the novel’s world.

Arnold Weinstein offers a very convincing theory about the way *The Sound and the Fury* interacts with the reader and the “ways in” it closes and opens. In Benjy’s and Quentin’s sections, the narrative does not allow the reader to tap into its content in regular cognitive ways, but it compensates for this by amplifying the reader’s affective perception, by intensifying the emotional content of the narrative, which many readers find much more readily accessible in this text.11 For instance, this is how one early British reviewer describes his perception of *The Sound and the Fury*:

One reads as one would read a work in a foreign language of which one had a slight knowledge…. One can tell that everybody is agitated, that there are mysterious happenings, sudden piercing memories, hatreds, jealousies, agonies. They are all genuine. One believes in them. But these things take place behind an impenetrable curtain of words. The reader is shut off from them. He is excited, but he does not know why. (Swinnerton, in Bassett 92)12

Another reviewer says, “Never had I adequately known the meaning of pathos until I read the first part of this book” (Martin, in Bassett 94).13 Weinstein says that by their challenging, unconventional method of telling, Benjy’s and Quentin’s narratives “force” the reader to “glimpse—and then feel—the awful coherence and pain of twisted lives” (38), “that darkly coherent inner story (of Benjy and of Quentin)” (41). We get to perceive this dark inner coherence of pain only “from our (now) quasi-inescapable position as insiders” (Weinstein 40) into which the text forces us. I would say these responses imply that the affective, empathic way of understanding is especially adequate for reading Benjy’s and Quentin’s narratives. In order to make one’s way through the first two sections, the reader is strongly invited to exercise empathy, to share the narrators’ emotional worlds—that is the only way to understand Benjy’s section, and the most effective way to understand Quentin’s. (In fact, even young Jason, as he appears in Benjy’s section, can arouse sympathy and understanding, when he cries because he can’t go to sleep with the grandmother any more, or when he does not get an equal share of affection from his father.) The dimension of “forcing” that the text seems to exercise over the reader might become a topic for another paper—but for the purposes of this paper, the resulting empathy (for characters with whom it might be very difficult to empathize in the real world) is a key feature of a “good-enough reader,” a reader that will lend this text sufficient attention and credit.

Ong briefly discusses Faulkner’s reader role in comparison with the role imposed on a reader of Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms*. Hemingway’s text
constructs the reader as an intimate insider, apparently just like *The Sound and the Fury*—but the effect is totally different. Ong shows how by the use of “the” and “that,” and by the general terseness of style and spare descriptions, Hemingway’s reader is constructed as a companion-in-arms, a respected and empathic friend who has a lot of shared experiences in common with the narrator, someone who will understand everything without too many words; and in the case of Hemingway’s fiction, this role “was assimilated by relatively unskilled readers with very little fuss” (Ong 12–14). By contrast, “Faulkner [in *The Sound and the Fury*] demands more skilled and daring readers, and consequently had far fewer at first, and has relatively fewer even today when the Faulkner role for readers is actually taught in school” (14). This remains true in spite of the superficial likeness between Benjy’s language and the language of a Hemingway narrator, a likeness that Robert Dale Parker often uses as a joke when teaching Faulkner’s novel:

> When someone [in the class] remarks the radical simplicity of “Benjy’s language,” it helps to specify the simplicity: a minimum of subordination, short sentences, little reliance on adverbs and adjectives, heavy reliance on nouns and verbs, and heavy reliance on simple past tense. (A joke about the likeness to Hemingway in these categories can help place Benjy’s style in relation to something more familiar.) (29)

In fact, both Faulkner’s and Hemingway’s narrators require from the reader a great deal of identification, intimacy and empathy—but Hemingway’s narrators succeed in getting these from many more readers.

Faulkner repeatedly compared himself to Hemingway along similar lines: when asked to name the best five contemporary writers, he said,

> Wolfe, Hemingway, Dos Passos, Caldwell and myself. I rated Wolfe first, myself second. I put Hemingway last. I said we were all failures. All of us had failed to match the dream of perfection and I rated the authors on the basis of their splendid failure to do the impossible.... I thought after Wolfe I had tried the most. I rated Hemingway last because he stayed within what he knew. He did it fine, but he didn’t try for the impossible. (Faulkner, Breit, in Meriwether and Millgate 81)

This is not the only instance of Faulkner’s half-praise, half-condescension toward Hemingway as someone who had greater success with the public at the expense of compromising the limitless freedom of experimentation that Faulkner himself opted for, in *The Sound and the Fury*. In effect, Faulkner suggests that Hemingway stayed within the limits of the recognizable, practicable reader-roles that he could safely expect his readers to take on, while Faulkner’s reader-roles were and remain more challenging.
IDEAL READERS INSCRIBED IN THE NOVEL

Gene Fant argues that after an initial disappointment in his readership upon publication of his first two novels, “which got published and not bought” (Faulkner, in Fant 155). Faulkner “stopped writing for the ‘ideal’ reader, regardless of the consequences” and started either writing for himself, as in The Sound and the Fury, or for profit. For instance, Faulkner claimed that Sanctuary was written along the lines of “what a person in Mississippi would believe to be the current trends” (Faulkner, in Fant 155–6). According to Fant, Faulkner’s despair about his actual readership found expression in his texts via allegories of the reader: as a blind-deaf-mute character in Sanctuary, as a smug, over-confident, “over-active” narratee in Absalom, Absalom (Fant 165–7, 169–73), and as the “idiot” Benjy in The Sound and the Fury. Fant suggests that Benjy, who always insists on passing the statue of the Confederate soldier on the same side, and who becomes hysterical when the carriage is driven around the square in the opposite direction, represents the reactions of a conventional, “average” reader when confronted with a new way of writing (168–9).

Fant quotes an exchange between Faulkner and a student at the University of Virginia:

Q. Do you write with a particular reader in mind, Mr. Faulkner? Any audience?

A. No, I don’t. I wrote for years before it occurred to me that strangers might read the stuff, and I’ve never broken that habit. I still write it because it worries me so much I’ve got to get rid of it, and so I put it on paper. (Gwynn and Blotner 14)

Faulkner’s response to the interviewer reinforces the sense of the reader we previously gathered from the novel itself, as an unwelcome, unexpected “stranger” who was never intended to read his private “stuff.” In another classroom exchange, when asked about the message that “the average reader would get after reading The Sound and the Fury,” Faulkner replies: “I can’t answer that because I don’t know what the average reader gets from reading the book. I agree that what I tried to say I failed to say, and I never have had time to read reviews so I don’t know what impression people might get from the book” (Gwynn and Blotner 4). As we have seen earlier, however, there were quite a number of early reviewers of the novel who did manage to appreciate its power and at least potential greatness. So Faulkner’s refusal to assert that he has aimed at “a particular reader” or “any audience,” like his claim about failing to say what he tried to say (and never reading reviews), seems to be grounded in his unrealistic desire for ideal understanding, which the real flesh-and-blood reviewers naturally failed to achieve.
One might say that in his desire for ideal communication, for the ideal language that would abolish the very “need to compose,” Faulkner reduced his imaginary audience to himself—thereby creating an ideal communicative situation where the resistance of language and the distance between different individuals’ worlds of experience is overcome. Kenner’s reference to the primary language that Adam spoke in the Garden of Eden suggests a desire for an ideal relationship, such as Adam had with God before the fall and before the creation of Eve—before language was corrupted by the possibility of multiple interpretations introduced by the serpent. In the Garden of Eden, there was “no need to compose.” Yet, *The Sound and the Fury* did get written and published, did come into contact with real readers, and towards these readers Faulkner showed a curiously ambivalent attitude. On the one hand, he insisted that if the reader has difficulty following his text, “it’s not the reader’s fault. I try as every artist should to tell my story simply and clearly. If sometimes I don’t succeed it is my fault” (Faulkner, Grenier, in Meriwether and Millgate, 222). On the other hand, another interview places the burden elsewhere: “Q.: Some people say they can’t understand your writing even after they read it two or three times. What approach would you suggest for them? Faulkner: Read it four times” (Faulkner, Stein vanden Heuvel, in Meriwether and Millgate 250). One can read this, with Fant, as Faulkner looking down with disdain on the “average reader.” Yet his suggestion to read the novel the fourth time may also imply that Faulkner retained a hope that some readers would try “for the impossible with him”—would struggle to receive a communication across the “the curtain of print” (in Bertrand Bronson’s expression) in a more perfect, unhindered way than can be achieved in regular use of language or through the conventional novel-reading practices of a lay reader.

None of the three brothers in *The Sound and the Fury* actually narrates his story—like (or, in fact, unlike) Faulkner, they all have a zero audience within the represented world of the text. There are no possible narratees within the novel: in the case of Benjy and Quentin this is self-evident because stream of consciousness does not imply an intradiegetical narratee; in the case of Jason, he couldn’t actually tell what he narrates to any other character in the novel, because he cheats and manipulates everyone he deals with, so he cannot afford to disclose to any of them his full story as it is presented to the reader. Moreover, the choice of the stream-of-consciousness technique for Benjy’s and Quentin’s stories is a self-evident, no-alternative choice: the former cannot speak, and the latter could not have told the story of his last day to anyone, because his suicide at the end of the day leaves him no time and gives him no motive to tell it. So within the represented world of the novel, the communicative situation of each brother is in fact a situation of “non-telling.” *The Sound and the Fury*’s inscribed communicative failure can be metaphorically related to the three brothers’ sterility, as discussed by Walter
Benn Michaels. Michaels sees the Compson brothers’ inability or refusal to procreate as a desire to maintain the purity of their “race” (white, Nordic, American, and familial): “The Sound and the Fury represents the Compsons as... committed above all to their own ‘purity’ and thus—since ‘Purity is a negative state and therefore contrary to nature’ (Faulkner 71)—to their own disappearance” (Michaels 12). In the realm of communication, such purity can mean, actually, a non-transmission of the message, where the message amounts to the whole endemic world that the text attempts to encapsulate. Only non-transmission can guarantee the message’s non-distortion, save it from the abuse of misreading, partial or inaccurate understanding. But then, what induces the author’s and the narrators’ urge to articulate this message, to lodge their world in language? A partial answer to this question is provided by the ideal reader figures inscribed in The Sound and the Fury, and by instances of what Faulkner seems to see as ideal or nearly-ideal communication.

To extend the sexual metaphor of communication, if the characters’ refusal or inability to communicate is compared to sterility, then the text’s apparent “desire” to communicate only to a reader who is already closely familiar with it can be compared to incestual desire. In the closing scene of Benjy’s section, on the memorable night of the grandmother’s funeral, the father says good night to Benjy and Caddy sleeping in the same bed. The father asks her, “Are you going to take good care of Maury,” and she answers “Yes.” Symbolically, he leaves Benjy to her—which is a gesture well suited to our allegory of the author abandoning his text to the reader’s care. Is Caddy the ideal, intimate-insider reader that the text most desires? Is communicating with such a reader metaphorically equivalent to incest, since she already shares the meanings that are to be transmitted to her, being from the beginning flesh and bone of the novel’s world?

Actually, as the text clearly shows, Benjy is capable of communicating. He does manage to communicate to others the most important things that he needs or that bother him—but he only gets through to those others who care to interpret his signs. For instance, he succeeds in letting Caddy know that he doesn’t want her to use perfume—but he succeeds only because she notices that he doesn’t respond to her embrace and keeps walking away from her (40–43). Their mother has no idea what is bothering Benjy or how Caddy can communicate with him: “‘What is it, Benjy.’ Caddy said. ‘Tell Caddy. She’ll do it. Try.’ ... ‘Why are you teasing him.’ Mother said. ‘Bring him here’” (Faulkner 41). The mother believes Benjy cannot “tell” anything. Caddy, on the contrary, persists in asking him and soon discovers what has upset him; she is also prepared to give away the bottle of perfume to Dilsey so as not to upset him any more.

Dilsey is even better than Caddy at understanding Benjy—she develops what looks almost like a telepathic connection with him, always knowing not only what he wants or what has hurt him, but also whether there is
someone to blame for hurting him. Unlike Fant’s negative typology of readers inscribed in Faulkner’s texts, I propose that in *The Sound and the Fury*, Caddy and Dilsey are two figures of an ideal reader for whom both the text and the author (in his subsequent “paratext”) show great love and respect. Caddy may be seen as representing the intended, imagined, ideally-informed and perceptive reader who, in Ong’s phrase, “fired the writer’s imagination,” provided a primary inspiration for writing; Dilsey, who is not a blood-relative of Benjy’s and whose life only accidentally crosses his, may be seen as a real, accidental reader whom the text did not “expect” or “desire” but is very fortunate to find. As Faulkner says, “Dilsey is one of my favorite characters because she is brave, courageous, generous, gentle and honest. She’s much more brave and honest and generous than me” (Faulkner, Stein vanden Heuvel, in Meriwether and Millgate, 245); “she held that family together not for the hope of reward but just because it was the decent and the proper thing to do” (Gwynn and Blotner 85). In yet another place he adds, “She held the whole thing together with no hope of reward, except she was doing the best she could because she loved that poor, otherwise helpless, idiot child.” These descriptions can be read as outlining a certain ethics of reading: the good-enough real reader that the biographical Faulkner did not really expect the book to find, and who would generously and selflessly do the best he or she could to *take care* of the text, give it full affective attention, reading and re-reading, to make sure its communication is received. This would be done out of love for this imperfect creation, and just because that would be “the decent and the proper thing to do.”

In spite of Faulkner’s occasional statements to the contrary, *The Sound and the Fury* places the main burden of responsibility for the success of communication on the recipient-reader: if the recipient *wants* to understand, the message will come through to him/her even from a narrator like Benjy—he will succeed in “telling”; if, on the contrary, the recipient is prejudiced, unsympathetic and unreceptive, like the police who ask Quentin what happened between him and the little Italian girl, telling is not possible even with the best rhetorical capacities. As the police warn Quentin, “everything you say will be used against you” (179); in such a situation, he cannot communicate even a very simple story to show that he didn’t kidnap the child.

The one conspicuous instance of perfect communication *The Sound and the Fury* describes is the Easter Sunday sermon given in the Negro church by the visiting preacher, Reverend Shegog, in the fourth section of the novel. In terms of content, Shegog’s sermon is built around an exhortation to his audience to “see” Jesus at different moments of his life, as he himself claims to see Jesus while speaking. The preacher’s rhetorical strategy is similar to Benjy’s and Quentin’s mode of narration and recollection, where the events and persons they remember seem to be
actually present to them, as real as their “today.” During Reverend Shegog’s speech,

“the congregation seemed to watch with [Rev. Shegog’s] own eyes while the voice consumed him, until he was nothing and they were nothing and there was not even a voice but instead their hearts were speaking to one another in chanting measures beyond the need of words....” (Faulkner 294).

This is not communication in its proper sense any longer but a communion, a dissolution of individual selves. Based and dependent on language at first, the sermon retreats into the more physical realities of rhythm and sound that the body has before it has language. To be sure, Reverend Shegog uses words, and he is a masterful speaker, capable of shifting between registers and even accents—he starts out in “white” English and a “cold inflectionless” tone (293), and then when he feels the moment is right, he switches to African American dialect and a tone that “was as different as day and dark from his former tone, with a sad, timbrous quality like an alto horn, sinking into their hearts and speaking there again when it had ceased in fading and cumulate echoes” (294). His mastery of speech succeeds in transcending words. And it also sounds a little like Benjy’s crying as described by the same third-person narrator a few pages earlier: “Then Ben wailed again, hopeless and prolonged. It was nothing. Just sound. It might have been all time and injustice and sorrow become vocal for an instant by a conjunction of planets” (288). The arbitrary, conventional connection between a verbal signifier and what it stands for is overcome in both of these cases. The sound itself carries the emotion, the passion, the message, proceeds from it, is one with it. Yet we should still remember that we don’t hear this sound, we get its effect in verbal form—and therefore the actual fusion is not achieved, in any case, not for the reader, we are still not in the realm of the ideal communication that Faulkner aspires to.

CONCLUSIONS

Faulkner’s ideal of communication could be summed up in one word as fusion—melting together of the signifier and signified (ideally, transforming the whole complex of meanings he wants to communicate into “one word,” as quoted earlier); blending sign and sound, sound and meaning, fusing together the author and the reader—which writing for a “zero audience” practically amounts to—blurring the boundaries between the character and the reader, through the essentially uncritical mechanism of empathy described above (allowing the reader to step over whatever might alienate and repel him/her from the characters). These fusions of fundamental opposites are metaphorically present in the novel as incest, equivalent in terms of communication to non-transmission of the message to “strangers”
from the outside world. Finally, there is a religious aspect given to this desire for fusion in the Easter sermon, where there is a melting together of the congregation and the preacher; the voice and the words; the past, the present, and the future; the individual and the community; everyman and Jesus.

Yet, paradoxical as it may appear, the main audience of the novel has turned out to be composed of the most critical, analytic, intellectual readers of the time, operating through the principles of separating the text from its author and context, analyzing content and form as separate, though interdependent components, rather than adopting the total fusion, the holistic mode of reading that the novel seems to ask for. *The Sound and the Fury* found its receptive “home” in the American literary studies community, and the benefit of this relationship was reciprocal: this novel, and Faulkner’s work as a whole, became one of the major centers around which this new scholarly community took shape starting in the late 1940s. In his comprehensive survey of five decades of Faulkner criticism, John Bassett (1975) shows how a boom in Faulkner studies began in this period. The academic community recognized *The Sound and the Fury* as a modern classic, and created an unprecedented body of serious criticism and scholarship around the novel. Faulkner was the most discussed author in the academic critical publications in the late 1940s and the 1950s. Thus it is possible to say that Faulkner’s work became one of the centers around which the American literary studies community crystallized, during its dramatic expansion following World War II. Subsequently, first-time readers of *The Sound and the Fury*, especially students or teachers, could turn to this community for support, in order to become adequate, good-enough readers.

A final paradox arising from the above discussion deserves comment by way of conclusion. While *The Sound and the Fury* may illustrate the written text’s Platonic powerlessness and “orphanhood,” it has exercised, in the course of its reception history, an extraordinary capacity to transform its audience, bringing into being a new readership that was both sympathetic enough and well enough equipped with a new (New Critical) set of reading skills to do it justice. And finally, from this perspective Faulkner is not “the last novelist” at all, but rather one component of a cycle. Faulkner intensifies to the extreme the “loneliness” of the novel as a genre, noted by Benjamin, but at the same time he paradoxically brings into existence a community of readers which any new, solitary reader may join, or turn to for assistance in order to become a “good-enough” (if not ideal) reader of this novel.

NOTES

1. See e.g., *Lion in the Garden*, a collection of Faulkner interviews, eds. Meriwether and Millgate, and *Faulkner in the University*, eds. Gwynn and Blotner.

2. Two well-known examples of the ubiquitous metaphor of the text as an in some way defective a child of the author’s mind are Mary Shelley’s description of *Frankenstein* as her “hideous progeny,” in the
preface to the novel’s second edition, and Anne Bradstreet’s poem “The Author to Her Book” developing a conceit of the book as “thou ill-formed offspring of my feeble brain.”

3. By analogy with Winnicott’s well-known concept of “good-enough mother.”

4. I am relating only to the United States and England here, but it should be mentioned that in Europe, especially France, Faulkner found a much more enthusiastic reception in the 1930s.


8. Edward Crickmay, review, Sunday Referee 26 April 1931, 9, in Bassett 90.

9. Ibid.

10. Interview with Cynthia Grenier, in Meriwether and Millgate 225.

11. The importance and helpfulness of the reader’s emotional response in making sense of The Sound and the Fury was confirmed by a mini-survey conducted in a group of Ben-Gurion students who studied the novel in 2007–8 with Prof. Barbara Hochman.


15. Intro to Modern Library 1932 edition of Sanctuary, qtd in Fant 155.


17. Interview with Cynthia Grenier, Meriwether and Millgate 222.

18. Interview with Jean Stein vanden Heuvel, Meriwether and Millgate 250.

19. On reading as desire, see Peter Brooks (1984), Reading for the Plot.

20. Interview with Jean Stein vanden Heuvel, Meriwether and Millgate 245.


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