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Adam Hirsch
Oberlin College

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Hearing Beyond the Veil

Benjy Compson and the acousmatic experience



an Honors English Thesis
by Adam Hirsch



Oberlin College
2014

*Well, shall we
think or listen? Is there a sound addressed
not wholly to the ear?
We half close
our eyes. We do not
hear it through our eyes
It is not
a flute note either, it is the relation
of a flute note
to a drum. I am wide
awake. The mind
is listening.*

William Carlos Williams
"The Orchestra"



The opening gesture of William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* is an entrance into a world of appearing things: "Through the fence, between the curling flower spaces, I could see them hitting."¹ The motion of the language is one of crossing a new threshold, of bringing us into something which was at first distant but perceptively now very close. The prepositional movement *through* and *between* potential barriers or frames arrives at the establishment of a narrative consciousness—an *I* which sees what we are to see, hears what we are to hear, feels what we are to feel.

The *I* that the reader is presented with is Benjy Compson, the mentally impaired son of the Compson family who begins the novel by dictating his impressions of the golfers he sees through the fence around his family's property. As the first narrator in this multi-voiced text, Benjy embodies the derivation of the novel's title by delivering "a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury / Signifying nothing."² The three main components of these last lines from Macbeth's torrential soliloquy provide useful windows into how we might read the first section of Faulkner's novel:

1) The section is indeed "a tale told by an idiot," in that Benjy's mental health is impaired far beyond retrieval; yet we must keep in mind, as Andrei Bleikasten points out, that Faulkner never intended to "provide an accurate record of what really goes on in an idiot's mind," and that his "superb indifference to the tenants of naturalism" renders Benjy's idiocy as more literary than realistic.³ In this light, we may view Benjy's irregular modes of perceiving and narrating his world as a kind of textual experiment

¹ William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury* (New York: Modern Library, 1956), 1.

² William Shakespeare, *Macbeth* (Leipzig: Tauchnitz, 1868), V.v.26-8.

³ Andrei Bleikasten, *The Most Splendid Failure: Faulkner's Sound and the Fury* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), 67.

through which Faulkner may “re-present the world in ways that bypass the filters of language that modify our relationship to experience.”⁴ This modification happens at the level of Benjy’s phenomenological relationship to the world, for his “world is different from ours not only in the quantity of material at his disposal but also in the phenomenological structure of that material.”⁵ I employ the term phenomenology in the tradition of its philosophical usage, whereby the world is described not as it is but as it *appears* to us; and through an act of *reduction* to the immediacy of experience, phenomena (*phainomenon*, “appearing things”) are studied purely as they are given to consciousness itself.⁶ Benjy exemplifies and carries to extremity the intricacies of perceptual consciousness that Maurice Merleau-Ponty theorizes in *Phenomenology of Perception*—“a consciousness of endless perspectives, one vulnerable to inaccuracies, contradictions, and inconsistencies.”⁷ I will proceed with a notion of Benjy’s “idiocy” as a window into not only the phenomenological makeup of his narrative consciousness, but also the ways in which Faulkner constructs the reader’s relationship to his world as phenomenologically reduced.

2) Benjy’s section is indeed “full of sound,” and populated with varied sensory experiences that make up its phenomenological structure. Cleanth Brooks calls Benjy’s monologue “a poetry of the senses, rendered with great immediacy, in which the world—for Benjy a kind of confused, blooming buzz—registers with great sensory impact but

⁴ Noel Polk, *New Essays on The Sound and the Fury* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 142.

⁵ William Sowder, “William Faulkner’s Benjy Compson and the Field of Consciousness.” *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology* 19.1 (1988), 60.

⁶ Aaron Helgeson, “What Is Phenomenological Music, and What Does It Have to Do with Salvatore Sciarrino?” *Perpectives of New Music* 51.2 (2013), 5.

⁷ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* in Sowder, 62.

with minimal intelligibility.”⁸ Benjy’s senses dictate his orientation to his environment, while forms of higher intellect are completely absent. While this leaves Benjy prone to error, inconsistency, and fragmentation, his credibility as a narrator is in some ways highly reliable from a phenomenological perspective—“Objects taken in their true nature, Merleau-Ponty insists, are taken not through the intellect but in the configuration of a sensory field revealed by the body.”⁹ Benjy’s dictation of his world to the reader is a phenomenological vacuum, in which the world appears *only* as a series of sensory events. The sonic character of Benjy’s section is found not only in the sound of the “blooming buzz” in his language, but also in the various ways that Faulkner structures Benjy’s aural relationship to the world: his hearing of voices, his synesthetic transformations of material objects, his diffusion of narrative through auditory events, and his sonic triggering of temporal shifts all contribute to the sense that Benjy’s phenomenological salience is largely dependent on Faulkner’s use of acoustics throughout his section. All of these sonic phenomena collide in the first sound event that occurs on the first page of the novel when Benjy hears, “Here, caddie,”¹⁰ and conflates the golfer’s statement with the name of Caddy, his beloved and long-absent sister. Noel Polk sums up the mystery surrounding this particular phrase:

The novel’s first spoken words—‘Here, caddie,’—are relayed to us by the same narrator who has thrown us asea in the first paragraph, who transmits them without identifying their source, and who misunderstands them. They contain an aural pun, a homophone, and are related, though we don’t yet know how, to the narrator’s inexplicable reaction.¹¹

⁸ Cleanth Brooks, “Man, Time, Eternity” in Michael Cowan, ed., *Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Sound and the Fury* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1968), 63.

⁹ Merleau-Ponty in Sowder, 62.

¹⁰ Faulkner, 1.

¹¹ Polk, 139.

The homophonic relationship between *caddie* and *Caddy* can also be applied to *here* and *hear*; combined with the fact that the following piece of dialog is Luster's command "Listen at you, now," we are told as readers from the outset of the novel to "hear" and "listen" to the workings of Benjy's consciousness, and to the sonic fragments which act as cruxes for our reading of the section as a whole.¹²

3) There are many ways in which we can view the sonic content of Benjy's section as "signifying nothing," in that both lingual and aural material is often confused, conflated, and abstracted from its source or meaning. "Here, caddie" is neither preceded nor followed by an identification of a discreet source for the sound; it "appears" seemingly out of nowhere. For Benjy, the context of the sound is also masked, in that his perception of it is inextricably associated with his sister, and not with the ambiguous figures who are "hitting"; these associations trigger Faulkner's leaps in temporal location, obscuring the sound even from a stable sense of time and place. Further complicating the issue is Faulkner's appendix statement that Benjy "could not remember his sister but only the loss of her."¹³ Thus, the sound of "Here, caddie" does not signify anything in particular—not the golfers who said it, nor the man carrying the clubs, nor the sister who bears the homophonous name; and yet, the sound makes Benjy cry, moan, and shift erratically between temporal locations, and the only signification it might carry is a vague feeling of "loss" of something which he cannot even remember. The sound—a "lingual, aural, and visual crux"¹⁴—is an object without a source, an essence without a context, living only in the moment of the listening that brings it into being. How do we think about this sound that is heard through a veil? For it is important to keep in mind that the

¹² Faulkner, 1.

¹³ Faulkner, 423.

¹⁴ Polk, 140.

veil here is not only Faulkner's strange abstractions of context, but also the barrier of the page itself, masking these sensory events in the aspect of written language.

For clarity, we can turn not only to phenomenology, but also to its de facto correlate in the study of sound: Pierre Schaeffer's theory of *acousmatics*, which postulates on a basic level that "by isolating the sound from the 'audiovisual complex' to which it initially belonged, it creates favorable conditions for reduced listening which concentrates on the sound for its own sake, as sound object, independently of its causes or its meaning."¹⁵ Emergent with the French school of *musique concrète* in the late 1950s, acousmatic theory assimilates Husserlian phenomenology to the study of listening and perception of sound, treating sound material only as the "sonorous objects" which appear to consciousness. Early proponents of acousmatics claim that through a process of reduced listening, we might more closely approach the *essences* of sonorous objects; this idea was useful as a compositional process for composers such as Schaeffer, Michel Chion, and Pierre Henry (among many others), who were interested in extracting a sound individually from its context so that it might be repeated, varied, manipulated, and obscured from forms of signification.¹⁶ Its original context, however, was meant as an investigation into sound itself, and the ways in which the reduction of our listening practices can give way to radical shifts in perceptive systems.

It will be the purpose of this project, then, to examine Benjy's perceptive systems and listening practices through the lens of acousmatic theory. It is not my intention to draw connecting lines of influence between Schaeffer and Faulkner, nor do I mean to

¹⁵ Michel Chion, *Guide to Sound Objects* (Paris: Institut National de l'Audiovisuel, 1983), 18.

¹⁶ Other notable early composers of acousmatic music and *musique concrète* include John Cage, Delia Derbyshire, Halim El-Dabh, and Francis Dhomont, among others. It is also important to note that the term "acousmatic music" in its contemporary usage may refer to any music performed through loudspeakers or played back through electronic media. For my purposes, I will limit my usage to its original context of Schaeffer's theories about sound and listening, as well as the compositional techniques that precipitated from those theories..

identify a historical/cultural impetus for their coincidence within a few decades.¹⁷ The two should rather be considered critical analogs for one another, in that our engagement with acousmatics opens channels of investigation into sound and aurality in the Benjy section that wouldn't be available otherwise, and vice versa. My main goal is to prove that 1) Benjy's consciousness; 2) Faulkner's structuring of the first section of the novel; and 3) the reader's sonic relationship with Benjy's world are all constructed upon the idea of acousmatic reduction. This investigation will then give way to larger questions about how these techniques might determine our reading of the rest of the novel, as well as how we might use acousmatics to engage with the auditory dimension of any literary work.

In this investigation, then, it seems we are dealing with three discrete disciplines: phenomenology, acousmatics, and literary sound studies (or, the application of the preceding fields to literary study). Before proceeding further into the novel, it will be important to briefly survey of all three of these areas individually, that they might more fluidly integrate with our inquiries into *The Sound and the Fury*.



“It would seem inescapably obvious that language is an oral phenomenon,” proclaims Walter Ong at the outset of his seminal work *Orality and Literacy*.¹⁸ The crux of Ong's observation is the stabbing, conditional *would* that precedes the “seeming”

¹⁷ Such a topic is worthy of discussion, however. Many critics and theorists have postulated that the emergence of modernism in the early 20th century is largely a result of the new global market for media and communications devices. This was certainly true for Schaeffer, whose theories were propelled by the advent of phonographs, tape machines, and new technologies in radio broadcasting. Marshall McLuhan writes particularly well about these shifts in our sense of auditory space in the last century in his essay “Visual and Acoustic Space” from *The Global Village* (Oxford UP, 1992). The effect on Faulkner is a bit more ambiguous, but some critics have identified critical ways in which auditory technology directed the project of literary modernism as a whole. Angela Frattarola's essay “Developing an Ear for the Modernist Novel” (*Journal of Modern Literature*, Vol. 33, No. 1), lays out the idea that as a result of a shifting technology landscape, “modernists use sound to counteract traditional, Cartesian concepts of subjectivity, and by extension, rational and linear narrative conventions.” Such techniques certainly apply to Faulkner, especially to his irrational treatment of narrative in *The Sound and the Fury*.

¹⁸ Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Routledge, 2002), 6.

obvious: for his thesis in a larger sense is that orality—the sound of spoken language—is far too neglected in the production, study, and criticism of literary arts. He points to the often taken-for-granted notion that “‘reading’ a text means converting it to sound, aloud or in the imagination, syllable-by-syllable... Writing can never dispense with orality.”¹⁹ Implicit in Ong’s thoughts on the reading process is that in written language—and thus spoken and “heard” language—aurality precedes orality (the homophony here, though ecstatically appropriate, is purely coincidental). Sound exists independently of language, but language, in order for it to exist at all, relies on the production and perception of sonic material. Assignment of such sounds to visual symbols comes later, and in Ong’s assessment, distances us in a sense from the original sonic quality of language:

Though words are grounded in oral speech, writing tyrannically locks them into a visual field forever. A literate person, asked to think of the word ‘nevertheless’, will normally (and I strongly suspect always) have some image, at least vague, of the spelled-out word and be quite unable ever to think of the word ‘nevertheless’ for, let us say, 60 seconds without adverting to any lettering but only to the sound.²⁰

Without making any overt acknowledgement of it, Ong places himself somewhat in line with acousmatic theorists, who also advocate for the abstraction of visual signification, to access a kind of essential quality in the direction of one’s senses toward the auditory. When applied to a literary context, Schaeffer’s theories reinforce the claim that “written texts all have to be related somehow, directly or indirectly, to the world of sound, the natural habitat of language, to yield their meanings.”²¹ Furthermore, we can feel a pulse of phenomenology in Ong’s identification of the “psychodynamics of orality”: “Sound has a special relationship to time unlike that of the other fields that register in human

¹⁹ Ong, 8.

²⁰ Ong, 12.

²¹ Ong, 8.

sensation. Sound exists only when it is going out of existence. It is not simply perishable but essentially evanescent, and it is sensed as evanescent.”²² The ephemerality that Ong points to in our sense of sound is particularly resonant in the context of prose fiction, in which our sense of time is being propelled forward while our “heard” experience is slipping behind us at every moment. As I will return to later, the phenomenological function of sound in both determining and resisting an established sense of time is a central problem for Benjy, and in *The Sound and the Fury* as a whole.

The Polish critic and philosopher Roman Ingarden is one of the few writers to undertake a detailed investigation of the phenomenology of sound in literature as a whole; and his results conflict in several interesting ways with Ong’s. In *The Cognition of the Literary Work of Art*, he claims that on a phonetic level, we can divide the sonic phenomena of words in a literary text into two categories: 1) verbal sounds, which consist of a word’s pure sound qualities (i.e. table = “tay” and “bull”) and 2) typical word formations, or verbal meaning, which consists of the specific meaning units communicated by the word’s corresponding linguistic function (i.e. table = a flat surface with four legs). Ingarden argues that both functions act simultaneously in the reading experience, that “we apprehend the verbal sounds not as pure sound patterns but as something which, in addition to its sound, conveys or can convey a certain emotional quality.”²³ Such a statement seems obvious to any reader: a word has a sound, but it also has meaning. What is of particular interest to me, however, is the fact that Ingarden proceeds to give impenetrable privilege to one over the other:

The verbal sound is then heard superficially and almost unconsciously. It appears on the periphery of the field of awareness, and only incidentally does it sound ‘in

²² Ong, 31-2.

²³ Roman Ingarden, *The Cognition of the Literary Work of Art* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 23.

our ears,' provided, of course, that nothing out of the ordinary draws our attention to it. *It is precisely this fleeting way of apprehending the verbal sounds which is the only correct way for the apprehension of the literary work as a whole... to prevent the phonetic side of the language from encroaching too much on the hearer, from coming to the fore.*²⁴

Although Ingarden is quick to mention that there are many cases, particularly in poetry, in which the text is designed to draw attention toward phonetic form; he still insists, however, that the phonetic qualities of a work must be heard only incidentally: "Thus the reader must have an 'ear' for the phonetic stratum of the work (for its 'music'), although one cannot say that he should concentrate on this stratum particularly."²⁵ Ingarden's attempt to shed light on the workings of sound phenomena in a literary work thus doubles back on itself, and leaves a gaping hole in the question of how the auditory level of a text can be apprehended as a self-contained phenomenon in any formation of meaning. In Ingarden's analysis, *apprehension* is more of a priority than *perception* in the reading process, and a "correct" reading of a literary text must refrain from abstracting the visual, contextual, and semiotic signs/sources into a purely auditory mode. An acousmatic approach to *The Sound and the Fury* will demonstrate ways in which Benjy's relationship with sound material engages the reader in a mode that contradicts Ingarden's notions of "correct" reading; for one to be fully open to the possibilities of this particular text, words and word-sounds must often be abstracted from their immediate context and treated acousmatically.

The word *acousmatic* has its foundations in the Greek word *akousmatikoi*, the word given to the disciples of Pythagoras who listened to their teacher's lectures while his body remained hidden behind a curtain. Schaeffer seeks the same reduction in the

²⁴ Ingarden, 23.

²⁵ Ingarden, 24.

listening experience; for the modern listener—at the time of Schaeffer’s writing in the 1950s and 60s—the mode of reduction is not a curtain but rather a panoply of sound technologies such as radios, tape recorders, loudspeakers, and sound studios. These technologies create “new conditions for observation” of sonic objects removed from their physical, historical, and personal context.²⁶ As Schaeffer lays out in his 1966 manifesto *Treatise on Musical Objects*, the study and composition of acousmatic sound requires a *reduced listening* that focuses attention on the act of listening itself:

The acousmatic involves a reversal of the normal course of events (...) it is no longer a question of knowing how a subjective listening interprets or distorts ‘reality’ or of studying reactions to stimuli; the listening itself becomes the origin of the phenomenon to be studied. (...) The question: ‘What am I hearing?... What precisely are you hearing?’ is turned back on to the subject, in the sense that he is being asked to describe, not the external references of the sound he perceives, but his perception itself.²⁷

The self-reflexive subjectivity of Schaeffer’s theory, as well as the ways in which perception *itself* is the focus of study, indicates the key point through which acousmatics is derivative of phenomenological thought; for the reduced listening that Schaeffer advocates is to be directed at a *sonorous object*—the sonic derivative of the *intentional object* in the writings of Husserl.

An intentional object in Husserl’s conception is not the same as a physically material or “real” object; it is rather a *correlate* of an act of cognition that allows for an object to be seen as “identically the same through a multiplicity of acts of consciousness.”²⁸ Husserl gives the following demonstration in *Ideas*:

We start by taking an example. Keeping this table steadily in view as I go round it, changing my position in space all the time, I have continually the consciousness of the bodily presence out there of this one and self-same table,

²⁶ Pierre Schaeffer, *Traite des Objets Musicaux* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1966), 98.

²⁷ Schaeffer (1966), 92.

²⁸ Kane, 2.

which in itself remains unchanged. But the perception of the table is one that changes continuously; it is a continuum of changing perceptions... Only the table is the same, known as *identical* through the synthetic consciousness which connects the new perception with the recollection... But the perception itself is what it is within the steady flow of consciousness, and is itself constantly in flux.²⁹

At any one moment in time, one cannot see all parts of Husserl's table; one must keep circling around it in order to see parts of it that were not seen previously; but the moment one moves to another perspective of the table, aspects of the previous perspective are lost, and thus this continual flow of perceptions is merely a collection of fragments, or in Husserl's words, adumbrations (*abschattungen*). Nothing inherently or definitively holds these fragments together; they are simply a set of variations in the way the table is qualified. It is only through a synthesis of those perceptions that one arrives at the idea of the table as an intentional object: "Carried along by the flow of experience we have only a series of indubitable *qualities*, but through the synthesis of these qualities, we are able to posit the *identity* of the object, as transcendent to perception."³⁰ When grasped as an intentional object, the table is not seen as a table in the sense that one has seen other objects like it that are tables, nor is it seen as an exact arrangement of wood at 45 degree angles viewed from the northwest corner of the room; it is seen as a quality that is elastic, unbound from fact and temporal space: "the object is no longer bound to any spatio-temporal adumbration. It is independent of any factual context—it has become an *essence*."³¹

The *essence* here is not a merely an ephemeral "feeling" or Platonic ideal, but a concrete idea of the object as it is given purely to perception. The same is true for

²⁹ Edmund Husserl, *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology* (New York: Macmillan, 1931), 117-118.

³⁰ Kane, 2

³¹ Kane, 2.

Schaeffer's idea of the sonorous object as "the meeting point of an acoustic action and listening intention."³² In his comprehensive guide to the *Treaty on Musical Objects*,

Schaeffer's pupil Michel Chion offers the following summarized definition:

The name sonorous object refers to every sound phenomenon and event perceived as a whole, a coherent entity, and heard by means of reduced listening, which targets it for itself, independently of its origin or its meaning... It is a sound unit perceived in its material, its particular texture, its own qualities and perceptual dimensions. On the other hand, it is a perception of a totality which remains identical through different hearings.³³

Implicit in this definition is an inherent tension between fragmentation and totality: for reduced listening requires that only certain aspects of the physical event are perceived, yet the result is a totality of the perception itself. The sonorous object is particular yet total, adumbrated yet unified. This is one of the more confounding aspects of both Schaeffer and Husserl's theories: the idea that in the act of intentionally *reducing* one's perceptive relationship to the world, rejecting context in favor of sensory encounter, one actually might reach a kind of unity of what is perceived thereafter.

This seemingly confounding principal of totality in phenomenology and acousmatics becomes clearer in the two theorists' discussions of how *variation* plays a role in the process of intentionality. In his *Cartesian Meditations*, Husserl proposes a method for attempting to bring one closer to the core of perceptive essences. He calls it "imaginative free variation":

Starting from this table-perception as an example, we vary the perceptual object, table, with a completely free optionalness, yet in such a manner that we keep perception fixed as perception of something, no matter what. Perhaps we begin by fictionally changing the shape or the colour of the object quite arbitrarily ... In other words: abstaining from acceptance of its being, we change the fact of this perception into a pure possibility, one among other quite 'optional' pure

³² Schaeffer (1966), 271.

³³ Chion, 35.

possibilities—but possibilities that are possible perceptions. We so to speak, shift the actual perception into the realm of non-actualities, the realm of the as-if.³⁴

Imaginative free variation acts as a way of freeing intentional objects from the causality of the external world, expanding the possibilities of variant perceptions while identifying commonalities between them. Variation theoretically allows one to grasp the *invariant* properties of the object, in that the changing *context* of the object reveals its essential qualities to be identical throughout the process. In other words, possible variations are nearly infinite, yet the object or essence at the root of those variations remains the same. Such an idea is at the very foundations of the basic Husserlian notion that “*perception and imagination are to be treated exactly alike.*”³⁵ Schaeffer’s acousmatics are a way of experiencing this phenomenon at the level of sound. Using an array of studio techniques, the composer’s free variation of sound allows for the removal of a sonic object from its causal context while demonstrating to a listener the ways in which one’s imagination can direct one’s hearing:

We must therefore stress emphatically that a sound object is something real, in other words that something in it endures through these changes and enables different listeners (or the same listener several times) to bring out as many aspects of it as there have been ways of focusing the ear, at the various levels of ‘attention’ or ‘intention’ of listening.³⁶

For Schaeffer, the phenomenological difference between altering a sound in a studio and imagining a variation within one’s experience of hearing is conceptually negligible. Both situations involve *focusing* the hearing in one way or another, and both situations eliminate distinctions between actual hearing and imagined hearing. This idea of freely varying the context of one’s imagination of a sonic object will be the main lens through

³⁴ Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1970), 78.

³⁵ Husserl, *The Idea of Phenomenology* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1964), 53-4.

³⁶ Schaeffer, Booklet accompanying *Solfège de l’objet sonore* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1967), 59-61.

which we will examine Benjy's use of sound as a phenomenological narrator in *The Sound and the Fury*.



Let us begin by examining the ways in which Benjy's relationship to sound is on a basic level a form a *reduction*. William Sowder claims that Benjy is "phenomenologically deaf to all but the simplest sounds," and compares his ears to "aural quicksand."³⁷ This deafness is true to a certain extent; he can certainly hear the sounds around him, but the phenomenological nature of those sounds causes his perception of them to be limited in certain ways. The main characteristic of Benjy's "deafness" is that sounds often fail to indicate to him some physical event or piece of information that accompanies them; for example, when it is raining, rather than inferring that rain is falling on the house, Benjy repeatedly narrates, "I could hear the roof."³⁸ The initial source of the sound is abstracted, while the resulting sound is heard for its auditory texture. Benjy's mode of perception here resembles one of Schaeffer's acousmatic sound experiments called the "cut bell":

The experiment of the cut bell involved intervening in the progress of a recorded sound: if a fragment of the resonance of a bell was "taken out" after its attack, then, by evening out its dynamic behaviour and repeating this fragment... "a sound like a flute" could be heard.³⁹

In Benjy's case, the "attack" of the rain is taken out, and we are left with his perception that a sound like the roof can be heard. Even simple exchanges of word representations that are as subtle as these ("roof" instead of "rain," "flute" instead of "bell") can change

³⁷ Sowder, 64.

³⁸ Faulkner, 69.

³⁹ Chion, 20.

our relationship to these sounds radically, especially when we as readers are presented with *only* the textual representation of them.

Benjy's meaning-gathering capabilities from language are also severely limited; he hears the language of those around him, yet he is virtually unable to infer any significance from it. This is most often manifest in the characters' inability to communicate commands to Benjy: he is told a total of 83 times throughout the short section of the novel to "hush," "shut up," or "be quiet." The repeated sounds of these commands are registered by Benjy, narrated to the reader, and seem to fall away without consideration as meaning-bearing signs, but rather as fragments of acousmatic sound. In this sense, Faulkner's writing of Benjy engages in Schaeffer's acousmatic reduction by withholding his sense of context and causality as they relate to his aural faculties.

Benjy's modes of reduction are reinforced by Faulkner's construction of his consciousness as an unwaveringly passive one: in addition to the other characters' constant demand for him to be silent, this passivity is largely constructed upon his inability to make or describe his own sounds with any real agency. He is only able to make moaning sounds that are never represented sonically, except for his admissions of "I cried" or "I moaned." This is a stark contrast to the narrations of the other characters in the following sections, who give us details of loudness, duration, and quality ("Bellow on bellow, his voice mounted, with scarce interval for breath").⁴⁰ One key moment of reduction in Benjy's perception of his own sounds occurs when he and T.P. become drunk from what they think is "sassprilluh" during Caddy's wedding. As Benjy becomes

⁴⁰ Faulkner, 400.

disoriented from the alcohol, he falls and injures himself, and hears a sound coming from his own body:

But when I tried to climb into it it jumped away and hit me on the back of the head and my throat made a sound. It made the sound again and I stopped trying to get up, and it made the sound again and I began to cry. But my throat kept on making the sound while T.P. was pulling me. It kept on making it and I couldn't tell if I was crying or not, and T.P. fell down on top of me, laughing, and it kept on making the sound and Quentin kicked T.P.⁴¹

This is one of the only instances throughout the entire section of the novel that we “hear” Benjy make a sound. The moment is startling because of its stark contrast to the rest of the section, throughout which Benjy is told to hush and as a result never speaks or enacts any components of the auditory field. Here however, Benjy hears himself; yet the sound is independent from context, even from any causality. As readers we can make the assumption that the sound is a cry of pain as a result of his sudden injury—yet Benjy hears it acousmatically. He does not enact it or control it, he is *struck* by it, and assumes no connection to the workings of his own nervous system; indeed the narrator, as Polk identifies, “doesn’t even register his own reaction to stimuli as a reaction.”⁴² This moment exemplifies Chion’s claim that “in reduced listening, our listening intention targets the event which the sound object is in itself and not to which it refers.”⁴³ Here we see Benjy’s mental deficiency as a means to this phenomenological end, in that his reduction is qualified by his inability to identify even his own body as a source of reference for the sound that he hears.

Benjy maintains a similar reductive relationship to language. We cannot go so far to say that Benjy treats language as an arbitrary arrangement of sonic fragments, for he is

⁴¹ Faulkner, 48.

⁴² Polk, 140.

⁴³ Chion, 33.

able to infer that commands of “hush” are intended to silence him (“Caddy turned around and said ‘Hush.’ So I hushed.”⁴⁴), he becomes upset when Caddy speaks of running away, and so on. There are instances throughout his section, however, that suggest his relationship to the linguistic sphere is often acousmatically abstracted. In other words, he relates to language through sound and a specific focus on the phenomena of perception. Andrei Bleikasten posits that this is due largely to the nature of Benjy’s flattening of the plurality of other voices in the text:

Reported conversation occupies more than half of Benjy’s monologue—a monologue which, strictly speaking, is no monologue at all but rather a *polylogue*, a mosaic or patchwork of many voices seemingly recorded at random by an unselective mind... The movement of Benjy’s speech is often one of... a very singular *monotone*, whereby the plurality of voices echoed in his monologue are muted and homogenized into a distant murmur.”⁴⁵

The idea that Benjy’s relationship to language is often *homophonic* rather than monophonic seems more appropriate here; for it seems that the way he receives language is more an act of *conflation* than flattening, in that one linguistic sound does not necessarily have one specific attachment or signified determinant.

We can examine many of the homophonic devices at play in Benjy’s aural experience of language through his plastic relationship to names. The nature of this plasticity lies in the idea that names are treated as sonorous objects that exist regardless of their branches of signification; and thus Benjy’s attachment of names to the respective people who bear them is fluid and interchangeable. This phenomenon begins with the fact that his name was changed from Maury to Benjy at an early age, implying the unstable signification of names in the novel. Maury is also the name of Benjy’s uncle, who is a source of discomfort for the whole Compson family, resulting in their changing of their

⁴⁴ Faulkner, 21.

⁴⁵ Bleikasten, 70.

son's name. This doubling of characters' names has the effect of destabilizing the relationship between established linguistic labels and the people (or things) they are supposed to signify. We see the same effect in the doubling of the name Jason in Benjy's father and brother, as well as the doubling of the name Quentin in Benjy's brother and Caddy's daughter. Let us take as an analog the label of Hamlet as pointing to the referents of Hamlet the Prince, Hamlet the King, Hamlet the play, Hamlet the protagonist of said play, and so on. When all referents are considered as a whole, the name itself becomes malleable, and the things it represents become interchangeable. In *The Sound and the Fury*, we have Maury the uncle, Maury the former name of Benjy, and multiple instances in which the characters' mentioning of this name is not clearly determinant of the one or the other. Again we are reminded of Schaeffer, to whom the sound of a violin, when veiled by the process of acousmatic listening, could point to any number of sources, meanings, qualities other than the violin itself.

Benjy exemplifies these modes of both aural conflation and abstraction with regard to name-giving. He narrates an overheard conversation about his name between Frony and Dilsey, who assume that he can't even understand them:

“Saying a name.” Frony said. “He don't know nobody's name.”
“You just say it and see if he don't.” Dilsey said. “You say it to him while he sleeping and I bet he hear you.”⁴⁶

We know that Frony's estimation that Benjy doesn't know people's names is untrue, based on the fact that Benjy narrates the text through the use of names assigned to characters. And yet her suggestion makes us consider how these relationships come into being, and how they are susceptible to undermining. Benjy's name assignment came

⁴⁶ Faulkner, 38.

about through superstition on his family's part, but really came into being through the repeated sounding of the word: "*Your name is Benjy. Caddy said. Do you hear. Benjy. Benjy.*"⁴⁷ The idea of having to be told what one's name is after infancy is absurd to a certain extent; our names are self-evident since before we can remember; yet Benjy inhabits a world in which he must aurally infer the sound which will become the sonic determinant of his character. These episodes of temporal shifting in his section are presumably within the reach of his memory; thus, the giving of his name at such a late age sets the precedent that names are not bound to their correspondents, and are sonorous objects that carry no inherent attachment to context. We find this phenomenon described at the outset of John Ashbery's "Grand Galop": "All thing seem mention of themselves / And the names which stem from them branch out to other referents."⁴⁸

While Benjy's two names carry their own set of homophonic variability, an aural "branching out" occurs most prominently with the phenomenon of Caddy's name outlined at the outset of the essay. Noel Polk continues to outline the ways in which the sound is diffused semantically through an array of possible perspectives:

For the speaker, the word 'caddie' has a specific, unproblematic referent, and he or she assumes that the person holding the golf clubs will know what he or she means; readers, who see the words' written representations rather than hear their sounds, perforce share this assumption and adduce from it that the speaker is probably a golfer.... Our narrator, on the contrary, does not read the words but hears the sounds that stand for the words, and what he—or she: we don't yet know the gender—hears is 'Caddy' or, more precisely, some form of the sounds a phoneticist would transcribe as [kædi] or, probably closer to Faulkner's pronunciation, [kædI]. These sounds have a single referent for the narrator, a referent quite different from the golfer's and, at this point in the novel, quite different from the reader's."⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Faulkner, 74

⁴⁸ John Ashbery, "Grand Galop," *Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (New York: Viking, 1975), lines 1-3.

⁴⁹ Polk, 140.

Polk identifies the idea that Faulkner's treatment of this word reveals the extent to which the representational relationships between speaker, listener, narrator, reader, author, and phoneticist are deeply fragmented. On a general level, this phenomenon points to the instability of the word-sign as word-sound, challenging Ingarden's notion that the aural aspect of language must be "on the periphery of the field of awareness" for a reader. On a more specific level, we can see Benjy's misinterpretation of the word as a kind of micro-representation of these semiotic disparities. We must consider the fact that Faulkner could have chosen to misrepresent what the golfer says by writing, "Here, Caddy"—but he chooses instead to locate the problem in the narrator's consciousness, the reader's phenomenological center. The written representation of "Here, caddie" can be seen as a signification of what Schaeffer refers to as the "physical signal" of a sound: "an energetic phenomenon acting in the physical world, existing independently of any 'listener,' but which allows him to hear a 'sound object.'"⁵⁰ The 'sound object' in this case is what we can insufficiently refer to (as Polk does) as [*kædi*]⁵⁰—but this insufficiency in the visual sign's ability to represent the acousmatic experience of the sound is what renders Benjy a kind of vessel for the experience, or at least the catalyst of potential reading perspectives that might more closely approach it.

One glaring flaw in Polk's analysis is his claim that the sounds have a "single referent for the narrator." On the surface, yes, we can infer (after gathering together pieces of the violently adumbrated plot line) that the name of Benjy's sister is the locus of Benjy's confusion; however, we must keep in mind several qualifications. Recall Faulkner's claim in the appendix, which is that Benjy cannot remember Caddy but only

⁵⁰ Chion, 21.

the loss of her. This is to imply that Benjy does not hear the sound and think immediately and singularly of his sister, but instead is struck with a more ambiguous feeling of loss. Yet we can infer that his reactions are intimately connected with Caddy in some sense, based on the exposition of Benjy's memories as a young child. We come to understand that Benjy used to play with Caddy in the pasture that later became the golf course, which brings into focus the significance of not only the sound but also the *space* in which it is heard. Furthermore, we can locate a multiplicity of referents that this sound has in the extent to which Faulkner repeats and diffuses it through time, unbounding it from spatio-temporal context. Like Proust's madeleine, the sound acts as a temporal trigger for Benjy, dislocating his (and our) sense of place and time. The sound comes to indicate not merely a golf caddie or Benjy's sister, but rather through its referential variability a kind of gateway into how acousmatic perception of sound works in the novel. In Benjy's case, reductive acts of listening give way to a kind of sound processing which facilitates diverse forms of imagination and variation.

Benjy's acousmatic processing of sound material often results in the *sonomorphic*⁵¹ production of new forms; his reduction of sound material to its essential and variable components is of a piece with his synesthetic relationship to the sensory field as a whole. Faulkner enacts in Benjy a highly variable form of perceptive imagination through an act of blending senses simultaneously, and activating disparate perceptual functions within one fragment of sensory awareness. These moments often take the form of pared-down, direct descriptive phrases: "I could smell the bright cold,"⁵²

⁵¹ I employ *sonomorphic* here as a term of my own invention, aiming to find a conveniently-packaged way of referring to the quality of being sonically transformed, or having undergone any kind of morphology that involves sound production/perception.

⁵² Faulkner, 5.

and “I couldn’t see it, but my hands saw it.”⁵³ With regard to sonic material, Benjy’s consciousness has a tendency to synesthetically translate sounds into visual and tactile stimuli. This physiological function is often referred to as *transduction*, in which one form of sensory stimuli is converted into another. We may also see a convenient analog with the use of this term in acoustics, which applies the term both in the context of converting acoustic sound to electric signal (through a microphone), and to the process of an ear drum vibrating sympathetically with air molecules to create mechanical energy, which the brain then converts into our perception of sound. Benjy enacts forms of sonic transduction in both directions: through actions of both synesthesia and what I will refer to as *sonification* of non-auditory material.

Benjy’s moments of synesthesia are constituted by perceptions of sonorous objects that are either represented as stimuli through non-aural senses or trigger a synthesis of new visual/tactile forms. Benjy’s variance of the ways in which these objects are represented conveys a plasticity of consciousness which applies to the reading experience of the text at large. Benjy often conflates olfactory perceptions with sonic ones: “I stopped to start again I could hear mother, and feet walking fast away, and I could smell it.”⁵⁴ His sense of smell acts as a kind of transformative mechanism for processing sound objects, adding to a sense of free variability in the text’s representation of auditory events. This variability can move the other direction as well, in instances where visual sources are represented through auditory description. For example, Benjy claims that as he lies in bed with Caddy, he perceives the darkness around him through both smell and sound: “Caddy held me and I could hear us all, and the darkness, and

⁵³ Faulkner, 88.

⁵⁴ Faulkner, 40.

something I could smell.”⁵⁵ This mixing of sensory inputs is not only indicative of Benjy’s acousmatic relationship to sound, but engages the reader in a mode of taking in the text through a variable array of senses at once.

We can see this synesthetic simultaneity in the “bright shapes” Benjy often sees in a variety of contexts among other sensory materials. When riding in the carriage with his mother, Benjy describes, “I could hear Queenie’s feet and the bright shapes went smooth and steady on both sides, the shadows of them flowing across Queenie’s back.”⁵⁶ These are the same bright shapes that Benjy sees when falling asleep, when sitting in front of the fireplace, when he is drunk with T.P. during Caddy’s wedding, and when he panics in his encounter with the schoolgirls outside the fence. These moments of the “bright shapes going” all seem to occur at either moments of extreme distress or serene calm for Benjy, when his senses are taking in stimuli with particular force or clarity. In the case of his ride in the carriage, the sonic effect of Queenie’s feet moving “smooth and steady” in rhythm triggers his visualization of the bright shapes. Both sonic and visual symmetry are seen as one: the steady pulsing of Queenie’s hooves and the evenness of the light on both sides of the horse all coalesces into “bright shapes... on both sides.”

We also experience the variability of sound objects through Benjy’s acts of *sonification* in his narrative descriptions. I mean to use the term as a way of characterizing Benjy’s habit of ascribing sonic characteristics to sources which are not making the indicated sound, or not capable of making sound at all (a kind of sonic correlative of personification). Sonification gives us a very specific window into the acousmatic nature of Benjy’s perceptive consciousness; for the assignment of a sound to

⁵⁵ Faulkner, 89.

⁵⁶ Faulkner, 11.

a new source requires the complete abstraction of the sound's original mode of production. This phenomenon is often manifest in Benjy's reversal of passive/active relationships in sonic events. The simple phrase at the outset of the novel, "We went through the rattling leaves"⁵⁷ is an apt example of this reversal. Benjy and Versh are the ones enacting the "rattling" sound as they move through the leaves; and yet the sound is presented to us as if the leaves have produced it on their own. Benjy hears the sound removed from the context of his own activity, and acousmatically projects it onto a new source. We see the same phenomenon in his statement that "the flowers rasped and rattled against us."⁵⁸ Benjy's descriptive transformation gives the flowers the agency of producing sound on their own, and the reader's "hearing" of the sound is abstracted from the way in which it is actively brought into being. We can see a clear analogy here with acousmatic compositions that present sonic material enacted by the composer, yet presented/disguised as an independent, extant, and contained event. Take for example the contemporary electroacoustic composer Maggi Payne's *Arctic Winds* (2007). Payne writes in the program notes:

Arctic Winds transports me to the Arctic (where I've never been, but dream of). The piece is sparse, with occasional frantic "windstorms" stirring up the vast frozen expanse. Everything is suspended, in near silence, with occasional forays dropping low into blasts of "wind." Each sound is crystallized, exaggerated, as in our dreams.⁵⁹

The piece is presented as if the listener is situated in an environmental soundscape, with bursts of wind, rushing water, and breaking ice occurring in nature. However, the sources of the sounds—"dry ice and several sizes of ball bearings rolling across a variety of drumheads"—are actually far removed from nature and all a result of the composer's

⁵⁷ Faulkner, 4.

⁵⁸ Faulkner, 3.

⁵⁹ Maggi Payne, "Arctic Winds," *Program Notes*, <http://www.maggipayne.com/> (April 2014)

physical actions.⁶⁰ Schaeffer's words ring true in this situation when he writes that in an acousmatic situation, "We discover much of what we thought we were hearing was in reality only seen and explained by the context."⁶¹ The acousmatic abstraction of any visual source besides the paratext "Arctic Winds" leads the listener to believe that the sounds are just that—arctic winds. Benjy's mode of abstraction in this case lies in his inability to identify his own physical enactment of the sound, receiving it purely as a sonorous, intentional object.

In addition to synesthesia, Benjy's sonification is also an act of synthesis, in that he projects auditory descriptors onto objects that are purely visual. This is most present in his sensations of "buzzing": "The trees were buzzing, and the grass,"⁶² and "I could see the windows where the trees were buzzing."⁶³ We might assume that the "buzzing" Benjy is referring to is caused by crickets, cicadas, mosquitos, or other insects creating washes of sound emanating from the surrounding vegetation; yet nowhere in the entire novel does Benjy mention the presence of insects. His description of the buzzing is phenomenologically reduced to what he can immediately hear; the acousmatic nature of the buzzing allows for a more open-form treatment, resulting in Benjy's projection of the sound onto the trees and the grass. The moment is also spatially abstracted, in that his identification of the sound is located in his perception of the window. The reduction here is not a complete abstraction of visual stimuli, but rather a reduction of the field of depth—for Benjy the sound occurs within the framing of the window, independent of the idea that the actual source is a distance beyond the two-dimensional pane. There is the

⁶⁰ Payne, *ibid.*

⁶¹ Schaeffer (1966), 93.

⁶² Faulkner, 45.

⁶³ Faulkner, 92.

sense of a kind of hallucinatory quality in Benjy's reassignment of sonic activity to non-auditory sources; and yet Faulkner's balancing of hallucination with perceptive reality is what brings us closer to the immediacy of subjectivity in the novel. Moments like these are simultaneously realistic and surreal, in that they present the reader with phenomenologically resonant descriptions of objects as they appear to the narrator, yet arrive at this particular resonance only through a process of imaginative variation.



The most phenomenologically variant aspect of Benjy's relationship to sound is the way in which sonorous objects act as "pivot points" for rapid temporal shifting. One of the most consistent formal elements of Benjy's section is the fact that it erratically shifts between several (it is unclear how many exactly) temporal points, roughly: his early childhood, boyhood, teenage years, and his 33rd birthday. While there are certain plot-based markings that indicate we have shifted temporal location (such as who his caretaker is, or which members of his family are present), the most salient technique of time-shifting is Faulkner's use of italics to indicate sudden jumps in time frames. The author's use of this variation in the way the text *looks* has acousmatically significant implications for the way it *sounds*, and the way in which auditory material functions as an adumbrative trigger for Benjy. Many critics take the position that these italics and time shifts are meant to indicate that time as a concept does not register with Benjy. Leona Toker claims that "time-shifts are supposed to imitate the spontaneous associative backward-and-forward movement of the characters' minds and therefore cannot be expected to have date tags. For Benjy, notions like 'before/after' and 'past/present' do not

exist.”⁶⁴ Perrin Lowrey similarly argues that “to speak of Ben’s concept of time is in reality a contradiction, for Ben cannot conceive of time. For him, time does not exist... it is these dislocations, brought about by Ben’s lack of a time sense, that cause him to make ironic misinterpretations.”⁶⁵ While it is true that Benjy does not make distinctions about what is past, present, or in the future, it seems that the purpose of these shifts is to contextualize Benjy’s relationship to time rather than to obliterate it. Faulkner certainly constructed a complicated set of temporal parameters for Benjy, and to rule out his sense of time as “nonexistent” and his perceptions as “ironic” is to oversimplify the issue. Faulkner wrote that to Benjy, “time was not a continuation, it was an instant...it all is this moment, it all is now to him.”⁶⁶ In many ways, this phenomenon of simultaneity in Benjy’s consciousness seems to be rooted in both the auditory nature of the italics themselves, as well as the way in which the shifts seem to precipitate from the instance of refraining sonic events.

In his memoir of interactions with Faulkner, Ben Wasson (his literary agent and editor) recalls that the author sought a more explicit method of indicating time-shifts in *The Sound and the Fury*:

If I could only get it printed the way it ought to be with different color types for the different times in Benjy’s section recording the flow of events for him, it would make it simpler, probably. I don’t reckon, though, it’ll ever be printed that way, and this’ll have to be the best, with the italics indicating the changes of events.⁶⁷

Wasson still had problems with the flow of text in Benjy’s section, and he changed the italics to regular type with varying line spacing indicating the time shifts. Faulkner

⁶⁴ Leona Toker, “Diffusion of Information in *The Sound and the Fury*,” *College Literature* 15.2 (Spring, 1988), 112.

⁶⁵ Perrin Lowrey, “Concepts of Time in *The Sound and the Fury*,” *Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Sound and the Fury* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1968), 54-5.

⁶⁶ Faulkner quoted in Bleikasten, 76.

⁶⁷ Ben Wasson, *Count no Count: Flashbacks to Faulkner* (Oxford: University of Mississippi Press, 2006), 90.

rejected the changes, claiming that “italics are necessary to establish for the reader Benjy’s confusion... the form in which you now have it is pretty tough. It presents a most dull and poorly articulated picture to my eye.”⁶⁸ Perhaps the main reason for the superiority of the italics technique in communicating Benjy’s “flow of events” is that its sonic implications are much more significant. Both line spacing and italics create great phenomenological rifts in the reader’s experience of the text; however, the former is purely visual in nature, while the aspect of the latter alters both our visual and auditory interaction with the text. An application of italics to the scripting of a speaking voice often indicates a change in the nature of how the voice emphasizes a given word or phrase. If we are dealing with a spoken voice, this emphasis must be a sonic one, whether through shifts in volume, spacing, speed, pitch, or accent. Since Benjy is given as a first-person narrator, we receive his text as his voice—and any emphasis through italics as such will likely have the effect of altering how we hear that voice.

The auditory effect of the italics allows Faulkner to express both sonic transformations and temporal shifts within very limited spaces on the page. Instances of these transformations are most effective when the italics are applied to refraining phrases, emphasizing the highly associative nature of Benjy’s “flow of events”:

Caddy smelled like trees. ‘We don’t like perfume ourselves.’ Caddy said.
She smelled like trees.
‘Come on, now.’ Dilsey said, ‘You too big to sleep with folks. You a big boy now. Thirteen years old.’⁶⁹

We are presented twice with Benjy’s statement that Caddy “smelled like trees,” once in roman type and once in italics, the latter indicating a shift from when Benjy is a young child to when he is thirteen years old. The close proximity of the two identical phrases

⁶⁸ Wasson, 106.

⁶⁹ Faulkner, 51.

makes for a startling contrast between the two different type faces because they are the same words yet we hear them differently; Faulkner manipulates this disparity in auditory effect as a means of immediately situating the reader in a new temporal context. A major reason why this couldn't have been accomplished with line spacing is because Faulkner often implements these shifts before line breaks even occur. When Luster tells an adult Benjy to get into the water, Benjy narrates:

I hushed and got in the water *and Roskus came and said to come to supper and Caddy said,*
*It's not supper time yet. I'm not going.*⁷⁰

Faulkner told Wasson that he wanted the nature of the printing to reflect an “unbroken-surfaced confusion”⁷¹ in Benjy’s consciousness. In this case, Benjy’s associative temporal shift occurs at the moment he gets in the water; a choice to change the coloring of letters or to break the lines apart would break this surface, whereas the italics preserve the visual continuity while altering the sonic character of the material on the page. The effect is a seamless transition between temporal locations over twenty years apart within one short sentence, all pivoting around this acousmatic manipulation of signs.

Auditory *repetition* is an essential characteristic of the way that Faulkner navigates these transitions between time locations. Schaeffer emphasizes the ways in which repetition is a key technique in both abstracting sounds from their sources and varying their contextual qualities, to create “specific moments of illumination, directions which are always precise and always reveal a new aspect of the object, towards which our attention is deliberately or unconsciously drawn.”⁷² Another one of Schaeffer’s early

⁷⁰ Faulkner, 19.

⁷¹ Wasson, 106.

⁷² Schaeffer (1966), 94.

exercises in “interruption” is the *closed groove*, a compositional technique of incessantly repeating and varying recorded sound material:

The closed groove experiment consisted in closing a recorded fragment in on itself (as is done accidentally by a scratch), thus creating a periodic phenomenon taken, either by chance or deliberately, from any sound continuum and able to be repeated indefinitely... This sound fragment could be described in itself, when the “causal” and anecdotal perception was soon over and when it presented itself to the listener as an “object”, always identical yet always capable of revealing new characteristics when heard over and over again.⁷³

This experiment in repetition is the guiding principle of Schaeffer’s first acousmatic work, *Etude aux Chemins de Fer*, or, *Railroad Study*. The piece begins with the clattering sound of a train moving along a railroad track. A fragment of about two seconds is looped and repeated consistently; it soon begins to take on a very distinct rhythmic quality in the way it is repeated, which to the ear gradually suggests a percussion instrument’s timbre. As the piece progresses and the repetition causes the listener’s perception to move further away from the idea of a railroad, Schaeffer applies other types of variation to the sound, altering its timbre through filtration, reverberation, and changes of speed and pitch. Throughout all these changes, the essence of the original sound remains present, yet it does not overtly suggest a railroad sound, but rather a *sound in itself*, existing as an intentional object that we hear from a variety of perspectives, outside of immediate spatio-temporal limits.

Faulkner creates the same type of repetition and variation in several sounds that Benjy hears. We can divide these sonorous objects into two categories: linguistic— words that trigger Benjy’s movements to other moments in time when he heard the same or

⁷³ Chion, 20.

similar phrases; and ambient—sounds that are treated as a kind of “background” noise that carry over across temporal boundaries.

I will return to discussing Faulkner’s treatment of “caddie” and “Caddy,” one of the most prevalent linguistic temporal pivots in Benjy’s section. I have already examined the ways in which Benjy conflates these two words through an acousmatic reduction of the sound to its variant properties. Caddy’s name also acts as a trigger for temporal variation within the flow of Benjy’s prose:

‘Did you come to meet Caddy.’ she said, rubbing my hands. ‘What is it. What are you trying to tell Caddy.’ Caddy smelled like trees and like when she says were asleep.

*What are you moaning about, Luster said. You can watch them again when we get to the branch.*⁷⁴

At the beginning of this scene, the sound of the golfers saying “caddie” is what brings the sequence of the narrative back to Benjy’s childhood, to memories of his sister coming home from school; her repetition of the sound of her name swerves our temporal location back to the “present” of Benjy’s 33rd birthday, where the golfers are still yelling the same sound. The sound carries across time locations, and functions as an associative locus for both the reader and Benjy. In order to orient ourselves in the flow of adumbrated time modules, we are required to hear these sounds as they resonate across shifting temporalities.

This kind of sonic repetition also happens with other repeated phrases, often utterances from the same person but in different locations in space and time. While with T.P. and Roskus in the barn, Benjy narrates the following:

‘Taint no luck on this place.’ Roskus said. ‘Turn that calf in if you done.’

⁷⁴ Faulkner, 5.

*Taint no luck on this place, Roskus said. The fire rose and fell behind him and Versh.*⁷⁵

The phenomenological character of the textual materials here is somewhat complicated by the fact that the phrase is repeated by the same voice, even scripted in the same way and positioned in vertical symmetry at the head of two separate paragraphs. The identical nature of the two phrases makes the contrast between their variable contexts all the more acousmatically salient. Two key variations occur: one of course is the difference between quotations and italics as the visual representation of spoken text; the other is the immediate shift in location—we move from the barn to the living room. This combined with the assumption that we have jumped forward in time (from Benjy’s early childhood to a time when he is fifteen years old) creates an implicit variance in the way we are to hear Roskus’s voice. The phrase is treated like Husserl’s table: seeing/hearing it from a multiplicity of phenomenological viewpoints forges connections between adumbrated perspectives of time and space. This balance between intentional consistency and contextual variance invites us to enter into a mode of hearing the phrase not strictly for its linguistic meaning, but for the ways in which close attention to its essential and variant qualities helps to orient our reading experience within Benjy’s disordered sense of time.

Faulkner additionally uses combinations of linguistic phrases with sonic correlatives as a means of creating associative pivot points across temporalities. For Benjy, the sound of Dilsey’s moaning is rich with acousmatic variance with respect to his experience of death and mourning, causing a sudden shifting between the night of Damuddy’s funeral and his memories of Roskus’s death:

‘What’s a funeral.’ Jason said.

⁷⁵ Faulkner, 34.

‘Didn’t mammy tell you not to tell them.’ Versh said.
‘Where they moans.’ Frony said. ‘They moaned two days on Sis Beluh Clay.’

They moaned at Dilsey’s house. Dilsey was moaning. When Dilsey moaned Luster said, Hush, and we hushed, and then I began to cry and Blue howled under the kitchen steps. Then Dilsey stopped and we stopped.

‘Oh. Caddy said. ‘That’s niggers. White folks don’t have funeral.’

‘Mammy said us not to tell them, Frony.’ Versh said.

‘Tell them what.’ Caddy said.

*Dilsey moaned, and when it got to the place I began to cry and Blue howled under the steps.*⁷⁶

Here Benjy forges a correlation between the word-sound “moan” and the sound of Dilsey’s crying during Roskus’s funeral. His association of these word-sound correlatives precipitates other associations in Benjy’s mind, more specifically his connection between the two temporalities represented, as well as the parallels they share concerning death and mourning.

Ambient sounds play an important role in acting as pivot points across time centers in Benjy’s section. Over the course of pages 76 to 86, the sounds of rain pounding the roof and wood burning in the fireplace cause a torrent of shifts between three widely spread memories: 1) an argument between Caddy and his mother when Benjy is a young child; 2) Caddy coming home from a date after losing her virginity when Benjy is a teenager; 3) Jason scorning Luster for his poor supervision of Benjy when he is an adult. All of these events happen in the Compson’s living room when there is a fire in the fireplace and rain outside, and Benjy grounds his associative time-shifting between them in his refraining of the phrase “We could hear the fire and the roof” with several variations. The refrain occurs nine times over these ten pages, each repetition indicating a new pivot in time:

⁷⁶ Faulkner 39

We could hear the roof. I could see the fire in the mirror too...

I could hear the fire and the roof...

We could hear the roof. We could hear Jason too, crying loud beyond the wall...

We could hear the roof. Quentin smelled like rain, too...

I could hear the roof. Father leaned forward and looked at Quentin...

We could hear the roof and the fire, and a snuffling outside the door...

We could hear the roof and the fire and Jason...

Jason snuffled. We could hear the fire and the roof. Jason snuffled a little louder.

'One more time.' Father said. We could hear the fire and the roof...

Versh smelled like rain. He smelled like a dog, too. We could hear the fire and the roof.

We could hear Caddy walking fast...

We could hear the fire and the roof and Versh.⁷⁷

Just as in Schaeffer's *Etude aux Chemins de Fer*, Faulkner repeats fragments of acousmatically reduced sounds and creates variations in their context. "We could hear the roof" is a form of acousmatic listening in itself, in that it does not assume that the cause of the sound is rain; just as "We could hear the fire" leaves out the sound's modes of production through the burning of wood. The presence of both these sounds in all three scenes forges an associative connection between all of them; and Benjy's reduced state of listening allows him to freely vary his experience of these sounds that carry across temporal borders. The fire and the roof are means to the phenomenological end of maintaining a plastic relationship to sense perception, which is not bound by the immediacy of time or space. These sounds also characterize the section of the Benjy

⁷⁷ Faulkner, 76-86

chapter that seems to build into a disorienting crescendo: as the section draws to a close, the distance between repetitions becomes shorter, and the wide leaps in time become more frequent. As a result, the flow of the narrative more closely approaches entropy, wavering in an almost complete estrangement from a sense of sequential temporality.

v

In any discussion of acousmatics, it is difficult to shirk concerns for how this all relates to an idea of *truth*. Although Schaeffer avoids making distinctions like true vs. false and real vs. fake in his writings on sound, one is still left with a kind of ambiguous notion of the acousmatic veil: for the experience of acousmatic sound, as in the dialogue between Pythagoras and the *akousmatikoi*, is in the end an exchange of information. So do we receive this information as a kind of truth? Or is the veil a means of masking that truth in search of a different, more abstract form of reality? The *akousmatikoi*, as the story goes, were dogmatic truth-seekers, and received Pythagoras's teachings as such concrete reality that they "refused to recognize continued mathematical and scientific research as part of the Founder's intentions."⁷⁸

For insight we may return to Hamlet once more to examine another literary moment of acousmatics. As Hamlet speaks to Gertrude in her chamber while Polonius listens behind the arras, the following moment transpires:

POLONIUS: [*behind the arras*] What ho! Help!

HAMLET: How now, a rat? Dead for a ducat, dead. [*He kills Polonius by thrusting a rapier through the arras.*]

POLONIUS: [*behind the arras*] O, I am slain!⁷⁹

The murder here is the result of an occurrence that is acousmatic on a very basic level:

Hamlet hears a sound whose visual source is masked behind a curtain. It is hard to resist

⁷⁸ Richard D. McKirahan, *Philosophy Before Socrates* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2011), 89.

⁷⁹ Shakespeare, III.iv.28-30

an interpretation of this moment that posits an idea of truth as the determining factor behind Hamlet's actions; for one could easily say that the curtain withholds the truth of Polonius's identity, causing Hamlet to make the mistake of killing him impulsively as he would a rat. For this reason many critics liken this gesture as representative in a larger sense of Hamlet's perennial desire to "break through" the mask of reality, as it were, to reach some for transcendent form of truth. I on the other hand, believe truth to be completely irrelevant to this situation. Hamlet knows that it is Polonius who is behind the curtain, and his motivations for killing him have certainly reached a tipping point by this moment of the play. The curtain is not masking reality but rather giving Hamlet an excuse to slay Polonius, and in a larger sense giving Shakespeare the opportunity to create a moment which in turn precipitates the entire denouement of the play (Hamlet's exile and eventual return, Laertes's revenge, and the slew of deaths that follow). The acousmatic arras does not conceal or convey truth, it is simply a means of *differentiation* that creates new opportunities of perception and interpretation.

In the case of *The Sound and the Fury*, we can see this differentiation as a way for Faulkner to engage his readers in a new kind of reading. His employment of acousmatic techniques is a form of didacticism in that the text teaches us how to read it, albeit in a very unusual way. Bleikasten points to the idea that this paradigm shift in the experience of reading is an essential aspect of Faulkner's novel:

From the outset, the reader is jolted into the uncomfortable awareness of a *text* that refuses to fit into his prior reading experience. Instead of allowing us to settle cozily into the familiar world of make-believe fiction, Faulkner points at once to the specific premises of his own creation, compelling us to find for ourselves by what rules it is governed.⁸⁰

⁸⁰ Bleikasten, 68.

Faulkner's manipulation of auditory material in the text is one of the most effective ways of forcing these shifts in conventional reading habits. The way that he treats sounds acousmatically is not a means to arriving at a more truthful or realistic representation of these objects, but rather a way of reorienting our perceptive positions toward them—to open our senses to new modes of hearing and interpreting language. For “just as he plays with Benjy's hearing of the phonemes, so does Faulkner play with the way we read, with the mechanical signs of punctuation and spelling that harness and control, that give rhythm and shape and weight and expressive meaning to, the silent words that appear on the paper.”⁸¹

A glaring disparity at the end of all this is that Faulkner's treatment of sound is a perennially *silent* one, for just as Ong laments, the written word is frozen into a static visual frame. We must keep in mind that any sonic significance we ascribe to the writing is purely interpretive, and that Faulkner was by no means necessarily thinking in musical or auditory terms. What I hope to have accomplished with this inquiry, however, is the possibility of a more fluid critical dialogue between sound and written language, for the communication of ideas in either field ultimately depends on the other. In Faulkner's mind, an arrangement of letters on a page never lacked the infinite potential for sonic invention: “I don't appreciate music as much as I ought to. It's one of my flaws I reckon.... Language is my music. All I'll ever need.”⁸²



⁸¹ Polk, 143.

⁸² Judith L. Sensibar, *The Origins of Faulkner's Art* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1984), 207.