

Buddenbrooks and The Sound and the Fury

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BUDDENBROOKS AND *THE SOUND AND THE FURY*

The Sound and the Fury resembles Mann's *Buddenbrooks* not only in its outlines but in some of its details. For instance, Jason resembles Christian, Quentin resembles Thomas, and Caddy resembles Tony. The novel marks the dividing line between Faulkner's apprenticeship and his mature art with romantic plots characterizing his first novel, realism the mature work. The influence of *Buddenbrooks*, Mann and European realism, which had relatively little effect on major American literature before Faulkner, is a positive influence on *The Sound and the Fury* and the work that comes after that.

I

Thomas Mann's first novel, *Buddenbrooks*, written at the turn of the century and published in 1902, is sub-titled "The Decline of a Family."¹ Other and earlier European novels had also dealt with families, of course, with their rise and decline. Tolstoy dealt brilliantly with family cycles in *War and Peace*, and many of the other great masters of nineteenth-century realism, including Balzac, Dickens, George Eliot and Dostoevsky, studied aspects of the family in their novels. But Mann's youthful masterpiece, a gathering together of thematic strands which had served mainly secondary purposes in the nineteenth-century novel, subordinates the romantic elements of courtship, love and marriage and the adventurous elements of exploration, ambition and quest which largely occupy the earlier realists, and is distinguished by the fact that it focuses entirely on the family and its disintegration. The larger life of the society, its social and political and cultural forms, is not ignored by Mann but is brought in as a lightly adumbrated background against which the drama of family disintegration is played out, and against which the story of the Buddenbrook family resonates with a large significance.

Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, the novel in which Faulkner touched for the first time the height of his creative powers, was written nearly 30 years later (1928-29), but might have been

sub-titled, had it been written in a simpler time, "The Decline of a Family" — for that is squarely Faulkner's subject. In technique it differs from Mann's novel, for James Joyce intervenes. But in scope and subject, Faulkner's later, shorter and more brilliant novel is in several ways close to Mann's — in outline, obviously so, but in a number of details as well.

The form of both books is determined by the subject — the life of a family over a span of three generations, and a period of 30 to 40 years. Faulkner, for the sake of dramatic compression, sees the whole of the drama from a concentrated point of time — four points, to be exact, involving four separate perspectives, a cluster of four separate days. In the older style, Mann unrolls the decades without any disturbance of traditional chronology. But the beginning and ending points are fixed in a similar way. There is first the seminal scene announcing, among other things, the first hint of decay. In Faulkner, it is the death of Damuddy. Caddy is eight, she and the other three children are playing in the "branch," she gets her drawers muddy, and that evening climbs a pear tree from which she peers through the window at the walled-off adult world, the mystery of death. In Mann, it is a less gloomy occasion — the afternoon housewarming party, the inauguration of the splendid Meng street residence where much of the rest of the novel is to take place. Tony, the older girl, like Caddy, is eight; she and her brothers come in happily from school; the grandparents are still alive, the family still united and happy. But like the Damuddy scene, which marks the rupture of primal innocence, it is the last occasion on which the family will be together — and it contains in miniature the pattern of the children's personalities and their future tragic relationships.

The end point is also similar. In Faulkner, it is the running off of the girl Quentin with the circus man — the definitive loss, in other words, of the sole offspring who carries the Compson blood and might have continued the line. In Mann, it is the death of little Hanno, the delicate son of Thomas, and also the only hope of carrying on the Buddenbrook line.

Both writers, Mann and Faulkner, draw psychologically sure portraits of the parents — the pietistic mother who has always at the ready some religious sentiment for the ears of her non-religious children; the father who embodies the culture and values of his class and time. The two writers also manage to draw touching pictures of the doomed grandchild — the girl Quentin, little Hanno. The central focus, though, in both novels is the "second

generation'' — the four Buddenbrook children in Mann's novel, the four Compson children in Faulkner's. It is in these ruined lives, traced from early childhood through adulthood, that the central drama of dissolution is mainly acted out.

There are a number of parallels, psychological and otherwise, between the two sets of children. The second son — it is Jason in Faulkner, Christian in Mann — is a kind of clown, a buffoon. Jason, to be sure, mixes sadism or cruelty in nearly all of his words and actions — elements entirely missing from the gentle Christian; but the clownishness stems in both from an inability or unwillingness to accept the dignified standards of a patrician tradition. Christian takes a common shopgirl as his mistress; Jason gives money to a whore he keeps in Memphis. The dignity of the family is a subject, to both of them, for jokes — cruel jokes from Jason, gentle ones from Christian. Christian is obviously weak, in character and in health. A hypochondriac, he is unable successfully to compete in business and is a continual financial drain on the family coffers. With his sharp tongue and bullying manners, Jason tries to appear strong, but is also a hypochondriac, incapable like Christian of sustained work, lacking inner discipline, and a drain on the family finances, which he pretends to replenish. Both of them are bachelors who, after the death of the father, live on in the family house with the mother, who protects and coddles them, and favors them over a morally superior older brother.

There are also parallels between the two sensitive eldest sons, Thomas and Quentin. Each of them is weighed down and ultimately destroyed by a heavy sense of family "honor," by a gnawing sense that his younger brothers and sisters are doing nothing to help support the burden, and by an intense, morbid consciousness of the decline of the family. The form that this takes differs, of course, in the two novels. Mann's book is set in a commercial Hanseatic port city in the middle of the nineteenth century, and the "patrician" traditions of the Buddenbrooks stem from their commercial pre-eminence and the civic responsibilities — from the family's playing, and having played for a century, an important role in the life of the town. Faulkner's novel, set in the opening decades of the twentieth century, deals with a family which has already lost its importance, and whose values on the Compson side are those of the impoverished land-based aristocracy — the exaggerated emphasis on chastity in its women, courage and the stoic virtues in its men, and its contempt for the bourgeois vir-

tues. Thomas' loyalty to the family tradition lies in his iron-willed attempts, despite a rebellious intellectualism and love of beauty deep in his nature, to live true to and outwardly exemplify the stolid Protestant commercial virtues — business probity, commercial success. Quentin's loyalty takes the form of an obsessive concern for his sister's chastity — the "fragile membrane" which occupies his thoughts and nightmares. The family and social ethic which forms the two boys is different. The conflict within the two, however, and its psychological root are much the same — a code of conduct absorbed from an admired father but too rigidly embraced by the son, a code which disciplines, warps and represses the urges of the instinctive, erupting at last in Thomas as a long-concealed decay, repressed in Quentin by his suicide.

Tony, the pretty blue-eyed sister, admires and loves her older brother Thomas. She sees in him the same strengths she had loved in her father, and tries to be loyal to them both. Caddy's love for Quentin and her father, and her loyalty to them and their values, is parallel, but complicated by both pity and revolt — her sense, shared by Faulkner, that their code is doomed and is less powerful than the urges of her blood. As a marriageable girl and later as a marriageable but "tarnished" woman, Tony, like Caddy, is pressured to carry the family name and honor into the marketplace of marriage. Her three marriages, each more disastrous than the last, drag the Buddenbrook name through shame and scandal — Mann's bourgeois, nineteenth-century equivalent of Caddy's promiscuous, twentieth-century sexual liaisons. Mann embodies in Tony what he sees as the essentially Feminine — weak judgment, vanity. Faulkner's conception of Caddy is idealized and heroic — the heroism of sexual freedom, sexual courage. But Tony and Caddy, as girls and then as lovely women, play out helplessly their female destinies and, without intending to, as women and fulfilling their role as women, smash the family hopes and destroy the family reputation.

The most striking difference between the two novels lies in the technique. Thirty years of restless experimentation separate the novels. In addition, it seems to be Mann's intention to deliberately revive the classical form of the nineteenth-century novel. Nevertheless, modernistic tendencies pointing in the direction of Faulkner can be made out. Mann organizes his major units around certain important occasions. Most of Book I, for instance, is taken up by a picture of the housewarming, and nearly all of the other sections of the book, as is true to some

extent in Faulkner's novel as well, are clustered around a relatively few ceremonial occasions — the death of the father, a Christmas party, the christening of Hanno, the hundredth anniversary of the Buddenbrook firm, etc. Mann's intention, like Faulkner's, is to substitute as much as possible dramatic scene for continuous narrative flow, to juxtapose scenes ironically, and to freeze time into a series of moments or clusters. There is scarcely any suggestion of the experimental in the way Mann does this, but a tendency can be made out.

The least classical chapter and the most striking "tour de force" from a technical viewpoint in *Buddenbrooks* occurs in the last book. The long second chapter, which stands out from the rest of the novel, marks no ceremonial occasion and no important change in the fortunes of any member of the Buddenbrook family. It is given over entirely to a perfectly uneventful, ordinary day in the life of the schoolboy Hanno. Freed from the requirements of plot and arbitrary in its use of a day as an organizing idea, it is by no means purposeless, however. It occurs immediately before Hanno's death, and it gives a meaning and impact to the death which, without the chapter, it would lack. Both as a detached set piece and a "tour de force," and in the personality dealt with, it can be compared with Faulkner's extraordinary, experimental first book in *The Sound and the Fury* — Benjy's long interior monologue.

When Hanno is born, he is at first thought to be an idiot. Sickly, he is slow to talk, slow to walk, and even later, after he gives signs of musical genius, he is not like other boys. He cannot play sports, learn his lessons or compete in school. It is, of course, not Mann's intention to create for the reader in the consciousness of Hanno, as it is for Faulkner in his more difficult task of creating the inner world of Benjy, the perceptions and visions of idiocy as it really might be. But Hanno, who like Benjy is the youngest and weakest of the family and stands most in need of protection, represents, as does Benjy in his helplessness and idiocy, the purity of feeling divorced from all other human capacities — from will, calculation, reasoning, etc. His inborn love of music is a symbol of his attachment to, and his deep immersion in, the world of feeling; and like Benjy, who cannot speak, Hanno is mainly silent, the passive observer who sees and hears everything, like a limpid and receptive plate on which all is registered but from which only non-verbal signs — musical notes from Hanno, bellows from Benjy — will ever be given.

Is it possible that Mann's picture of Hanno was a starting point for Faulkner's conception of Benjy?

It is impossible to say, based on external evidence, whether Faulkner was familiar with Mann's novel before or at the time he wrote *The Sound and the Fury*. Many years later, in 1956, in the famous interview with Jean Stein published in *Paris Review*, Faulkner singled out two European writers, and only two, as important, Thomas Mann and James Joyce, but so far as I know never acknowledged any direct debt to *Buddenbrooks*. Certainly he could have been familiar with it, though. The Lowe-Porter translation of *Buddenbrooks* appeared in 1924 and was then issued in a new edition in 1928, the year in which *The Sound and the Fury* began to take shape. In 1929, the year in which *The Sound and the Fury* was completed, Mann was awarded the Nobel Prize; Joseph Blottner, in his biography of Faulkner, mentions that in that year Faulkner bought a copy of the stories of Mann.

The internal evidence does not prove, either, that Faulkner had read *Buddenbrooks*, but it is hard to account for the parallels except on that assumption.

Faulkner may also have been familiar with Galsworthy's *Forsyte Saga*. There is not a great deal in the book that Faulkner could have found useful, and it is unlikely that he read it through in its entirety, but he may have been indirectly familiar with it through discussion or reviews. It was appearing in installments between 1906 and 1921, and was, despite Lawrence's devastating comments about it in 1927, being taken seriously on both sides of the Atlantic in the 1920s. If Faulkner was not familiar with *Buddenbrooks* or *The Forsyte Saga*, it is hard to see where the broad idea of *The Sound and the Fury* comes from. There is no model of this kind within the American tradition of the novel, and before Faulkner, with the possible exception of several novels by Howells, who was in turn directly influenced by European realism and naturalism, the family was not a major subject of study for the American writer.

II

The Sound and the Fury marks a fairly clear dividing line in Faulkner's work. Before it there are the works of apprenticeship — his botched, amateurish *Soldier's Pay* (1926) and the other writings in which only traces of the later power can be found. After it (although *The Sound and the Fury* is perhaps itself the high mark) are the half-dozen or so masterpieces of family doom or destiny — *Absalom, Absalom, As I Lay Dying, The Hamlet*, etc.

In *Soldier's Pay* Faulkner is feeling his way, and through most of the book is following what was to prove, for him, a false trail. His intention seems to have been to write a romance, a study of love in the modern world of a kind not so different from the novels his contemporaries, Fitzgerald and Hemingway, were writing at the same time — *The Great Gatsby* (1925), *The Sun Also Rises* (1926). In a sense, there is nothing surprising that a young Southerner bent on producing a first novel should turn in that direction. The modern novel, after all, from the 18th-century on had arisen in large part as a reworking of the romantic-comic subplots of the Renaissance dramatists, Shakespeare and others; and from Jane Austen and before, its staple had been themes of modern romance, courtship, seduction, love and marriage. *Soldier's Pay* takes a number of subplots of that kind — abortive courtships, short-lived passions (sometimes reciprocated, sometimes not) between young men and women, schemes of seduction and marriage. These are arranged in a kind of counterpoint, or paralleled and contrasted, and provide the flesh around the central story, which is also romantic, but in a different and more morbidly sentimental sense of "romance." Disfigured by the war (it is a question of a mysterious wound in the forehead), blinded and dying, the hero returns home where he is to be married to the physically beautiful but spiritually unworthy girl he had become engaged to before he left. Like a piece of statuary, a damaged twentieth-century St. Sebastian, the dying and silent hero is the focal point around which the other characters and events move. The central idea is surprisingly close to Hemingway's in *The Sun Also Rises* — also published in 1926. In both books the central fact is the war wound, and as a result of it the incapacity of the hero to love. By luck or genius, Hemingway had hit on the idea of the war wound being a genital one, however, and the love which can never be fulfilled rests solidly on the wound as modernistic

fact and symbol. Faulkner's forced invention (the wound in the forehead is possibly intended as a symbol but is entirely unbelievable as a fact), like much of the other invention in the novel, including the war experiences of the characters and the soldier talk (apparently drawn out of *What Price Glory?*), lacks solidity. The book as a whole does not give the impression of having been based on the writer's own experience. Much the same, however, can also be said of Faulkner's successful novels — *Absalom, Absalom*, for instance. One wonders whether the failure of *Soldier's Pay* is not based on the unsuitability of modern romantic love as a form and subject for Faulkner's talents and his vision of life.

Faulkner did not abandon the subject of love in the modern world, and was tempted back to it several times later in his career. *Sanctuary* and *Pylon* are both versions of the same theme. But unlike *Soldier's Pay*, neither of these novels is in any sense a "romance." Bitter, blackly comic, ironic novels, they are anti-romantic to an extreme degree. *Sanctuary*, in particular, in which a brothel symbolizes the place where "love" is carried out, in which the modern "lover" is a sexually impotent killer, and in which the act of love is a rape with a corn cob, owes its power to the savagery with which love as an expression of modern life is parodied, and the romantic patterns of courtship, seduction, love and marriage are turned upside down. Faulkner ultimately realized his interpretation of love in the modern world, one might say, by his rejection of romantic love both as a subject and as a form from the novel.

Neither *Sanctuary* nor *Pylon* could be described as "family" novels, but it is interesting to note that the inner pattern, of both books is formed from a series of contrasts of broken marriages, broken families. This is done with particular richness in *Sanctuary*, set like *Pylon* entirely in the present but in which the reader is introduced to a great variety of fractured households, defective families — the airless, feminized town-dweller household of Narcissa, whose husband is dead and whose suitor is effete; the broken modern marriage of Horace Benbow and Belle; the degenerate "household" of the moronic Tommy and his blind father, country-dwellers who live without a woman in a parody of family life; the "marriage" of Ruby and Lee Goodwin, who are not married, whose baby is dying, and who exist, as is more or less true of all the families, cut off from the rest of society; the household of gangsters and killers at Frenchman's Bend who regard

women as whores or sexual objects to be raped or exploited. The title "Sanctuary" points in fact to what is never presented anywhere in the book — the reciprocal love between man and woman which we never see; the family as an order of man, wife and child — which is present only in broken fragments; the whole society as the soil in which the family can be set and find nourishment and growth; the union between past and present, Town and primal Nature, which in *Sanctuary* are violently torn apart and refuse to coalesce.² But it is also clear that *Sanctuary*, written out of and a deliberate expression of rage and frustration with modern life, forms only an isolated interlude in Faulkner's total *œuvre*, and that the main tendency of his imagination, from the time of *Sartoris* and *The Sound and the Fury*, was instead directed at an interpretation of the present as a continuation and a part of the past. It was also directed, beginning in the late 1920s and throughout the 1930s and 1940s, at the gradual elaboration, piece by piece, of a whole and unified vision — at pictures of individuals set vividly into the workings of a family, of families tied or divided by blood or the claims of class and community set into a close relationship with other families, of communities set into an entire geography and history. As Malcom Cowley, who in the late 1940s read through all of Faulkner's writings and tried to see them as a whole, was the first to point out, the individual novels and stories form a kind of fabric, a breath-takingly inter-related and inter-connected totality stemming from a nearly single imaginative vision. It is an extraordinary accomplishment, unmatched in scope and depth in American fiction, and rare in any literature. One must look to a handful of European writers, Balzac and Zola, or to Thomas Hardy's more loosely interwoven Wessex novels, for a roughly comparable achievement.

Furthermore, this interconnected vision is supported, as in the masterpieces of European realism, by a dense circumstantiality of detail, a rich weight of social fact, a sharp sense of the difference — in speech, and life-style and outlook — between the member of one social class and the next, a broad canvas of town dweller and redneck farmer, "nouveau-riche" white trash and aristocrat, the Negro one generation removed from slave days and the Negro removed two. The reader senses behind this Faulkner's hunger to know and to pin down through his imagination each detail of even the minor characters he sets in motion — their total histories, their families, the main events of their lives. Perhaps for that reason Faulkner's crowded realism, for all of its responsive-

ness to economic fact, social class and the realities of historical process, is never, as in Zola or Dreiser, an instrument to submerge or crush his characters. On the contrary, the individuality of Faulkner's characters is almost always augmented by the complexity of the realistic setting, and their vitality depends on the vitality of the social nexus in which they exist. When the environment is not real, as in *Soldier's Pay*, the characters are not real, either. Faulkner's unusual success with Dilsey, Quentin, the mother, Benjy and the other characters in *The Sound and the Fury* depends on his realization and articulation of the life of the family as a whole, and perhaps secondarily on the solidity with which he sets the family into a community, a specific time and place. In that respect, more than in any other single quality, *The Sound and the Fury* resembles Mann's *Buddenbrooks*, and shows a kinship with it.

The question remains of how, in two or three short years, Faulkner was able to make the leap between the romantic materials and themes of *Soldier's Pay* and the mature realism of *The Sound and the Fury*, and the liberation of his genius that followed the writing of this book.

One answer is suggested by Blottner's detailed biography, the process between 1926 and 1928, meticulously recorded by Blottner, of a hard apprenticeship during which Faulkner wrote a great deal, made mistakes, profited from them, taught himself to quote himself, to recast and to make fresh and better use of images, sentences, characters and situations he had used more or less clumsily in his first writings. This account glosses over, however, two other factors which, one can guess, must have been going on at the same time.

The first is that Faulkner, quite obviously, was reading and absorbing the lessons to be learned from his American contemporaries — Fitzgerald, O'Neill, Sherwood Anderson. This shows most obviously in *Soldier's Pay*, where the influences are only partly absorbed — dialogue taken out of contemporary drama, psychological analysis from Anderson's *Many Marriages*. Faulkner's conception of Julian, the immature lieutenant who yearns for Margaret while writing her optimistic love letters and trying to make the fortune which he imagines he must have to win her hand, is clearly based on Fitzgerald and Gatsby — and is, furthermore, a satire of them both, revealing Faulkner's contempt for the complex of materialism-idealism which Fitzgerald admires in Gatsby and partly shares with him but which Faulkner dismisses

as barbaric, comic. He may also have read *The Sun Also Rises*, although, if so, at some point after completing *Soldier's Pay*. He was in any event able to make good use of castration and sexual impotence as fact and symbol in *The Sound and the Fury* and *Sanctuary*, and to use them, as Hemingway had done, as a symbol of the modern condition.

The second factor is that Faulkner was apparently in touch with the best currents of European realism, and, to judge from *The Sound and the Fury*, had been reading and largely profiting from Mann and Joyce. What is more, he seems to have instinctively grasped from his contact with them the presence of a vacuum in American literature that was not being filled by the romantic individualism of Fitzgerald, Anderson and Hemingway, and which Faulkner at this time marked out as a virgin ground for his own efforts.

Richard Chase in *The American Novel and its Tradition* distinguishes between the American tradition of the novel and the European, and points out that the American novel, unlike the European, was not "bound" by "social and psychological realism" and that instead it tended "towards melodrama and idyl; a more or less formulaic abstractness and, on the other hand, a tendency to plunge into the underside of consciousness; a willingness to abandon moral questions or to ignore the spectacle of man in society, or to consider these things only abstractly."³ Chase is apparently thinking of *Moby Dick*, *Huckleberry Finn* and Hawthorne when he writes that, and it is not strictly on target when applied to the American novel after World War I. But it goes far, nevertheless, to describe the situation which existed before Faulkner, and the situation, despite the brilliant social realism of Hemingway and Fitzgerald, before Faulkner wrote *The Sound and the Fury*. It also points to the curiously double nature of Faulkner's connection with the American tradition. On the one hand, no twentieth-century American writer is more given to "extremes of the imagination," the tendency "to idyl and melodrama," "formulaic abstraction" in Chase's sense, and the dark "plunge to the underside of consciousness." These tendencies are all at work in *The Sound and the Fury*, and most of them were taken farther in *Sanctuary*, *As I Lay Dying*, *Absalom, Absalom*, *Light in August* and *The Hamlet*. They mark Faulkner off from Fitzgerald and Hemingway (and even from the more melodramatic Thomas Wolfe), and are clearly connected — as, for instance, in *The Bear*, which is a rewriting of the central myth and story of

Melville's *Moby Dick* — with Faulkner's desire to make use of and to penetrate the nineteenth-century American literary tradition. But on the other hand Faulkner does not avoid psychological and social realism or abandon moral questions or ignore "the spectacle of man in society." The example here that Faulkner had before him was, I believe, Mann. Faulkner's joining of these two traditions, European and American, at that point in the twentieth century is seamlessly realized in *The Sound and the Fury*, and if Faulkner borrowed heavily from Mann in some of his details, the results more than justify the theft.

James SCHROETER.

NOTES

¹ Lowe-Porter translation.

² For a full-length exposition of this reading see James Schroeter, "Faulkner's *Sanctuary*: Between the Indignation and the Surprise," *Études de Lettres*, série IV, March, 1979, pp. 55 - 72.

³ Richard Chase, *The American Novel and Its Tradition* (N.Y., 1957), p. ix.