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The critical reception of William Faulkner's *The Sound and The Fury* across time

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The aim of the present paper is to explore the changes that occurred in the critical reception of Faulkner's The Sound and the Fury, which, after a long period of neglect, by now has become his most widely discussed work among literary critics. I will focus on three, historically and geographically distinct moments in the critical history of the novel: its reception at the time of its first publication in 1929 by the American reading public; American literary criticism written in the 1950's, when more extensive discussions of the work started to appear; and the reception of the novel by the Romanian reading public after 1971, when the Romanian translation was published. Drawing on Hans Robert Jauss's aesthetic of reception (1970, 1982), I seek to answer two questions with regard to the critical reception of the novel. First, I would like to see whether the literary career of The Sound and the Fury follows the trajectory from initial rejection to wide acceptance with increasing aesthetic value, as predicted by Jauss's theory. Second, I am interested in finding out whether those features of the novel that were initially perceived as unfamiliar and incomprehensible were indeed incorporated into the later readers' horizon of expectations, so that they no longer posed problems for later readers.

Keywords: *William Faulkner, "The Sound and the Fury", aesthetic of reception*

1. Introduction

In Hans Robert Jauss's aesthetic of reception, the effects of the reader's reception of a particular literary work are twofold: aesthetic and historical. The aesthetic implication consists in the reader's act of judging the work by comparing it to other literary works s/he has already read. The historical implication is that the literary experience of later readers does not consist in the unchanged recurrence of the experience of early readers, rather the appreciation is constantly enriched through further receptions from generation to generation (1970, 8-9).

By pushing this train of thought a bit further, we can assume that the first readers of a literary work are more prone to misjudge its aesthetic value if it fails to satisfy their expectations shaped by earlier literary experiences. Another

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implication of Jauss's idea would be that the appreciation of a particular work adds up in a cumulative fashion, so that the further it moves in time the more aesthetic value it gains.

Another point made by Jauss is that once the aesthetic distance between reader expectation and literary work starts to shrink, the original negativity of the work fades away, and what was initially perceived as a 'pleasing alienating new perspective' (1982: 25) builds into the reader's horizon of expectations.

The main goal of this paper is to test the relevance of Jauss's hypothesis regarding the reception and acceptance of a literary work of art that apparently

flouts the literary conventions of the time of its first publication. I would like to find out whether it is the case that – as Jauss predicts – subsequent reading communities become more receptive to the innovative aesthetic aspects posed by Faulkner's novel. And, as a corollary to this, I would also like to see if those features of the novel that were initially perceived as unfamiliar and incomprehensible were successfully incorporated into the later readers' horizon of expectations.

In search of answers, I will survey the book reviews, critical works, and comments of three, culturally and historically distinct reader communities, namely: American first readers evaluating the novel upon its first publication, American literary criticism written about the novel after the 1950's, and Romanian literary critics and reviewers expressing their opinion on the Romanian translation of the novel published in 1971.

2. American early reviews

In my attempt to gain general insight into the early American reception of the novel, I relied heavily on a number of works that reproduced either entirely or partially some of the original book reviews. My references mainly go to Thomas M. Inge's William Faulkner: The Contemporary Reviews (1995), Nicholas A. Fargnoli, Michael Golay and Robert W. Hamblin's William Faulkner: A Literary Reference to His Life and Work (2008), O. B. Emerson's Faulkner's Early Literary Reputation in America (1984), as well as to John Bassett's two important books, William Faulkner: An Annotated Checklist of Criticism (1972) and William Faulkner: The Critical Heritage (1975).

Thanks to the works listed above, I could access reviews written between October 1929 (the time of the publication of the novel) and June 1930, published in the following American newspapers, magazines, and periodicals: Providence Sunday Journal, Nation, Philadelphia Record, Cleveland Plain Dealer, Philadelphia Public Ledger, New Orleans Times-Picayune, New York Herald Tribune, Saturday Review of Literature, Southwest Review, Boston Evening Transcript, Outlook and Independent, Hound and Horn, and Philadelphia Inquirer.

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With regard to the main topics of the reviews, two patterns seem to emerge: some of them focus on the local and universal significance of the Compsons' family tragedy, as well as on ethical and moral interpretations, whereas some others raise questions of text intelligibility and reader attitudes and the act of reading. Since the purpose of the present paper is to reveal the changes occurring in reader attitudes over time, I have selected for discussion reviews falling into the latter group.

Clifton Fadiman chose a telling title for his book review: "Hardly Worth While" (1930). He appreciates Faulkner's technique but dismisses the content of the novel: "The theme and the characters are trivial, unworthy of the enormous and complex craftsmanship expended on them" (Inge 1995, 38). The review addresses other questions too, which I regard as important. First, there is the question of intelligibility, a problem raised by many early readers. According to Fadiman, the confusion the novel creates in the reader is symptomatic to the whole contemporary 'revolutionary' trend of novel writing:

> Frequently the intelligent reader can grasp the newer literary anarchies only by an effort of analytical attention so strained that it fatigues and dulls his emotional perception. He is so occupied in being a detective that by the time he has to his own satisfaction clarified the artist's intentions and technique he is too worn out to feel anything further. (Inge 1995, 38)

These words reveal a reading strategy that gives primacy to the analytical level of comprehension over any other levels (e.g. emotional). This strategy seems to be based on the assumption that one has to arrive at a rational understanding first in order to be able to experience emotions. This is an expectation that The Sound and the Fury refuses to satisfy bringing about a lot of criticism from readers who retort to this reading strategy.

Curiously enough, - and this is another equally relevant observation made by the reviewer - it is precisely the unintelligibility of Benjy's monologue that elicits Fadiman's appreciation, the only objection being that it goes on for too long:

> I admit that the idiocy of the thirty-three-year old Benjy is admirably grasped by Mr. Faulkner, but one hundred pages of an imbecile's simplified sense perceptions and monosyllabic gibberings, no matter how accurately recorded, are too much of a good thing. (Inge 1995, 39)

In many reviews the problem of unintelligibility is closely associated with Benjy's section, which is also praised by others for its high artistic value, a thing that sometimes gives rise to contradictory evaluations. Howard Rockey's review entitled "Fiction, Largely European and Very Good in Average" (1929) is a perfect example in this respect: despite the positive title, the writer can hardly conceal his irritation over this 'example of perfection in idiotic expression,' even confessing his

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compelling urge as a reader of Benjy's section: "After reading a few pages the reader feels tempted to apply for admission to the nearest insane asylum" (Fargnoli et al. 292).

In his review "Southern Family Sinks into Dark Mental Decadence" (1929) Harold W. Recht praises Faulkner's performance of genuinely grasping the way Benjy perceives the world around him:

> The first day is presented through the eyes of Benjy, the idiot son, and here, unless I am misled by the novelty of the idea, Mr. Faulkner has done a brilliant piece of writing. No tale heretofore told by an idiot was nearly so sad or so beautiful. (Inge 1995, 34)

However, he accuses the writer of disrespect towards his readers for deliberately driving them into confusion. He objects to Faulkner's careless selection of the kind of information that he wishes to communicate to the reader: his withholding of crucial information on the one hand, and divulgation of unimportant details on the other (Inge 1995, 34-35).

Nevertheless, Recht claims that the merits of the novel richly compensate for such annoying features, and he even considers the possibility of a second reading – a suggestion made by several other reviewers as well: "However, these are minor matters which need not detract from the merit of a novel much above the average, and if they inspire a second reading, so much the better" (Inge 1995, 35).

The idea of multiple reading mentioned by the reviewers and repeated by later critics reveals one of the basic effects of Benjy's section: in an unusual way, once it is read, it is not exhausted as would be the case with more conventional narratives: rather it invites the reader to a second and third reading after s/he has read the whole novel. It leaves a kind of unsatisfied curiosity in the reader, a kind unsettling feeling comparable to that one which might urge one to turn around and look back on something s/he has passed by earlier so that s/he can see it from a different angle and in a different light.

This confusion inviting to a second reading, which is exactly what Ted Robinson remarks in his review "Full of Sound and Fury, Horror Tale Sinks Spurs into Snorting Nightmare" (1929). After stating that he 'was sadly confused' during "the first part of this horrid story" (Inge 1995, 37), he goes on to explain how he would have acted unless prevented by lack of time: "If I had had time I should have gone back and read the first part again, after I finished the book, just to get the chronological order straightened out" (Inge 1995). Robinson even credits Benjy with the performance of successfully conveying his story in spite of all appearances suggesting utter chaos. In doing so, Benjy contradicts the title of the novel since "from the standpoint of plot and atmosphere, this idiot's tale signifies a good deal. The confusion referred to results from the fact that in the idiot's consciousness there

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is no sense of time, and any chance smell, sound, or other physical stimulus will take him back to some past event that impressed him" (Inge 1995).

Admitting that the 'manner' of the novel might prevent many readers from accessing the book, the reviewer concludes that: "I shall credit its author with a large share of that proper proportion that constitutes what we call genius" (Inge 1995).

As opposed to this, in a review entitled *Two Aspects of Telemachus* (1930), Dudley Fitt points out the style as the main strength and attraction of the book: "It is the study of Mr. Faulkner's style, the consideration of the book as a rhetorical exercise, as a declamation, that repays the reader," specifying that "Joyce is the ultimate source" (Fargnoli et al. 292).

However, not all critics find the confusion created by Benjy's narrative so inspiring. In his review entitled 'Of Making Many Books' (1929), Walter Yust voices his discontentment about some 'tricks' played by Faulkner at the expense of the reader, such as the confusion created by the use of the same proper name for different persons (see also Harold W. Recht's objection, already discussed): "he descends to the rather unforgiveable trick, or so it seems to me, of delaying the identification of personalities. (It's a tossup, for the greater part, which of two Quentins you are reading about, or which Jason, and whether Quentin is a girl or a boy.)" (Inge 1995, 35). Yust, too, considers that the technique used by Faulkner creates too much confusion, and in this way he is unfair on the reader (Inge 1995, 35-36).

He identifies Benjy as the culprit with whom everything goes wrong right at the beginning of the novel, and as a final argument he questions the plausibility of the character: "The impress on the idiot's mind starts the confusion. I can't say that Mr. Faulkner has actually given us an idiot's mind; the matter's sort of hit and miss; who knows, anyway, what a deaf-mute idiot sees?" (Inge 1995, 36).

In her review *Literature and Less* (1930), Julia K.W. Baker hails the dream-like inconsistency of the novel as an improved version of James Joyce's stream of consciousness technique: "But the style and method of approach – fluid and fragmentary and inconsequent as dream – represent something new in the world of letters that James Joyce more than any other one person brought into it" (Inge 1995, 39).

In opposition to the analytical reading strategy proposed by Fadiman which the novel refuses to comply with, Baker thinks that the text requires a more delicate approach in order to be comprehended, and that it is likely to necessitate subsequent readings: "No doubt two careful readings are necessary merely to clarify the simple outline of the history" (Inge 1995).

With regard to Benjy's confused narrative blamed by so many reviewers, Baker claims that it is a designed confusion compatible with the content, which completely fulfils its role of initiating the reader into the events and the story (ibid.).

Abbot Martin's review 'Faulkner's Difficult Novel Has Sin and Decay as Theme' (1929) is relevant to this discussion for two main reasons. First, the author confesses in it that the reading of Benjy's section made a great impression on him:

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"Never had I adequately known the meaning of pathos until I read the first part of this book' in which 'an idiot utters with simplicity and pathos and beauty its imperfect understanding of the life that goes on about it" (Inge 1995, 84). Second, he addresses the reader directly, suggesting the best way to read this book is to surrender oneself entirely to it (Inge 1995). The strategy of reading proposed by him is very different from the one employed by Clifton Fadiman discussed above. While Fadiman's rational approach to the text resulted in fatigue and frustration, a more relaxed, trustful approach could bring about genuine pleasure.

Apparently, Faulkner's text requires a special kind of reading, which differs from that of reading more conventional literary works. Readers who are less predisposed to tolerate ambiguity and feel secure only if they can rationally understand and follow the plot are more likely to become frustrated and stop reading. In a later review, Abbot Martin does not predict a hopeful future for the novel in terms of popularity, but he considers that it is imbued with Greek tragedy and beauty despite its dealing with such depressing topics as madness, poverty, and decay (Emerson 1984, 7).

3. After the 1950's

There was a major revival of interest in the novel in 1946, when Malcolm Cowley's edition of The Portable Faulkner was published supplemented with an Appendix written by Faulkner meant to place the novel in a larger historical context extending from 1699 to 1945. As little substantial criticism had been written on The Sound and the Fury before this moment, many critics made the mistake of "reading the appendix more closely than the novel" (Meriwether 1970, 28).

After Faulkner was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1950, the occasions for making comments on his own work multiplied. Questions about The Sound and the Fury were raised during interviews, classroom discussions and visits, his answers being recorded and published in several volumes.[2] Two drafts of an introduction written by Faulkner for an imminent republishing of the novel in 1933 were posthumously printed. All these statements and materials were later used by critics in their interpretations as authentic 'raw material' holding equal status with the novel itself, tending even to surpass it in importance. As Burton Stacy puts it: 'This practice has been so common that most of the best-known phrases and lines of interpretation in The Sound and the Fury criticism come from Faulkner's retrospective comments rather than from the text itself' (2001, 607).

[2] For his statements during his 1955 visit in Japan see Jelliffe, Robert A. (1956): *Faulkner at Nagano*, his discussions at the University of Virginia in Gwynn, Frederick L. and Blotner, Joseph L. (1959): *Faulkner in the University*, a collection of interviews are published in Meriwether, James B. (1968): *Lion in the Garden: Interviews with William Faulkner* 1926-1962.

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In his article entitled *Faulkner: Technique of The Sound and the Fury*, Lawrence Edward Bowling examines the techniques used by Faulkner in the four parts of the novel (1948, 552-66). He approaches the novel from the perspective of the first reader, and finds that based on the use of the first-person narrative and the use of the past tense, the reader might assume after reading the first pages of the novel that s/he is reading an "ordinary, first-person, objective rendering of a past experience" (Bowling 1948, 553). Then, the italicized passages force him/ her to reconsider his/ her previous assumption, and after successfully figuring out the relationship between the different passages s/he realizes that what s/he was reading in the first pages was not the rendering of a past event, but – despite the use of the past tense – the stream of consciousness rendering of a present event (Bowling 1948, 554).

The reader is left to comprehend the associative stimuli (such as nails, carriage, etc.) that make Benjy's mind capriciously jump from present to past and back again. The difficulties posed by the scrambled chronology are further aggravated by the varying length of the passages that are often not long enough for the reader to identify the time period they belong to. Bowling interprets Faulkner's use of this technique as a gesture telling the readers: "Here's an idiot; it's you and him for it" (Bowling 1948, 556) and leaving them on their own. But Benjy is not of much help for the reader, and "his section of the book is probably the most thorough-going sustained effort in impressionistic writing in all literature" (Bowling 1948). Reacting to Malcolm Cowley's earlier objection to Benjy as the first narrator, Bowling defends him arguing that the childhood memories must naturally be presented in the first part of the novel, and – even more importantly – Benjy's discourse "is the whole novel in miniature" (Bowling 1948, 564) since the childhood images presented in it foreshadow precisely the children's destiny.

In *The Sound and the Fury: A Study in Perspective*, Olga Vickery considers "that the novel was conceived in such a way that the reader is required to take responsibility over the meaning: by fixing the structure while leaving the central situation ambiguous, Faulkner forces the reader to reconstruct the story and to apprehend its significance for himself" (Vickery 1954, 1018). Vickery claims that the subject matter is strongly linked to the four narratives, the theme of the novel being "the relation between the act and man's apprehension of the act, between the event and the interpretation" (Vickery 1954, 1018). She discerns a pattern emerging from the four narratives that gradually leads the reader from the private world displayed in Benjy's part to the public world presented in the last section (Vickery 1954).

Throughout the first section, Faulkner uses several devices that serve "as the author's guide for enabling the reader to grasp the fragments as a comprehensible order" (Vickery 1954, 1020). Such a device is, for instance, the use of italics for signaling shifts in time, or Faulkner's precaution to leave the chronology of the most significant scenes intact. The sequence of events, for instance, stretching from the branch-scene to Caddy's climbing the pear-tree is interrupted by other passages but its parts are not themselves dislocated, so that the reader can easily follow the

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sequence of events. Vickery observes that the repetitions and the identifying sensations occurring in Benjy's narrative serve a double purpose:

> With consummate skill the repetitions and identifying sensations which are used to guide the reader are also used as the basis of Benjy's own ordering of experience. Benjy's mind works not by association which is dependent, to some extent, on an ability to discriminate as well as compare but by mechanical identification. (Vickery 1954, 1022)

Benjy's mechanical way of thinking is also demonstrated by his "inflexible identification of one word with one object" (Vickery 1954, 1023).

During the 1960s the critics' interest in Benjy's section was unremitting. Whole books dedicated to Faulkner's novel-writing techniques largely discussed his performance as the author of The Sound and the Fury, and more particularly as the writer of Benjy's section. Critics like Peter Swiggart, Lawrence Thompson, or Olga W. Vickery considered the first section of the novel as an exceptional writerly performance.

The circle of critics who regarded Benjy's section as a literary text of the highest quality gradually became larger. In *The Art of Faulkner's Novels*, Peter Swiggart considers the rendering of dialogues through the mind of a narrator as the most effective way of characterization where Faulkner's narrative genius reaches its peak (1962, 87). He observes that Faulkner never presents the characters' thoughts; he confines himself to showing us the events and situations which are reflected upon, and "yet the sympathetic reader is encouraged to interpret the physical details as tantamount to psychological revelation. In many cases the impression of stream of consciousness is supported by the reader's willingness to attach psychological importance, as in Benjy's monologue, to whatever seems deliberately obscure" (Swiggart 1962, 79).

In his discussion about the collaborative act of reading required by Faulkner's novels, Lawrence Thompson supplies further details to our understanding of the way Faulkner's narrative works. By choosing a child-narrator capable of perception but not of comprehension, the author manages to both keep up the reader's interest in an elusive story and to appeal to his/ her emotional sensibility (Thompson 1963, 29).

Benjy's impressionistic associations of different past and present images and events provide the reader with a series of effects without specifying their causes: "As a result, the reader's own associational responses are stimulated to imagine various possible causes. Thus, invited to collaborate, the reader needs and wants certain narrative facts, not given in Benjy's soliloquy, about Caddy" (Thompson 1963, 32). While by withholding crucial narrative information, Benjy keeps the reader's intellect active and alert, the recurrence of "life-encouraging images, such as rain, sunlight, the color of blood, and the warmth of the fire" (Thompson 1963, 133) appeal to the instincts and to the unconscious. In this way, the story narrated by

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Benjy fulfills both criteria on which – according to Thompson – the ultimate value of an artistic narrative depends: the story both holds the reader's attention and emotionally moves him/ her (Thompson 1963, 4).

By qualifying the Benjy section "the hard nucleus of the novel" (1975, 160), Irving Howe makes the same observation as Bowling before about the major significance Benjy's discourse has within the novel. Howe also defends Benjy's role as the first narrator arguing that Faulkner needed somebody who survived long enough to tell the Compson story, and out of all the characters Benjy was the only one able to retain the past in a form unaffected by selfish considerations (Howe 1975, 158). Howe's high appreciation of Benjy's section is shown by the fact that more than half of his discussion of The Sound and the Fury is dedicated to Benjy alone.

Howe's concern with the reader is revealed on several occasions. Right at the beginning of the study he raises the question whether an "unprepared" reader can approach the novel successfully: "The Benjy section, one of the few original efforts at experimental writing ever undertaken in America, places some formidable barriers in the way of the unprepared reader" (Howe 1975, 157). Unfortunately, he does not go on to discuss what an adequate preparation for reading this difficult novel would consist in, but several pages later he addresses the problem of the reader again saying that "the Benjy section forces the reader to participate in the novel, to become, as it were, a surreptitious narrator; otherwise he cannot read it at all" (Howe 1975, 160). From this we can infer that Howe does not actually have in mind the readers' preparation before the reading activity; what he means is a change of attitude on the reader's part: s/he is required to turn from a passive observer into an active participant in the process of meaning construction. Parallel with the reading process, the reader is composing a conventional narrative which "accompanies, registers, but finally submits to the narrative of the book" (Howe 1975).

From a reader-response point of view, Benjy's section serves as a proving ground, where the reader is invited to figure out an effective reading strategy for himself/ herself. As Howe puts it, "The bewilderment, produced by Benjy's flow of memory, sharpens one's responses, teaches one to look for clues, parallels and anticipations" (Howe 1975) In this way, the reader comes to realize the importance of such details as names, places, feelings, sensations, and images, clues that are indispensable for achieving a certain degree of coherence.

Howe appraises Faulkner's self-effacing and disciplined style, which is so controlled throughout the first section that for not a single moment does Benjy "show himself coyly aware of his role" (Howe 1975, 161) – an error that would shatter the reader's illusion of being inside of a primitive mind. Apart from the successfully sustained primitive style, juxtaposition is another extremely effective method used by Faulkner in Benjy's section. By juxtaposing present and past events that mutually shed light on each other, the author subtly induces the emergence of significances that "suggest more than they say" (Coindreau in Reeves 1971, 44). The

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role of the author ends at the point of juxtaposing the events – the inference to be drawn is the reader's responsibility.

4. Romanian reception

The circumstances of the reception of the novel by the Romanian public were completely different from those of the early reception which took place in a critical vacuum. First, the time lag between the original publication (1929) and the Romanian translation (1971) was more than four decades – therefore long enough for the aesthetic distance between the readers' horizon of expectations and the aesthetic novelties represented by the novel to diminish significantly. Besides, the readers and the literary critics had to do with an already acclaimed novelist, a Nobel Prize winner, whose works had become the subject of a consistent amount of literary criticism.

In order to gain insight into the Romanian reception of the novel, I surveyed the 1971 editions of the following periodicals and magazines: *Amfiteatru*, *Convorbiri literare, România literară, Steaua*, *Viața românească*, and various issues of *Cronica*, *Revista bibliotecilor*, *Ramuri*, and *Secolul 20*, looking for book reviews and articles about Faulkner. I also looked for essays and studies on Faulkner's novels, especially those on The Sound and the Fury, in collections and volumes, prefaces and postfaces in more recent editions written and edited by Romanian literary scholars.

Shortly after having translated Benjy's part of *The Sound and the Fury*[3], Mircea Ivănescu published a study entitled *Dostoievski și Faulkner* [*Dostoevsky and Faulkner*] (1969). Noticing that Dostoevsky's most noble characters are proclaimed idiots, he points out that Benjy's suffering becomes a "genuine poetry" through the acuteness of sensations that are displayed (Ivănescu 1969, 209). He refers to Benjy as a "congenital deaf mute", and motivates the unusual punctuation of the section by Faulkner's intention to suggest how the narrator's mental limitation disqualifies him from any kind of interpretative activity other than "simple reproduction of sounds" (Ivănescu 1969, 212). Ivănescu considers it important to warn the readers that there are two Quentins and two Jasons in this part of the novel.

In his review on the translated novel, Aureliu Goci describes Benjy as "decrepit", "incapable to discern the importance and the tension of the events" his narrative appears to be "chaotic at first sight" (Goci 1971, 2). However, as a compensation for his lack of verbal expression, he possesses "an exceptional

[3] It must have been a rather strenuous work judging by the nickname he and Andrei Brezianu gave to the novel at the time: "Zbieretul și ochiul roșu" [The bellow and the red eye] – as Ivănescu confessed later on it in an interview. (http://www.observatorcultural.ro/articol/nu-stiam-niciodata-ce-se-va-produce-in-poezie/)

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acuteness of perception" (Goci 1971). The reviewer appreciates Faulkner's refusal to analyze, his method of introducing his characters through their behavior, as well as the way in which identities and consciousnesses overlap.

Virgil Stanciu also emphasizes that the book is "chaotic at first sight, fragmentary, and deliberately labyrinthic", but defends Faulkner's technique by arguing that it only reflects the unselective character of life itself (Stanciu 1971, 33). He appreciates Faulkner's technical performance, which – he admits – sometimes leads to "obscure meanings if one does not read very carefully" (Stanciu 1971, 33).

Valeriu Cristea focuses on the way consciousness is represented in the novel, for – he states – "Faulkner does not operate with characters any more, but rather with consciousness" (1971, 13). In doing so, he draws attention to the old epistemological problem that humans have faced, namely that consciousness is always interposed between the observer and the events. As Cristea aptly notices, "it is curious how hard it is for us to adapt ourselves to our own mode of contemplating the world when it is transposed into literature" (Cristea 1971). For this reason, he easily predicts that "the common reader of novels will certainly be confused by *The Sound and the Fury*" (Cristea 1971).

The observations made by Virgil Stanciu and Valeriu Cristea point to a fundamental conflict inherent in our human condition. This conflict exists between our predisposition both as human beings and as readers to rationalize everything by trying to smooth every event of our own lives or the lives of literary characters into a comforting and reassuring narrative on the one hand, and the challenges of life coming in the form of unpredictable twists and turns that work against our constant effort to rationalize on the other.

The 100th anniversary of William Faulkner's birth was commemorated in Romania by a new edition of the Romanian translation of The Sound and the Fury to which Ștefan Stoenescu's thought provoking postface *Dincolo de patimă și mînie* [*Beyond passion and fury*] is added. Stoenescu appreciates the unusual narrative technique used by Faulkner in *The Sound and the Fury* as an authorial strategy used by modernist writers meant to discourage unprepared readers and to select the experienced ones "capable of constructing a plausible interpretation on their own from the disparate and dispersed data offered to them" (Stoenescu 1997).

Four decades after Sorin Alexandrescu's monograph published in 1969, Mircea Mihăieș published a new one in 2012 entitled *Ce rămâne. William Faulkner și misterele ținutului Yoknapatawpha* [*What is left: William Faulkner and the mysteries of Yoknapatawpha county*].

The reader's plight is largely discussed by Mihăieș. He sees Faulkner's act of assuming the failure of an unsuccessful narrative as a gesture meant to "soothe the stupefaction of the unsuspecting reader, adherent of classical narratives and fluent plotlines" (Mihăieș 2012, 467). Mihăieș (2012) considers that Benjy's part poses most problems for the reader. The problems are not caused by the scrambled chronology, but reside in the narrator's mind: the reader's confusion is generated by

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his/her being thrown into 'the autistic world' of a narrator with an atrophied body, whose only intact organs are his eyes, described as "cold, incapable of discrimination" (Mihăieș 2012) "the impersonal eye of this human camera" (Mihăieș 2012, 473).

Unlike many other critics, Mihăieș does not think that Benjy's language is a faithful reflection of his way of perceiving the world. He insists that Faulkner's characters are literary conventions, and Benjy is an idiot for the simple reason that we are told so, but "his text is not that of an idiot's" (Mihăieș 2012, 474). If "the subjective slippages from one sentence to another" are not taken into consideration, "the text itself does not bear the mark of idiocy" (Mihăieș 2012).

In the view of Mihăieș, Benjy's part is the most obscure of all, but at the same time it is the most suggestive not because it is the first narrative of the novel, but because it is the most elliptical, "a masterpiece of minimalism" (Mihăieș 2012, 476).

5. Conclusions

The reception of *The Sound and the Fury* in our country was significantly smoother than in the United States. By the time it appeared in Romanian, Faulkner was a Nobel Prize winner, and the novel had earned its place in the literary canon. None of the critical works that I have consulted objects to the fragmentariness of Benjy's section, which caused so much irritation with American early readers. But all the critics anticipate the problems looming over the reader, and they try to dissipate them by explaining the aesthetic effects of Faulkner's technique - some of them even give clues beforehand to ease the reader's task.

I would like to conclude this paper by turning back to the questions formulated in the introduction:

Has the literary trajectory of *The Sound and the Fury* followed the stages in Jauss's reception theory, i.e. from initial rejection to wide aesthetic acceptance by specialized readers? According to the survey presented above, this seems to have been the case. While at the time of its publication many reviewers and critics contested the artistic value of *The Sound and the Fury*, the appreciative voices became much more numerous with the passing of time. However, I have to add, my research does not confirm the claim made by some critics that it once was a unanimously rejected work. There were literary voices which recognized from the very beginning the fingerprints of a genius on it.

As for the second question, on whether the fragmentariness of Benjy's section has been incorporated in the horizon of expectations of later ('common') readers, so as not to pose reading problems anymore, the answer is more ambivalent. If we look at the critics' response, it seems to be a mainly positive one. But their constant preoccupation with the common reader's reading experience, their anticipation of possible problems and their attempt to offer clues beforehand show that they

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consider the text to remain difficult to access for many readers. Such features of the narrative – mainly associated with the first section of the novel narrated by the mentally disabled Benjy – as fragmentariness, and withholding crucial information, which triggered irritation and puzzlement in many early readers, were later considered to be narrative techniques deliberately used by the author with the aim of involving the reader in the act of meaning construction. However, as the receptions of the Romanian translation of the novel shows, the unease generated by the novel in literary critics persists in the form of constant concern with the reader. We can conclude by saying, that in the history of reception of *The Sound and the Fury*, the incomprehension and frustration experienced by early readers gave way to rationalization in the 1950's, and later evolved into a preoccupation with the unsuspecting reader's literary reading experience.

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