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Man Fearing the “Feminine in Man”: An Examination of *The Sound and the Fury* and *Going After Cacciato*

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Introduction

In the 1960's and 1970's, multi-culturalism became a buzz word in American academics, and the voices complaining that the American literary canon was overrepresented by “dead white males” became louder and clearer. One result was the creation of *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*, which tried to respond to such questions as “where are the minorities?” and “where are the women?” (Lauter and Leveen). The people behind the development of the Heath Anthology deserve praise for their efforts to make the voices of as many different types of writers as possible available to students of American literature.

At the same time, it is important to note that many of the white males who had found relatively secure places in the “old” canon believed, themselves, that American culture could gain from some degree of feminization. At the end of *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne has his heroine, Hester Prynne, declare her hope—and assumedly *his*—that the patriarchal Puritan society would one day give way to a society more balanced in masculine and feminine traits, that “a new truth would be revealed, in order to establish the whole relation between man and woman on a surer ground of mutual happiness” (SL 227). In *Billy Budd*, Melville lets us know that the tragic execution of the “handsome” sailor is the result of the male military world refusing to listen to “the feminine in man” (BB 362). As *Moby Dick* races towards its catastrophic conclusion, Melville contrasts the “murderous thinkings of the *masculine* sea” with “the gentle thoughts of

the *feminine* air” (*MD* 542, my italics), and he allows the vengeful Ahab a moment to reflect that had he left room in his life for the feminine, it might not have been such a “desolution of solitude” (*MD* 543). It is no accident, then, that when the *Pequod* goes down, Ishmael survives by hoisting himself atop Queequeg’s floating coffin. Ishmael had, after all, recognized the feminine in himself, had allowed himself, in the Spouter Inn, to be enveloped in Queequeg’s “bridesgroom clasp” (*MD* 26).

In the 20th century, two highly acclaimed, male-written novels which focus on the need for the “feminine in man” are William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) and Tim O’Brien’s *Going after Cacciato* (1979). One novel portrays the dissolution of an aristocratic family in Mississippi, the other the horrors facing the foot soldier in the Vietnam War, but both share a similar pattern of development: In both novels, severely traumatized male characters are unable, on their own, to realize that recognizing the feminine in themselves is the “treatment” they need to heal themselves; they are given, however, chances to awaken to that possibility through their relationships with “idiots”—mentally challenged, child-like characters—who show great affection for the key female figure or literally guide the traumatized males toward that key female figure; in the end, in both novels, the male-dominated world rejects the key female figure and all she stands for, leaving itself in moral confusion; the contrasts drawn between the perceptions of the “innocent” and “natural” idiots and those of the other male characters emphasize how warped the thinking of those other male characters has become—and how tragic their choices are.

In this paper, I attempt a detailed explanation of the above-mentioned pattern, in both *The Sound and the Fury* and *Going After Cacciato*—in an attempt to call attention to how concerned these two novels—and hence their authors—were with the tragic lack of the “feminine in man” in the male-dominated worlds of which they wrote—and thus how largely Faulkner and O’Brien contribute to the tradition in American literature of male writers dealing with this theme.

1. Traumatized Males

In *Going After Cacciato*, Paul Berlin has hoped to follow up his father's brave and meaningful soldiering in World War II with some brave and meaningful soldiering of his own in Vietnam, but the dubious purpose in Vietnam, the inability to sense an actual enemy, the random killing, and his squad's murder of its lieutenant leave him traumatized and morally confused. The novel, as Heberle puts it, centers on Berlin's attempt "to deal with the traumatic facts of his war by dreaming of a scenario that will allow him to escape it" (108).

The three Compson brothers, in *The Sound and the Fury*, are also trauma victims. The source of all three brothers' trauma is their sister Caddy. Quentin, the idealist, clings to an unrealistic code of honor that insists a brother must protect his sister's virginity at all cost. Caddy's promiscuity is a horrible affront to everything he believes in. Jason, the materialist, is traumatized by the loss of what he considers his best chance at a respectable job. Caddy's newly-wed husband, Herbert Head, rescinds his offer to Jason of a position in a bank when he learns that Caddy is pregnant with another man's baby. Jason, mean-spirited since childhood, spends the next eighteen years blinded by a raging self-pity, unable to see his sister and niece as anything but bitches. His trauma renders him incapable of love. His only relationship with a woman is with a Memphis prostitute. Finally, Benjy is traumatized by, very simply, the loss of Caddy's physical presence. He moans in anguish at any sensation that awakens a memory of her. Quentin's and Jason's traumas, though related to Caddy, are in fact self-inflicted—brought on by the two brothers' unnatural perspectives on women and life. Benjy's trauma, on the other hand, elicits sympathy, for it results from an overwhelming loss about which he can do nothing.

2. The Idiot as Guide

"The mind at war with itself wants to be healed," Griffin writes in *Pornography and Silence* (98-99), "but still clings to the old damaged way

of being.” This statement certainly applies to the traumatized males mentioned above, and by extension, the male worlds they represent—the squad in *GAC*, and the crumbling, patriarchal South in *SF*. If the men in these novels were better communicators, perhaps they could find ways to overcome their trauma, but their male-dominated worlds discourage communication. In *GAC*, soldiers newly deployed to Vietnam cram into bleachers to hear a lecture. A corporal sits down before them, turns his head away from them—and is silent for a full hour. “All right,” he then says. “That completes your first lecture on how to survive this shit. I hope you paid attention” (*GAC* 37). Oscar, the most “masculine” of Berlin’s squad members, consistently shows his disdain for discussion: “Spit on speeches,” he says (*GAC* 34). In *SF*, Quentin and Jason are both linguistically gifted, but they are both consumed with their own voices and philosophies; neither is capable of listening to any perspective that threatens the world order they have grown comfortable suffering in.

Who, then, can lead these traumatized males to possible paths of healing? In both novels, it is a child-like idiot—Cacciato in *GAC*, and Benjy in *SF*. Unable to ponder abstractions and moral complication or to evaluate complicated experience, they remain more closely in tune with nature than the men surrounding them. Such innocence enables them to sense a path to healing. As Mellard points out in his analysis of Benjy, “[T]he child-idiot is thought to have what Empson refers to as ‘the right relation to Nature’” (235).¹ The child-idiot’s instinctive judgments indicate, Mellard argues—borrowing wording from Kermode—“how much baser the corruption of the civilized can be than the bestiality of the natural” (243).²

Traumatized and incapable of discovering a respectable course of action, Paul Berlin is suddenly confronted with the fact that a fellow squad member, Cacciato, has, on his own initiative, “left the war” (*GAC* 2). Cacciato tells Berlin that he has decided to walk to Paris—and disappears.

¹ William Empson’s phrase, “the right relation with Nature,” quoted by Mellard, comes from *Some Versions of Pastoral*, New Directions (New York, 1974), 261.

² The Frank Kermode passage quoted by Mellard comes from “Introduction” to *The Tempest*, ed. Frank Kermode, Arden Shakespeare Paperbacks (New York, 1964), p. xxiv.

It is unfair to characterize Cacciato, literally, as an idiot, but for the most part, that is how the squad members think of him: he is “[d]umb as a month-old oyster fart”; he is “just awful dumb”; he “missed Mongolian idiocy by the breadth of a genetic hair”; he is “dumber than marbles” (*GAC* 2, 5, 8, 10). O’Brien, though, is careful to emphasize Cacciato’s child-like innocence, his uncorrupted state, as much as his mental weakness: he is “curiously unfinished,” “[o]pen-faced and naïve” with “boyish simplicity”; he lacks “the fine detail, the refinements and final touches that maturity ordinarily marks on a boy of seventeen years”; he is a “child-faced soldier” with “a child’s voice,” a “big blue baby” (*GAC* 8, 212).

At first, Berlin tries to convince himself that Cacciato’s plan to walk to Paris is ridiculous—and even imagines that Cacciato’s stupidity is worthy of death:

Paul Berlin was suddenly struck between the eyes by a vision of murder. Butchery, no less: Cacciato’s right temple caved inward, silence, then an enormous explosion outward-going brains. [. . .] No one gets away with stupidity forever. Not in a war. (*GAC* 14)

Gradually, though, Berlin comes to wonder if perhaps Cacciato, as dumb he may be, has not intuited some possibility that offers hope for him as well. He is haunted by the fact that when the squad schemed to murder Lieutenant Martin, only Cacciato refused to touch the grenade and give his blessing to the affair. Soon, Berlin is speculating on “how Cacciato might lead them through the steep country, beyond the mountains, deeper, and how in the end they might reach Paris.” It brings a smile to his face, and before long, he is believing that “it could truly be done” (*GAC* 48). By the time he first meets Sarkin Aung Wan, the female refugee, he is stating confidently, “Cacciato. He’s our guide” (*GAC* 60).

Benjy’s role in *SF* is slightly different from that of Cacciato’s. We first hear Benjy moaning his anguish in the year 1928 (in the very first pages of the novel), long after Caddy has been disowned by the Compsons and long after (in the history of the Compsons) Quentin has committed suicide.

In 1928, Jason is still raging, but we feel his lifelong anger and bitterness are inalterable. Thus, Benjy's wailing becomes a novel-long chorus to a tragedy—a lament to missed opportunity, a bellowing that rips into the hearts of readers, enabling them to feel the needless heartache and hurt that wasted lives such as Quentin's and Jason's cause. Through their childhood, Quentin and Jason have had unlimited opportunity to see the attributes in their sister that bring such comfort to Benjy—to see what it is that Benjy, in “the right relation to Nature,” can see—but they have failed to follow his “lead”—failed to comprehend that more of Caddy's feminine self in all of them would do the Compson family a world of good. In the end, then, Benjy does not become the guide for Quentin and Jason that Cacciato does for Berlin and his squad—but he does become a guide for readers: his wailing draws their attention to the huge significance of a sister lost; it “leads” them to an appreciation of all that the lost sister embodies.

3. The Feminine as Presented in the Two Novels

It is not my purpose in this article to define, outside the world of these two novels, what is meant by the word *feminine*, but only to identify what it signifies *inside* them, what it meant for Faulkner and O'Brien as they wrote, what characteristics the female characters display that the majority of the male ones do not.

Without question, both novels portray worlds that are hostile to women. In *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, O'Brien clues us in to the mentality soldiers in training are encouraged to develop: “There is nothing named love in the world. Women are dinks. Women are villains” (52). *Dinks* was, during the Vietnam War, a disparaging term for North Vietnamese soldiers; the well-trained soldier in *Combat*, then, was to consider women—a symbol of love—to be the same as the enemy. When Berlin first imagines Sarkin joining the squad on its imaginary journey to Paris, he is met with stiff resistance from his squad, and for the time being he accepts its opinion that “it was no place for women” (GAC 59). *It* refers to both the war itself and the imaginary journey. There just is not room, Berlin is saying at this point, for a woman's perspective on his troubles. And of course, Caddy,

in *SF*, is disowned by the Compsons and forced to live in what amounts to exile; afterwards, her name is not allowed to be spoken. Afterwards, Jason, the *de facto* head of the Compson household constantly insists that women are nothing but bitches.

What then are the key attributes of the central female characters—Sarkin and Caddy—in these two novels? Perhaps the two most important ones are 1) a sincere desire to interconnect with others, to communicate with others,—including a willingness to *listen* to others and to help others find their voices; and 2) an innate belief in the power of touch to soothe human beings, a natural tendency to cherish and share “softness.” Of course, these two attributes are, in a sense, just one.

The only one of the Compsons who tries to engage Benjy in communication, indeed the only one of the Compsons to recognize him as a human being with human needs, is Caddy—one sister among three brothers. As Wagner writes, she serves Benjy as a “creator and conveyor of language” (50). “With her *words* and *touch*,” as Gwinn puts it, “she dissolves the boundaries between herself and Benjy” (44). She does what she can to help him acquire language, as when Benjy tries to make sense of a piece of ice: “‘It’s froze,’ Caddy said. ‘Look.’ She broke the top of the water and held a piece of it against my face. ‘Ice. That means how cold it is’” (*SF* 9). She encourages Benjy to communicate: “‘What is it, Benjy,’ Caddy said. ‘Tell Caddy. She’ll do it. Try’” (*SF* 26). She knows he deserves more than distanced pity: “‘You’re not a poor baby. Are you. Are you. You’ve got your Caddy. Haven’t you got your Caddy’” (*SF* 6). She realizes that Benjy, like everyone, needs warm, physical human contact. Again and again, we see her holding his hand, wrapping her arms around him, carrying him. As far as Benjy’s moaning goes, Caddy knows, that all you have to do is hold him, and it will stop (*SF* 41). She gives him a cushion to hold, knowing that if she cannot always be with him, something soft will bring him comfort. In all, Benjy feels, in her presence, love—though he is incapable of saying that that is what it is. Thus, whenever he feels her loss, he can do nothing but wail.

In *GAC*, Sarkin is a tremendous healer. For Lieutenant Corson, she

is “[l]ike a daughter caring for an ailing father. [. . . S]he encouraged him to eat and exercise, coddled him, scolded him, gently coaxed him into showing concern for his own welfare and that of his men” (GAC 256). She plays a similar role for the “ailing” Paul Berlin, using gentle touch and a giving, encouraging style of communication to help him overcome his trauma and understand that a life in Paris—along with the peace, harmony, domesticity and love it represents—is what he truly needs.

She is, of course, a mere product of his imagination. He invents her because he knows, inside, that he needs guidance from his “feminine” side. When the squad falls through “The Hole on the Road to Paris” and into a confusing maze of tunnels, it is Sarkin that Berlin’s imagination has guided them out, and no sooner does she than Berlin finds himself alone with her in a Mandalay hotel room—where he is overwhelmed by the softness she embodies.

The room was warm and the bed was soft. He couldn’t get over it—*the softness of things*. He squirmed. She was holding the big toe of his left foot, pinching it to raise the nail, locking in the clippers, then—snap, snap. Her damp hair felt like seaweed on his legs. *Everything so soft*. (GAC 114, my italics)

Begrimed with the battlefield, Berlin is literally untouchable—but Sarkin chips away at his coat of “caked filth,” “chipping away at the war” (GAC 115). She rubs him down with alcohol. She bathes him. She also dreams of opening a beautician’s parlor in Paris—of providing “skin care,” and it is when she talks of such that Berlin most likes to touch *her*, that her touch is most healing.

[. . .] and it was then that he most liked to touch her. To put his hand on her calf and rub it to feel the smoothness of the skin and the short bristles of black hair at the spots she’d missed shaving. He liked putting the creams on her. All sorts of creams, a whole sack of them: “This one, it replenishes the facial oils,” she’d say, and then she would

explain how, after replenishing the oils, it helped close the pores to keep out bacteria. Then she'd laugh and dab some on his nose, and rub it in, and rub more onto his chin and throat and chest and stomach, asking if he felt replenished, and he would say, yes, he felt greatly replenished. (*GAC* 170)

Sarkin's caressing conversation style—asking him questions, encouraging *him* to participate in dialogue—convinces him, at least temporarily, that true duty to country and friends does not include senseless killing, that the only truly meaningful life to be lived is one full of loving and caring. Sarkin's style of communication is in direct contrast to Oscar's, who takes on a more domineering role in the squad as *GAC* nears its conclusion. Oscar's speech is composed primarily of orders and is thick with intimidation. He cannot afford even "ten seconds" for discussion—what he calls "bullshit" (*GAC* 306). While his language threatens, hers nurtures. His language is ugly; hers is as soft and replenishing as the oils she rubs into Berlin's skin.

4. Rejection of the Feminine

At the end of *GAC*, the male world rejects the feminine, though only in Berlin's imagination. As Tal argues, "Berlin's relationship with [Sarkin has been] an analogy for his relationship with himself—his own masculine and feminine parts" (77). As the novel winds down, Berlin finds himself more and more influenced by Oscar. He can no longer imagine himself in a happy domestic conversation with Sarkin. He can only imagine the two of them as adversaries in impossible negotiations: They sit on opposite sides of a "giant table" (*GAC* 317). They need microphones and headsets to hear each other. Before, Berlin could imagine the two of them chatting in English; now Sarkin needs a translator to make herself understood. All intimacy has been shattered. They no longer converse, but merely state positions untenable to the other. Sarkin speaks for taking bold steps to create peace and happiness; Berlin, a victim of inertia, speaks for "duty," which ultimately means sticking with the guys. And then the two of them

leave by separate exits.

Sarkin does not reappear in Berlin's imagination. In the end, then, Berlin chooses loyalty to his male squad members over the feminine; and in doing so, he condemns himself to participating in a war he hates. Bates has written of O'Brien's work that it implies "that the survival of the human race depends on a feminization of the dominant male character" (44); this certainly is true of *GAC*. As Tal writes, "The division between men and women in this novel is unbreachable, and it is the male half which must triumph, even though that triumph will bring about the destruction of men and women alike" (78).

In the opening scene of *SF*, Luster and Benjy walk along the Compson fence, watching the men on the other side play golf. When one of the men yells out, "Here, caddie," Benjy is reminded of his lost sister, Caddy, and begins to wail. From the very first page of the novel, then, Caddy and the feminine qualities she embodies seem irretrievably lost, and, as I've said, the novel becomes a book-length lament to her. Her brother Quentin has idolized her virginity, but as his father tries to tell him, his antiquated views on purity violate the laws of nature and prevent him from understanding Caddy as a real human being: "Purity is a negative state," his father tells him, "and therefore contrary to nature. It's nature is hurting you not Caddy" (*SF* 74). "[S]he loves," his father tells him, "she loves people through their shortcomings" (64), but Quentin is deaf to such words. He can only see her as wanton. His distorted view of her leaves no room for her real self in his life, and unwilling to admit the natural world into his world view, he leaves no course for himself but suicide.

The very first sentence of Jason's narrative speaks volumes about the attitude he has held his entire adult life toward Caddy, and by extension, women in general: "Once a bitch, always a bitch, what I say" (*SF* 113). He is a materialistic misogynist who has blamed all his financial woes on his sister's promiscuity, and when that sister's daughter steals her own money back from him, his hatred of women leaves him outraged—he has, after all, "been outwitted by a woman, a girl" (*SF* 191). His hatred of women is so great that at times he cannot even bear the smallest sign of their

existence: "I make it a rule never to keep a scrap of paper bearing a woman's hand, and I never write them at all" (*SF* 122). Quentin and Jason are both Caddy's opposites. While Quentin is obsessed with abstractions, Caddy is down to earth. While Jason is obsessed with money and social position and resentful of family, Caddy is unselfish and compassionate and caring. Together, then, Quentin and Jason provide two pictures of traumatized males who have abandoned the very woman who embodies the qualities they themselves desperately need. Their attitudes doom the Compson family.

In the final chapter, when Dilsey takes Benjy to church on Easter Sunday, Faulkner describes his wailing like this:

[It was] hopeless and prolonged. It was nothing. Just sound. It might have been all time and injustice and sorrow become vocal for an instant by a conjunction of planets. (*SF* 179)

Here Faulkner makes it clear that Benjy's wailing represents much more than his personal loss of Caddy—it represents mankind's loss of the love and compassion that Caddy embodies. Indeed, in an interview with Jean Stein vanden Heuvel, Faulkner spoke of his own emotion for Benjy as that of "grief and pity for all mankind" (*Lion in the Garden* 245). Perhaps Faulkner's most famous comment on Caddy was made during an appearance in a University of Virginia literature class, where he exalted her as "the beautiful one," and he explained his "failed" attempts to tell her story through four different narrators.

And I tried to tell it with one brother, and that wasn't enough. That was Section One. I tried with another brother, and that wasn't enough. That was Section Two. I tried the third brother, because Caddy was still to me too beautiful and too moving to reduce her to telling what was going on, that it would be more passionate to see her through somebody's else's eyes, I thought. And that failed and I tried myself—the fourth section—to tell what happened, and I still failed. (*Faulkner*

in the University 1)

Faulkner thought Caddy would seem more beautiful if she were not “asked” to explain her story herself, but no matter how important this storytelling consideration was, the narrative structure he settled on for the novel, in the end, was one in which four male voices attempt to explain Caddy—and none of them are able to. The male narrators need Caddy—but do not know how to approach her, how to accommodate her, and the result is, in Vickery’s words, “the artificial isolation of the woman” (37). Faulkner’s great triumph is that while he relies on four narrators who themselves “fail” to describe Caddy sufficiently, we still receive from their “failed” narratives a vivid picture of Caddy (as Wagner and Gwinn have argued) as a strong, compassionate, communicating, tender, affectionate, nurturing, loving human being—and we feel her loss tremendously.

O’Brien, also, has made comments about the tragic abandonment of the one central female character in *GAC*. In an interview with McNerney, O’Brien declares that Sarkin and William Cowling, the protagonist in *The Nuclear Age*, are the only true heroes he has ever written into novels.

Sarkin Aung Wan is to me an extraordinarily strong character. In fact, she might be an example of a hero. [. . .] She is made up by Paul Berlin. She is an aspect of Paul Berlin’s personality. In the Paris Peace Talks table scene, she speaks for part of Paul Berlin’s personality, speaks for *the good part*, I think—saying, You’ve walked this far in your imagination, why don’t you keep walking out of this war? Why don’t you be brave? [. . .] She has a tenacity of spirit. She has a strength of endurance that belies her physical fragility. [. . .] Sarkin Aung Wan has an abiding obstinacy of purpose and a strength that is meant to represent part of Paul Berlin’s own personality—that which would act bravely, that which would flee from war, that which would do something difficult. (McNerney 11, my italics)

Yes, Sarkin speaks for “the good part” of Berlin’s personality, or at

least a necessary part—a feminine part, but in the end, Berlin cannot hear her. She may be a hero, but she is one ignored by the male world—and the male world suffers for her absence.

5. Final Remarks

Moby Dick, *Billy Budd*, *The Scarlet Letter*, *The Sound and the Fury*, and *Going after Cacciato* are all male-penned novels that focus on male-dominated societies: the all-male ship crews, the patriarchal Puritans, the southern aristocrats, and the all-male combat troops in Vietnam. But all of them are also male-penned novels that lament a lack of the feminine in those societies. And in *The Sound and the Fury* and *Going after Cacciato* respectively, Faulkner and O'Brien portray that crisis in a more severe stage: the men in the worlds they depict have traumatized themselves to such an extent that they can no longer do anything but, as Griffin puts it, “cling to the old damaged way of being,” and that only “idiots” are still capable of understanding their desperate need of the feminine. These are sad commentaries, indeed. There is “the beautiful one,” Caddy, and Sarkin Aung Wan, with her “strength of endurance” and her “abiding obstinacy of purpose,” but in the end, there is no one healthy enough—“innocent” enough, close enough to nature—to recognize their virtues but a pair of mentally-handicapped men.

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