Approaches to Teaching World Literature

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Approaches to Teaching Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*

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"Through the Fence, between the Curling Flower Spaces": Teaching the First Section of *The Sound and the Fury*

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Anecdotally, I have heard of many people who were turned away from Faulkner by *The Sound and the Fury*, including bright readers who were led to believe that critical reading in general and especially for Faulkner is little more than an arcane exercise in connecting dots and moving around puzzle pieces. With such readers in mind, I direct the crucial opening class on the novel to the first section's points of greatest resistance: Benjy's eerily simple language and jarring narrative transitions. I try to bring out some linguistic and psychic patterns and then ask about their cultural implications.

Actually, the teaching begins before the opening class. Although I do not like to reveal things about novels ahead of time, for *The Sound and the Fury* that seems excusable and almost necessary. Excusable, because *The Sound and the Fury*, unlike most of Faulkner's novels, proceeds as if readers were already beyond a first reading: it assumes a knowledge of its plot much more than it trades on the suspense that can come from gradually unrolling that plot. And necessary, more or less, to help first-time readers who might be frightened off by the novel's difficulty and by its unfamiliar kind of difficulty. Some teachers go over the plot and form in class before students begin reading. That can help, but it can be hard for students to remember oral explanations, and some students may be absent or late. Therefore, before a class reaches *The Sound and the Fury*, I pass out a genealogy of the Compsons and Gibsons and an introduction that reviews the issues of plot and form that most confuse first-time

readers, while otherwise giving away as little as possible. (The introduction appears as an appendix to this essay.) I also invite students to consult Edmond L. Volpe's charts of the scene shifts in the first two sections. While some students prefer not to look at Volpe's charts until after they read a stretch of text, virtually all of them find the charts immensely helpful.

Then I begin the first class on *The Sound and the Fury* by inviting discussion of an early passage that includes the first two transitions, or scene shifts:

> We went along the fence and came to the garden fence, where our shadows were. My shadow was higher than Luster's on the fence. We came to the broken place and went through it.
>
> "Wait a minute." Luster said. "You snagged on that nail again. Cant you never crawl through here without snagging on that nail."
>
> *Caddy uncaught me and we crawled through. Uncle Maury said to not let anybody see us, so we better stoop over, Caddy said. Stoop over, Benjy. Like this, see. We stooped over and crossed the garden, where the flowers rasped and rattled against us. The ground was hard. We climbed the fence, where the pigs were grunting and snuffing. . . .*
>
> *Keep your hands in your pockets, Caddy said. Or they'll get froze. You dont want your hands froze on Christmas, do you.*
>
> "It's too cold out there." Versh said. "You dont want to go out doors."
> (4–5)

Working from this passage, we introduce such concerns as Benjy's minimal differentiation between separate times; his stunning indirectness, as when he lets us know it is cold but does not register the feeling himself; and his dissociation of cause from effect. Students often ask why Faulkner does something—for example, why he leaves out question marks—which gives me a chance to suggest converting questions of why, of intent, to questions of effect. When I then ask what the effect is of leaving out punctuation marks, they soon convert their confusions into insights.

Students often refer to Benjy as speaking or telling his story, and I ask what they mean by those terms or how he can tell his story when he has no language, which prompts a wider discussion of language in the so-called Benjy section. This can lead to a formula we later return to and work variations on. In the first section of *The Sound and the Fury* we get not Benjy's language, although we might sometimes call it that as a convenient shorthand, but instead we get what he *would* say, if he *could* say, *which he can't*. That last emphasis on *which he can't* usually provokes laughter as students recognize the struggle to describe something outside our epistemological categories. I repeat the formula later for the Quentin section and then vary it for Jason, illustrating the lack of any time or place in which Jason actually speaks "his" section by referring to it as what he would say, if he did say, which he doesn't. In a Faulkner course, we can return to the same touchstone for *As I Lay Dying*; for unthought thoughts in

the later novels (e.g., Joe Christmas "didn't even think then *Something is going to happen*" [*Light in August* 118]); for Rosa Coldfield in chapter 5 of *Absalom, Absalom!*; for Ike Snopes in *The Hamlet*, and so on.

When someone remarks the radical simplicity of "Benjy's language," it helps to specify the simplicity: a minimum of subordination, short sentences, little reliance on adverbs and adjectives, heavy reliance on nouns and verbs, and heavy reliance on simple past tense. (A joke about the likeness to Hemingway in these categories can help place Benjy's style in relation to something more familiar.) L. Moffitt Cecil notes that Benjy uses only about five hundred words (38–43). That is the more remarkable given that a fair number of his words—albeit a small proportion—are surprisingly distinct and evocative, as students often note, asking how Benjy can use such words, in this passage, as "rasped and rattled" or "grunting and snuffing." I observe how curious and even comical it is that the novel provokes us to ask such questions when, at the same time, Benjy uses no language at all. In the absence of language, the more unusual words are no more radical a distortion or illusion than the use of any language to render a state of no language—what he *would* say, if he *could* say, *which he can't*. Faulkner has it both ways, forging an impossible compromise that evokes a lack of language and a minimum of intellectual complexity while also maximizing the representation of those incapacities through language.

Indeed, while "Benjy's language" follows a group of radically simple patterns, it also takes up a surprising number of more conceptually demanding variations from those patterns. He says "so," "but," "when," "where," "while," "until," "anymore," "again," "too" (in the sense of also), and even "because," and he uses a number of similes, such as "like trees" (see Cecil 43). The exceptions to these patterns meet the immediate and evolving needs of the narrative as it progresses, much as writers like Mark Twain figured out how to make dialect read more smoothly by using dialect forms or spellings only part of the time. To use them all the time makes the dialect distracting rather than fluent.

Sooner or later, someone mentions the structure of temporal transition or the use of italics. In a remarkable letter, Faulkner argues that what he calls the "thought transference" is "in Ben's mind and not in the reader's eye" (*Selected Letters* 44). Thus the italic and roman typefaces do not represent any given times, but the shift from roman to italics or back from italics to roman usually represents a shift between times, as in our opening example. Benjy snags on a nail, and then the shift in typeface signals that his thoughts transfer to an earlier time when he also snagged on a nail. Students can write papers comparing such bridges, or fulcrums, as I call them, with transitions later in the novel or in novels like *As I Lay Dying*, *Mrs. Dalloway*, *Ulysses*, and many others. Similarly, in a cinematic sound bridge, one scene ends with a sound, such as a train whistle, that then continues into the next scene, so that the sound stays the same while the picture changes. For Benjy, the nail not only bridges the transition and figures it metonymically; the nail also provokes the transition that it bridges.

Throughout, the present retains a privileged position; it interrupts the past without the impetus of any fulcrum. Yet here as in many other works, Faulkner sets up a discernible pattern and then violates it, defying any absolute system. Thus he gives us three time shifts from roman to roman instead of from roman to italics or italics to roman (pp. 38, 43, 53). Sometimes a shift from roman to italics signifies a time shift (e.g., pp. 22, 28, 29), but the following shift back from italics to roman, which usually represents another time shift (thirty-nine out of fifty-two times, by my count, that is, seventy-five percent of the time, by my calculation, not including two uses of incidental italics [pp. 8 and 44]), occurs without a time shift, as if Faulkner decided that once we understand which time we are in, there is no point in holding to italics. I tell students that I write two lines, like an equal sign, where the shift from italics to roman does not mark a time shift, and I write one line, to represent a break, where it does mark a time shift. Then I don't have to rethink each transition from scratch every time I reread a passage. A sharp student might note that, according to Volpe's chart, the second transition in our opening example shifts not between scenes but rather within scenes, as both parts fit in the scene that Volpe dubs "Dec. 23." In that sense this second transition is atypical, but it shows how Benjy's mind does not envision each "scene" as a continuous flow that goes inevitably forward in linear progression. Rather, just as his mind can shift to an earlier scene, so it can shift to an earlier point in the same "scene," thus exposing the artificiality of our (and Volpe's) convenient division of Benjy's memories into distinct scenes.

Still addressing this opening example, I ask whether, if the nail sets off Benjy's shift, something in Benjy determines the thoughts that he shifts to. Or are his responses impersonal and passive? Benjy's seemingly chaotic, rambling memory confines itself to a limited set of scenes. These sixteen or so scenes mirror each other and condense into metaphors and metonymies—the fence, the gate, Caddy's perfume, the slipper, the word "Caddy" or "caddie," the smell of trees, and so on—that the novel contrives to make represent all Benjy's life to that point, as if any thought he might have must come from this narrow repertoire of scenes. Thus André Bleikasten (in what otherwise seems to me the most useful discussion of the novel) finds Benjy impersonal and passive (*Failure* 71–75, *Ink* 58–61). Yet some scenes appear only once, as if they represent selections from a larger repertoire that he doesn't exhaust on any given day or perhaps ever. And if the range of Benjy's scenes feels imposed on him, the selection of any given scene seems less arbitrary, more motivated, and hence more representative of Benjy's mind and memory. The repetition gathers a quality of obsession, of a drive to return over and over to the same scenes and to the same concerns in different scenes. This first scene shift may seem to take Benjy to the least obsessively chosen of his scenes, to the scene least relevant to his pattern of preoccupations. But its turning up here only makes his obsessiveness more striking, especially once we decipher the Uncle Maury–and–Mrs. Patterson plot and see how it presages not so much Caddy's future

as, much more narrowly, Benjy's reading of Caddy's future. Caddy crosses the fence-marked boundary of sexual experience, here on Maury's errand and later on her own.

Indeed, in many respects the whole first section of the novel is constructed of fences and openings in fences. Many of the sixteen scenes into which Volpe divides Benjy's section depend on fences: the 23 December delivery of Uncle Maury's message, the end of what Volpe calls the "Uncle Maury–Patterson affair," Benjy's lingering at the gate, Benjy and the Burgess girl. Other scenes depend on fencelike boundaries, as when Caddy climbs the tree to look down through the window after Damuddy's death or when Benjy climbs onto a box to look through the window at Caddy's wedding. Many scenes include fences that echo the more prominent role of fences in other scenes. On the trip to the cemetery, Benjy "thinks," "We went through the gate, where it didn't jolt anymore" (10). In the scene after Quentin's death, he observes, "The calf was in the pig pen. It nuzzled at the wire, bawling" (28). Again, in the scene after Mr. Compson's death, Dilsey builds a fence to contain Benjy: "Dilsey took a long piece of wood and laid it between Luster and me. 'Stay on your side now.' Dilsey said" (32). On the day of Mr. Compson's funeral (listed in Volpe's guide to scene shifts but left out of his chronology, and so a seventeenth scene), when Benjy watches the hearse carry away his father, Benjy and T. P. "ran down to the corner of the fence and watched them pass" (32).

In a way, the novel's first section is about Caddy's crossing to the other side of the fence when Benjy can no longer cross with her. In this opening example, extramarital sexuality—here between Uncle Maury and Mrs. Patterson—is already figured as a crossing of fences, a crossing that Caddy can make with pleasure but that Benjy cannot understand. This passage provides an occasion to ask what it suggests to figure sexual experience as the crossing of a fence and how that figuring looks from the implied perspectives of Caddy, of Benjy, even of Mrs. or Mr. Patterson or Uncle Maury; it also provides an occasion to ask what light Caddy's perspective throws on Benjy's or where either of them gets his or her perspective—an especially tough and perhaps unanswerable question for Benjy.

More answerable, however vaguely, is the question of sources for Faulkner's preoccupation with figuring sexual experience as fence crossing and transgression or as betrayal of the familial bond. We can answer in generalized psychobiographical ways that fit anyone whose experience we describe in oedipal terms. But we can also ask what it tells us culturally that Faulkner figures Benjy's relation to Caddy in terms that condense around her so-called loss of virginity and its metonymies in fence crossing, kissing, wearing perfume, and marrying. What does it mean to "lose" virginity? It is not an object like Luster's quarter or Benjy's testicles. Benjy's preoccupation, and Faulkner's, is culturally produced rather than inevitable, which allows us to read it as a confining and defining cultural fixation rather than a natural or objective marker of Benjy's psyche. The notion that one has or loses something called virginity and the

notion that the possession or loss of it defines one's essence and the essence of one's relation to others represent a deeply implied but largely unspoken cultural assumption that may also burden some of our students. That assumption can go unrecognized, or unrecognized as culturally received rather than inevitable and natural, but its invisibility helps it settle more stubbornly in the restricted economy of cultural determinants. Thus Benjy is motivated not only by his own psychology but also by culture, whether directly, unconsciously absorbing the cultural fixations that motivate those around him (e.g., watching Dilsey's disdain at Caddy's soiled drawers and bottom), or indirectly, as a site where Faulkner's conscious and unconscious reproductions of the surrounding culture congeal and transform.

Benjy's language, then, is only partly his own. What might first appear anarchic turns out to have a surplus of system in a context so unfamiliar in some ways and so excessively familiar in other ways (e.g., in its submission to unconsciously received sexual boundaries) that at first we do not know how to recognize it. On the one hand, Benjy cannot use language directly; he can express himself only through other characters' registering his nonlinguistic actions and sounds, even if we discover those through a language that is somehow Benjy's even as it portrays its own nonexistence. On the other hand, sometimes he does express himself through language, or at least he tries to. His trying is itself a kind of expression, as when he is "trying to say" (53) and when he returns so feelingly to his sister's name:

> "Hush." T. P. said. "They going to hear you. Get down quick." He pulled me. Caddy. I clawed my hands against the wall Caddy. T. P. pulled me. "Hush." he said. "Hush. Come on here quick." He pulled me on. Caddy "Hush up, Benjy. . . ." (39)

But such cries mark only the more expressive points on a continuum where no one point is purely expressive or nonexpressive. Even though Benjy's narrative may seem like arbitrary chaos or neutrally reported dialogue and description, it is all selected, filtered, and processed in ways that accumulate meaning for Benjy and his world and for the act of narrating them. If there is no specific place or time out of which his narrative emerges or is provoked, there is still a narrative space of characterological, authorial, and cultural motive.

Perhaps the foremost emotion for Benjy is the pain of loss, as so many commentators have observed. Benjy loses so much and fails so dismally to transform his pain over loss into the play and work of culture, in contrast to the little boy whom Freud watched playing a game of *fort!* and *da!* (gone! and there!) to sublimate the loss of his mother (see Bleikasten, *Failure* 73–74, *Ink* 60; Freud, *Principle* 8–10). It can help students observe and conceptualize Benjy's pain simply to ask them to brainstorm, to name Benjy's losses while the instructor records what they name on the board. Usually, their list runs something like this: Caddy, name, pasture, testicles, fire, flowers, slipper, cushion, Quentin,

Father, Roskus, Versh, T. P., Luster's quarter, language (can he lose what he never had?), and Damuddy. Each loss that students name provides a chance to discuss something that catches someone's interest or leaves someone puzzled. As the losses accumulate in the novel and on the board, it becomes clearer that *The Sound and the Fury* evokes a psychic and narrative development arrested in loss, a fantasy of frustration that almost suggests a degree of narrative or authorial masochism. Yet it also suggests a release from such masochism, for by dwelling on Benjy's frustration it can remind us of our difference from Benjy (or from Quentin or Jason). This is, then, a novel about maturing, about passing from childhood to adulthood, and about resistance to that passing. Students alienated by the novel's form can often snag their interest on its picture of protracted adolescence. *The Sound and the Fury* is also, therefore, a novel of transitions and about transitions and the resistance to transitions. It is about adolescence as a state of transition and also as a state of nontransition at a time when transition is most longed for, a state of forcibly sustained childhood at a time—increasingly prolonged in modern culture—of feeling ready to progress beyond childhood.

Sometimes, when students brainstorm a list of Benjy's losses, they name his mother, perhaps even casting her as the loss that all the other losses displace. Other times I get at the same issue by asking why Benjy loves Caddy. In addition to noting Caddy's love of Benjy, students often point out how differently Caddy and Caroline treat Benjy and how Caddy displaces Caroline in Benjy's erotic economy. Caddy, in turn, is displaced by the transitional objects—slipper, cushion, and the rest—that come to defend against and figure the loss of Caddy and Caroline but that themselves get lost in turn, reproducing the pain they are seized on to resist.

The notion that Benjy's fixation on Caddy displaces the loss of his mother's love is a familiar and useful reading, yet perhaps too useful in its potential to reduce Benjy's emotional economy, in a vulgar Freudianism, to mere finger-pointing at the easy target of his mother. It can suggest Caroline Compson as a transcendent, ultimate source and first cause. We imagine some long-lost imaginary between Benjy and Caroline, or not quite so long-lost imaginary between Benjy and Caddy, lyrically evoked in the smell of trees and the "smooth, bright shapes" (75) and see Benjy as tragically condemned to an endless flip-flop between the imaginary and the symbolic, between the recovered presence and the stubbornly returning absence of his beloved sister or some object or word that evokes her, between the imaginary immediacy of presence and the symbolic distance of mediation and language. It is easy to forget how that imaginary is false and compensatory. Like any imaginary it is constructed retrospectively through a fantasy from within the symbolic. Otherwise it would be real and not imaginary. Thus not only is Caroline not a first cause, but there is no first cause (see Matthews, *Play* 68). Loss is the condition through which we imagine a state before loss that is inconceivable apart from the need to imagine it from the position of loss. That is the exchange of *fort* and *da* through

which most of us produce culture, but it is a process that Benjy can only repeat without ever transforming it into a means of production, without ever transforming it, that is, into a means of producing anything except more of itself.

I conclude our discussion of the Benjy section with one long passage where the children play in the branch on the day Damuddy dies, beginning in the present with "He pulled me back. 'Sit down.' I sat down" (17), extending through the scene where Caddy muddies her drawers and then back into the present at "*What is the matter with you, Luster said. Cant you get done with that moaning and play in the branch like folks*" (19). Here I try to bring out the novel's humor and show how the characters' early childhoods already contain their adulthoods, which can help new readers of the novel recognize and learn to work with the distinctive traits and patterns of each character.

Playing in the branch, Quentin and even the more independent Caddy both appeal to Versh's authority, revealing that Versh is a little older and that they all structure authority in terms they will not long sustain. As they grow up, social barriers replace personal connections, leading the white children to assume more authority and lose most of their ability to see authority in blacks. In the meantime, their reliance on personal rather than social distinctions underlines how constructed those social distinctions are. Yet even while they make so few social distinctions, they already diverge sharply in speech dialects. The contrast seems exaggerated, as if even while Faulkner shows the artificiality of those differences he also succumbs to a social pressure to reimpose them.

Quentin, Caddy, and Versh already act in distinguishable patterns. Caddy initiates the action and the others only respond. Her action is corporeal, and Benjy sees or remembers her and her action in terms—"She was wet"—that he cannot recognize as sexual:

> She was wet. We were playing in the branch and Caddy squatted down and got her dress wet and Versh said,
> "Your mommer going to whip you for getting your dress wet."
> "She's not going to do any such thing." Caddy said.
> "How do you know." Quentin said. . . .
> "I'm seven years old." Caddy said. "I guess I know."
> "I'm older than that." Quentin said. "I go to school. Dont I, Versh."
> . . . .
> "You know she whip you when you get your dress wet." Versh said.
> "It's not wet." Caddy said. She stood up in the water and looked at her dress. "I'll take it off." she said. "Then it'll dry."
> "I bet you wont." Quentin said.
> "I bet I will." Caddy said.
> "I bet you better not." Quentin said. (17–18)

Already, as through the rest of the novel, Caddy plays, improvises, and takes her own self as the authority and as the arbiter of knowledge, whereas Quentin—and Versh, whom we see less of later—appeal to exterior authority. In a sense the whole novel is about Caddy taking her dress off and about her brothers' reactions to it. Quentin's words are a dare. He desperately wants Caddy to take her dress off, despite his intense resistance to his own desire—and to hers—and so he soon escalates to saying, "You just take your dress off" (18), a plea hardly masked by its feeble sarcasm. In much the same way, the older Quentin will take masochistic delight in his revulsion at Caddy's adventurousness. Here, when she accedes to his command and removes her dress, Quentin slaps her, as he will slap her years later when she kisses a boy and as he will try impossibly to slap Dalton Ames (133, 160).

The scene continues through a series of often comic permutations on the Compsons' lifelong patterns, until finally Caddy, with her bottom "all wet and muddy," says she will run away, and Benjy begins to cry, less a foreshadowing of what happens later than a performance, emotionally and linguistically, of what Benjy—and Caddy, in her brothers' imaginations, at least—already can never do anything but repeat. Then suddenly we learn that "Jason was playing too. He was by himself further down the branch" (19), and it turns out that all through this extended, dramatic, and comic scene, Jason has been there too, on the outside of his siblings' closed drama, without making any difference to them. His sudden visibility hints that he somehow makes a show to remind them that he is there, trying hopelessly to make himself matter to them, much like his efforts through the rest of the novel.

Then Luster, utterly unaware of Benjy's memories, abruptly calls Benjy back to the present, which can always interrupt memory without any narrative fulcrum. In this scene, then, as in the section at large, the novel flaunts its transitions in ways that dramatize the concept of transition itself: narrative transition, emotional transition, transition between memory and present perception, transition from child to adult. At the same time, the same transitions also dramatize the psychological and cultural resistances that clog and thwart transition to lock each Compson in endless repetition. Thus I conclude by asking my students to ponder what it means at the end of the Benjy section when we go to sleep as Benjy, inside Benjy's consciousness as he returns to an imaginary, womblike, lyrical "always," and then turn the page to wake up as Quentin. Does that crossing, that fence gate or transition, release us into a superior or more familiar consciousness, or are we right back in another version of where we began?

APPENDIX
INTRODUCING *THE SOUND AND THE FURY*
(A CLASS HANDOUT)

The Sound and the Fury tells about the Compson family. It is written in four sections (plus an appendix Faulkner added almost two decades later), with each section told from a different perspective. The famous first section comes through the perspective of Benjy Compson, an idiot, not as we use the word colloquially, to mean a fool, but in the sense that denotes someone of extremely low intelligence. Benjy's intelligence is so low that he is not even capable of speech, although Faulkner records his process of mind in a language he might use if he could speak. As a result, Benjy's language is extraordinarily simple, so astonishingly simple that it can be difficult to read. Because Benjy understands so little, he sometimes fails to make connections that we all take for granted, such as between cause and effect; or he makes connections where we would not, such as between a golf caddie and his sister Caddy (Candace). At any moment, particular words or feelings can transport him to some remembered time that he doesn't distinguish from the present, although Faulkner usually gives some clue in language or typography to signal the transition that Benjy himself cannot understand. Gradually, as you read Benjy's section, you will crack the code. You will grow familiar with the different times that occupy Benjy's mind, and grow to recognize them by the people, places, events, and activities of each separate time.

Section 2 comes through the perspective of Benjy's brother Quentin. Quentin is intelligent, anxious, intellectual—in other words, a typical college student. Benjy's and Quentin's sections are the most famous American instances of what has come to be called stream of consciousness; that is, they follow the thoughts of a particular mind in whatever direction those thoughts go, even when those thoughts (like anyone's thoughts, sometimes) refuse to go in directions sensible, convenient, or clear. Benjy's section falls into a pattern, a code that you will eventually crack. You might find Quentin's section more profoundly and permanently difficult.

The third and fourth sections and the appendix offer no special difficulties.

It might help to explain a few details. In three instances, two characters have the same name. Benjy is originally named Maury, after Mrs. Compson's brother. When they realize he is an idiot, they fear that naming him after Maury is in bad taste, so they change his name to Benjamin. Some references to Maury, then, refer to the young Benjy. Jason, the other Compson brother, is named after his father; and Caddy eventually has a daughter, whom she names Quentin after her brother, so that there are two Jasons and two Quentins. The only major confusion might come with the Quentins, but young Quentin has a minor role at first, and the context makes clear which Quentin is which. Also, "Damuddy" is the Compson children's name for their grandmother; "Nancy" is a horse—

presumably part of a matched team with "Fancy"; and when the characters say "branch" they mean a brook or creek. Some readers get confused when Quentin tells his father (or imagines telling his father) that he has committed incest with his sister Caddy. He is lying; he has not committed incest, and his father knows he has not.

You should read *The Sound and the Fury* twice, or at least one and a half times, for you might not get enough from the first two sections until after you finish the whole book. If you read it twice, you might be able to read it in no more time than one careful reading would take. You can first read sections 1 and 2 rather quickly, without worrying about things you don't get. Then after you've finished the whole, you can go back and read it again much more easily. *Start early, so that you can be on your second reading when we get to the novel in class.* At the least, if you only read the novel once, you will probably find it helpful and pleasurable to spend a good deal of time going back over Benjy's and Quentin's sections when you finish.