

"Elder Watson in Heaven": Poet Faulkner as Satirist

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I

Elder Watson in Heaven.

*Elder Watson, lying still,
Protrudes a red haired meagre shank;
Treasure above has he, as well
Ten thousand dollars in the bank.*

*Elder Watson, when erect
And circumscribed with moral good,
Presents the world an iron curve
Of dogma and of platitude*

*In which his soul, that sober flame,
And presbyterian, and dight
With subtleties equivocal,
Need fear no sudden change of light*

*When through the shining gates he moves
While music mounts the golden air;
And his reward, as promised him,
Is spread before him everywhere.*

*Here there is no five percent.
Nor driven bargains, we are told:
Nor bankers' cheques: this is a life
Insurance premium, paid in gold.*

*This, too, will be a recompense
For that ten thousand left behind;
And, feeling Fate's incurious hand,
He drew the shroud across his mind*

*And to his waiting children, said:
"Walk upright in the sight of God"
Nor did he look back on his clay
As through the opening gates he trod*

*With confidence, and gravely smiled,
Pausing on the shining stairs
As passionately to him rose
The hurried mourning of his heirs.*

*Perhaps he smiled, and then, like God,
Saw Elder Watson in the wrack
Of worn theology, sleeping there
Profound, defenseless, on his back.*

William Faulkner,
Oxford, Miss.

Despite its likely composition date of 1921,¹ this appearance of William Faulkner's poem, "Elder Watson in Heaven," marks its first publication. In addition, the original two-page, nine-quatrain typescript in the Brodsky Collection from which the present text has been transcribed seems to be the only extant copy of this poem from Faulkner's apprenticeship years.²

¹In the early months of 1942, Robert W. Daniel wrote various friends, family members, and acquaintances of William Faulkner soliciting materials he might borrow and display in what that summer at Yale University would become the first major exhibition of Faulkner books, letters, and manuscripts. The display, running from mid-July through the better part of August 1942, was accompanied by a catalogue Daniel arranged and titled, *A Catalogue of the Writings of William Faulkner* (New Haven: Yale University Library, 1942).

Among those persons Daniel wrote was Mrs. Ben F. Wasson, Sr., mother of Ben, Jr., Faulkner's Greenville, Miss. friend, early agent, and editor of at least one novel, *Sartoris*. In Mr. Wasson's brief reply on his wife's behalf, written on March 16, 1942, he mentions he is forwarding "the only paper Mrs. Wasson has been able to find from the pen of William Faulkner." In addition, he continues, "I fear this paper will not be of much value to you, but you are welcome to it for whatever it may be worth." For a complete transcription of this letter, see Louis Daniel Brodsky and Robert W. Hamblin, eds., *Faulkner: A Comprehensive Guide to the Brodsky Collection, Volume II: The Letters* (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1984): 20.

Although Mr. Wasson failed to detail the contents he was contributing, a logical deduction as to what at least some of them might have been can be rendered. Assuming that Daniel acted on Mr. Wasson's generous offer, we can surmise that at least two poems were sent by Mr. Wasson, almost certainly made part of the exhibition, and retained by Daniel after the close of the exhibit sometime in August 1942. In 1978, I acquired from Professor Daniel a number of items relating to the 1942 Yale Exhibit, among which were two Faulkner poems, "Elder Watson in Heaven" and "Pierrot, Sitting Beside The Body Of Colombine, suddenly Sees/Himself in a Mirror." Both poems were ribbon typescripts, with typed signature on the bottom left hand side of the last page; both poems, the former consisting of two pages, the latter of three pages, were executed on 8½ by 14 inch unwatermarked legal sheets. And at the bottom of the third page of the "Pierrot" poem, penciled in Mrs. Wasson's hand, appeared this note: "Written while visiting in the house/of Mr & Mrs Ben F. Wasson/in 1921."

There seems little doubt that both these poems were certainly among, if not the entirety of, the "paper" which Mr. Wasson sent to Daniel in mid-March 1942. Furthermore, due to the similarity of format and the fact that these two poems were the only original Faulkner materials in the group Daniel allowed me to acquire in 1978, one might reasonably assume also a concurrence of composition dates as well as consistency of provenance indicated by the penciled notation on the "Pierrot" poem, thus assigning "Elder Watson in Heaven" 1921 as the likely year of its creation.

²I wish to extend my ongoing appreciation to Jill Faulkner Summers for consenting to let me make available to scholarship the text of this particular manuscript as well as other items in my Faulkner collection through publication of the *Comprehensive Guide* and, by extension, intervening scholarly publications that call attention to and which will subsequently be contained in the multi-volume *Guide*.

As seems to be the case with so much of Faulkner's earliest writing, this poem, a curiosity piece, may command our greatest attention as a text in which we can see themes, attitudes, structures, figurative and narrative techniques, and tone which the author would extend and refine in his mature fiction.

II

Structurally and narratively, "Elder Watson in Heaven" might be likened to a lighthouse situated on the treacherous shoals of William Faulkner's skeptical sensibility, whose beacon, no matter how dimly, would sweep the expanse of his entire literary career, illuminating a specific obsession: telling stories. In microcosm, this poem might easily serve to highlight that particular penchant as raconteur Faulkner demonstrated almost from the beginning of his writing career and which eventually would contribute to his consciously orchestrated shift from poetry as his dominant mode of expression to the broader freedoms of prose: that compulsive drive of his to conceive, elaborate, and narrate complete fictions from single threads or images.

Indeed, this poem is structured to yield a sense of narrative progression. Constituted of three distinct sections, though not so demarcated, told by at least two separate "persons" and arguably by a third-person voice controlling the concluding quatrain, it succeeds in more than just making an opinionated statement about a particular condition inherent in a specific person's character. Actually, it creates and defines its own environment and context in which its protagonist moves from point "A" through point "B" to destination "C," and is self-contained by means of an organic sense of circularity. Remarkably, the poem's climax effects a condition which increasingly would come to characterize virtually all of Faulkner's best fiction: a suspension of authorial judgment not only capable of requiring readers to participate in the narrative, but presumably to render individual interpretations rather than be satisfied with traditional absolutes as to motivation and outcome of human behavior.

Specifically, the initial five quatrains and first two lines of the sixth stanza are told in the present and, with one exception, future tenses by an internal, first-person narrator who in the fifth stanza, not unlike the narrator of "A Rose for Emily" (1930), identifies himself as the collective, communal "we." The narration itself operates on parallel levels with the objective description of Elder Watson (his physical appearance, position in the community, financial status) alternating with and consistently being undercut by subjective double entendres: words and phrases ironically

weighted toward the sarcastic, cynical, biting, snide, vindictive, and sardonic. Thus, to isolate just one example, it matters little that the protagonist has "treasure above" because, we are mockingly told, he has already enjoyed having "Ten thousand dollars in the bank." Words qualified or standing alone, such as "moral good," "iron curve of dogma," "platitude," "sober flame," "presbyterian," and "subtleties equivocal," evoke responses quite opposed to those superficially intended to generate sympathetic approval by the narrator.

Obviously delighting in his word play, Faulkner also allows three derivative echos to infiltrate his poetry: one, possibly an allusion to Eliot's apeline character at the heart of "Sweeney Among the Nightingales," describes Elder Watson's "red haired meagre shank" and his "erect" stature; a second, borrowing from the 17th Century tradition of the hyperbolic metaphysical conceit, suggests that for Elder Watson heaven will be "a life/Insurance premium, paid in gold"; one calculated to "recompense" him when he dies for having had to relinquish his "ten thousand dollars." Decidedly, a tertiary set of echoes in "Elder Watson in Heaven" seems to hark back to the poetry of E.A. Robinson. If dissimilar in rhythm and measure, tone, even particularized focus on religious personages, Robinson's secular "portraits" yet appear thematically compatible and may well be sources or models for Faulkner's "Elder Watson."³

³Reading "Richard Cory" (1897), "Miniver Cheevy" (1910), "Cassandra" (1916), "Bewick Finzer" (1916), and especially "Flammonde" (1916), one is struck by their pervasive affinities to William Faulkner's "Elder Watson in Heaven." These poems and others by E.A. Robinson focus with irony and occasional pity on human failures; they are about ambiguous lives generally characterized by hypocrisy, though not of the religious kind. Additionally, "Richard Cory," "Bewick Finzer," and "Flammonde" are narrated by the collective, personalized first-person plural "we," the technique employed by Faulkner to achieve a similar sense of familiarity in his poem.

In Robinson's "Flammonde," it becomes evident that the initial two octaves of this poem contain phrases Faulkner actually might have borrowed for his description of Elder Watson. Robinson's first stanza describes and qualifies "The man Flammonde" as appearing "With glint of *iron* in his walk" (emphasis added). Faulkner's second quatrain reads: Elder Watson, when *erect*/ And circumscribed with moral good./ Presents the world an *iron curve*/ Of dogma and of platitude" (emphasis added). Similarly, the second octave of "Flammonde" begins: "*Erect*, with his alert repose/ About him, and about his clothes" (emphasis added), and concludes with a couplet which might serve as a synecdoche for Elder Watson's condition as well: "And what he needed for his fee/To live, he borrowed graciously."

In fact, under the imperious tutelage of Phil Stone during the years of his poetic apprenticeship commencing in 1916, Faulkner's reading and interest in E.A. Robinson's poetry may have been considerably more extensive, his admiration and debt greater, than scholars have considered and appreciated. In a letter, now part of the William Boozer collection of Faulkner materials, Robinson himself may have documented this

If the first section of the poem begins with Elder Watson "lying still" and uses this static occasion to describe his immediate as well as "promised" state (the reader is led to believe Elder Watson is merely stirring in restive sleep), the second section is announced by a sharp shifting of tense and voice. Commencing with the second half of the sixth stanza and running through the seventh and eighth stanzas, and told in the third person, imperfect tense by an omniscient narrator, this section elaborates considerable physical action initiated by Elder Watson himself. Having drawn the shroud across his sleeping mind, accepting Death's invitation, he first admonishes his gathered "children," presumably at bedside, then without looking back passes through heaven's opening gates, pausing on the "shining stairs" just long enough to remark the "hurried mourning" of his "heirs."

As abruptly as the second section begins and ends, the third section opens and climaxes in the ninth and final stanza. But this shift is not without its own idiosyncratic and unexpected reversal. Up to this point, the voices describing the scene and the situational story they showcase have been very assertive, if deliberately ambiguous, to effect the appropriate attitude and tone espoused by their

possibly not-so-obscure or fugitive interest on the parts of Stone and Faulkner when he wrote on March 7, 1922, politely discounting Stone's apparent notion that he had used Swinburne as a model for a particular poem:

My Dear Mr. Stone,

Let me thank you for the poem by Swinburne—which I do not remember, though I must have seen it—and for your interesting comment. I should have said [?] Swinburne, if only for the line, "All the sting [?] and all the stain [?] of long delight—." On the other hand I "see what you mean" and thank you for your courtesy. I am glad to infer from your note that you and your friend have found something in my work that you remember.

Yours very sincerely
E.A. Robinson

Robinson's note not only provides insight into the reading habits and cultural predilections of Stone, but those of his student as well. Confirmed by Phil Stone's widow, Emily Whitehurst Stone, there is absolutely no doubt that the "friend" to which Robinson refers in his last sentence is "Bill Faulkner."

In "Verse Old and Nascent: A Pilgrimage," dated October 1924 (apparently the only extant typescript is in the Brodsky Collection) and first published in *The Double Dealer* 7 (April 1925): 129-131, Faulkner himself reinforced this connection when he eulogized the ending of his apprenticeship to 19th and 20th Century poets and poetry with this valedictory: "That page is closed to me forever. I read Robison [sic] and Frost with pleasure, and Aldington; Conrad Aiken's minor music still echoes in my head; but beyond these, that period might never have been."

Over 30 years later, Faulkner recalled Robinson in substantially similar terms. Responding to a question about poets whose work he liked, Faulkner recalled: "I remember when I read more poetry I read Elinor Wylie, Conrad Aiken, E.A. Robinson, Frost" (*FIU* 15).

particular narrators (not to be confused or necessarily fused with Faulkner's attitude and tone). Although the third person, past tense, omniscient voice is retained in the climactic quatrain, the deliberate pose of the unidentified narrator is blurred. Referring to the newly-arrived spirit of Elder Watson to heaven, the voice conjectures conditionally that "*Perhaps* he smiled" [emphasis added]. The suggestion is strange indeed; that the Elder might be suffering painful insights from his new vantage, seeing his former self for the hypocrite he had been. The poem returns to its opening scene in which Elder Watson, although now apparently dead, is "sleeping there/Profound, defenseless, on his back." Curiously, however, now the body is being punished in "the wrack of worn theology." Finally, most poignant of all is the more likely possibility that even though in heaven, Elder Watson "Perhaps" has failed to see the very implications of his former sanctimoniousness. Either way, the reader is not told whether Elder Watson's soul shall be redeemed, his salvation made manifest through ultimate awareness of his sins and absolution resulting from his asking and receiving penance from God. Regardless, the closure carries the reader back to the poem's opening lines and creates an atmosphere of endless circularity which forces him continuously to attempt to reassess his own interpretation in light of the dramatically suspended final authority the poet consciously withholds.

III

Thematically, even a cursory gloss of this poem reveals its author's unveiled, blatantly cynical distrust of fundamental, formal religion, his sardonic and skeptical attitude toward those charged with the responsibility of formally upholding their faith. With severe ironic intent, Faulkner levels his indictment at a respected Presbyterian Elder whose moral and ethical positions in the community, though seemingly unblemished, are undermined by his hypocrisy and sanctimoniousness. Indeed, Elder Watson may be more contemptible for his base greed than for his arrogance, inflexibility, or triteness.

Between 1929 and 1932, Faulkner would achieve his most mature fictional expression of these themes and attitudes. In composing the following set piece which Jason Compson delivers in the third section of *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), venting all his cynicism and sardonic humor toward the Church and its ministers, Faulkner might almost have had in mind his own character, Elder Watson, evoked seven years earlier: with minimal substitutions, "five thousand dollars" for "ten thousand dollars,"

first person, present tense narrative for third person, past tense, and prose for poetic technique and format, it is not difficult to make the leap with the author from groping to mastery of style and theme:

"After all, like I say money has no value; it's just the way you spend it. It don't belong to anybody, so why try to hoard it. It just belongs to the man that can get it and keep it. There's a man right here in Jefferson made a lot of money selling rotten goods to niggers, lived in a room over the store about the size of a pigpen, and did his own cooking. About four or five years ago he was taken sick. Scared the hell out of him so that when he was up again he joined the church and bought himself a Chinese missionary, five thousand dollars a year. I often think how mad he'll be if he was to die and find out there's not any heaven, when he thinks about that five thousand a year. Like I say, he'd better go on and die now and save money." (*S & F* 241)

In his next novel, *As I Lay Dying*, published the following year (1930), Faulkner would focus almost entirely on the theme of hypocrisy as it manifested itself in word and deed, in civil as well as in religious contexts. In addition to Reverend Whitfield, who, as an extended embodiment of Elder Watson, has committed a real, mortal sin, adultery, as opposed merely to hoarding wealth, and who seems to suffer for his unassuageable spiritual depravity, Faulkner would present Elder Watson's secular, female counterpart, Cora Tull, a self-righteous, rigid, and highly dogmatical arbiter of community values and religious standards. Like Elder Watson, she proves to a fault, literally, to be dependent on material wealth and ultimately distracted by it. In the first of her three monologues or "chapters," Cora convincingly makes clear her capacity for justifying and squaring the earthly omnipotence of finances with the heavenly austerity of election and salvation:

"She ought to taken those cakes anyway," Kate says.

"Well," I say, "I reckon she never had no use for them now."

"She ought to taken them," Kate says. "But those rich town ladies can change their minds. Poor folks cant."

Riches is nothing in the face of the Lord, for He can see into the heart. "Maybe I can sell them at the bazaar Saturday," I say. They turned out real well.

"You cant get two dollars a piece for them," Kate says.

"Well, it isn't like they cost me anything," I say. I saved them out and swapped a dozen of them for the sugar and flour. It isn't like the cakes cost me anything, as Mr. Tull himself realizes that the eggs I saved were over and beyond what we had engaged to sell, so it was like we had found the eggs or they had been given to us.

"She ought to taken those cakes when she same as gave you her word," Kate says. The Lord can see into the heart. If it is His will that some folks has different ideas of honesty from other folks, it is not my place to question His decree.

"I reckon she never had any use for them," I say. They turned out real well, too. (*AILD* 7-8)

With her hypocritical pretense of piety, Cora is as accountable for earthly and spiritual fallibility as is the Reverend Whitfield who, for all his apparent suffering, ultimately acquits himself of his impiety in the name of God's mercy, presumptuously

suggesting "He will accept the will for the deed." Now, that conditional "Perhaps" on which the climax of "Elder Watson in Heaven" hinges has been replaced by a much more subtle, if essentially similar, sense of the ironic. As a participatory condition imposed by his conception of the novel itself, Faulkner heightens the effect of exasperation the reader experiences by coercing him to accept being spoken to by the character, not by an outside narrator.

With the publication of *Sanctuary* (1931), Faulkner would reintroduce Horace Benbow, a male counterpart of Cora Tull, and in *Light in August* (1932), Faulkner would flesh out, through the characterization of Reverend Gail Hightower, his earlier portrayal of Reverend Whitfield. He would offer as dominant modes of expression stark, realistic detail combined with riveting, self-indicting interior monologues which would engender a palpable protagonist capable of commanding empathic responses from the reader, not just a nod to the satirical projected by a stereotypical Elder Watson or even the two-dimensional abstraction Faulkner named Reverend Whitfield.

In *Go Down, Moses* (1942), Faulkner would actually fuse the clerical with the temporal in the person of Ike McCaslin, exploring a life ranging over at least seven decades dedicated to squaring moral and ethical issues with religious requirements of spiritual right living. For all his apparently proper responses, Ike appears finally to fail at reconciling ambiguities of the human heart in conflict with itself and with its Maker. Faulkner further seems to suggest that neither society nor its most cherished, sacred rituals and myths raised to religious significance can ultimately accommodate Ike's own incapacity to act on his best intentions and most deep-seated convictions. If "The Bear" postulates hope and possibility for Ike to come to terms with his heritage and make appropriate reparations and changes, "Delta Autumn" would seem to seal his disappointing failure to succeed at these tasks.

Even as late as September 1950, disguising his pervasive contempt for hypocrisy, especially that wearing churchly robes, Faulkner would reassume the more directly satirical pose he had adopted in treating Elder Watson. This time, his spleen would vent itself in a humorous condemnation of three Protestant ministers whom he believed had egregiously overstepped their ordained bounds by decrying from their pulpits an upcoming petition and vote to legalize the public sale and consumption of beer in Lafayette County, Miss. To maximize his audience, Faulkner would eschew the relatively private domain of poetry in favor of the more immediately direct and accessible medium of the prose broadside; he would have the *Oxford*

Eagle print single-sheet copies of his response entitled "To the Voters of Oxford," and would personally assist in distributing it door to door in Oxford. Employing in his "Beer Broadside" a pseudo-scientific pose to reinforce his rebuttal of arguments previously published and disseminated in church by Ministers H.E. Finger, Jr., John K. Johnson, and Frank Moody Purser, "William Faulkner/Private Citizen" would contend that clergymen, without exception, should not interpose themselves through the influence of their office in public elections and other matters of temporal preference; to do so was to arrogate judgments best left to the democratic process. For his final point, Faulkner would express his expectation for "a freer Oxford, where publicans can be law abiding publicans six days a week, and Ministers of God can be Ministers of God all seven days in the week, as the Founder of their Ministry commanded them to when He ordered them to keep out of temporal politics in His own words: 'Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's.'"⁴ Once again, the bottom line, though couched along broadly humorous and satirical lines, and not a little Swiftian in attitude, intent, and tone, was unmistakably one of outrage against hypocrisy; specifically, religious cant.

Perhaps the final incarnation of Elder Watson is Flem Snopes, whose funeral in *The Mansion* (1959) occasions this description:

He (the deceased) had no auspices either: fraternal, civic, nor military: only finance; not an economy—cotton or cattle or anything else which Yoknapatawpha County or Mississippi were established on and kept running by, but belonging simply to Money. He had been a member of a Jefferson church true enough, as the outward and augmented physical aspect of the edifice showed, but even that had been not a subservience nor even an aspiration nor even really a confederation nor even an amnesty, but simply an armistice temporary between two irreconcilable tongues. (*MAN* 419)

This evocation functions on two levels: first, as an affirmation of Faulkner's overall thematic continuity—with the "irreconcilable tongues" of money and salvation sounding in a funeral scene, and, more importantly, as a full circling back to Faulkner's literary origins: that melting-pot filled with poems and inchoate Snopeses Faulkner and Phil Stone doubtless stirred together, certainly by the early 1920's.

This survey of literary treatments of a fundamental thesis which compelled William Faulkner during a career lasting more than forty years by no means exhausts poignant examples one might select to reinforce it. It should, however, serve to order and stabilize a preoccupation of Faulkner's often easier to isolate through individual citations and confirm as a pervasive pattern of perception and response than to trace to its sources. The publication of "Elder Watson in Heaven" pushes back the time frame in which William Faulkner seriously undertook what would become a salient theme in his most highly developed fiction and fixes it with some degree of certainty in the year 1921.

⁴See Linton R. Massey, "Man Working," 1919-1962, *William Faulkner: A Catalogue of the William Faulkner Collections at the University of Virginia* (Charlottesville, UP of Virginia, 1968): 118.