
LOUIS DANIEL BRODSKY

William Faulkner: Poet at Large

I

BILLY FALKNER was already writing verse when Phil Stone first met him in Oxford, Mississippi, in 1914. For the next decade, Stone would encourage, browbeat, and cajole *his* student not only to practice writing by emulating such then-considered masters as Swinburne, Keats, Shelley, and Housman but also to stay current by voraciously reading the contemporary voices of Amy Lowell, T.S. Eliot, H.D., Richard Aldington, e.e. cummings, the Imagists and Symbolists. Stone supplied the books, the personal criticism, and the contacts to whom he and Faulkner as editor and author (in that order in Stone's proprietary hierarchy) might submit the youthful poet's increasing repertoire of poetry. From their mutual efforts, two poems actually achieved national publication: "L'Après-Midi d'un Faune," in the August 6, 1919 issue of the *New Republic*, and "Portrait," in the June, 1922 issue of the *Double Dealer*. But no further offers to publish the "young Southern poet of unusual promise," as the "Notes on Contributors" section of the New Orleans literary magazine referred to Faulkner, seemed to be forthcoming.¹

Notwithstanding, on June 20, 1923, William Faulkner took the initiative to write The Four Seas Company, of Boston, offering for possible publication a collection of poems, some of which may have been revised from earlier versions in *Visions in Spring*, a typed, eighty-eight-page booklet Faulkner handbound in 1921; he had entitled this manuscript *Orpheus, and Other Poems*. It was rejected more by Faulkner than the publishing firm which had offered to publish it if money were advanced for its printing costs. Instead, Faulkner assembled a different manuscript consisting of poems written during the months of April, May, and June, 1919, entitled *The Marble Faun*. Phil Stone took up the beat, and together both young men were soon conspiring to get Faulkner published in book form by The Four Seas Company, a firm which had published at least two books of poetry Stone had purchased over the years and no doubt had shared with his protégé: *Sour Grapes*, 1922, by William Carlos Williams, and *Images Old and New*, 1916, by Richard Aldington.²

Apparently satisfied that the Faulkner/Stone consortium would subvent the four hundred dollars required for publication of the projected volume of poetry Faulkner had sent, The Four Seas Company proceeded with and had page proofs to

¹These two magazines, multiple copies of *The Marble Faun*, the typescript of *Mississippi Poems*, and more especially the Homer K. Jones documents which create the focal point of this article are included as numbers 38, 39, and 40 in *Faulkner: A Comprehensive Guide to the Brodsky Collection, Vol I: The Bibliography*, by Louis Daniel Brodsky and Robert W. Hamblin (Jackson: The University Press of Mississippi, 1982). I wish to extend my special appreciation to Jill Faulkner Summers for allowing me to bequeath to scholarship all her father's materials in my collection through the *Comprehensive Guide* and, by extension, ancillary publications calling attention to the multi-volume *Guide*.

²*Images Old and New*, by Richard Aldington, is one of numerous *survivors* from Phil Stone's library acquired by William Boozer and now part of his Faulkner Collection.

Faulkner by late September, 1924. By October 16, these proofs were back in Boston, fully corrected. On October 19, Stone sent a thick packet containing not only the form letter which they were to print and send out to prospective buyers of *The Marble Faun*, but an undetermined group of *new* poems from which the publisher might wish to choose a few for promotional purposes. One of these poems was entitled "Mississippi Hills: My Epitaph."³ Stone's offerings were accompanied by a simple, yet suggestive proviso: Four Seas would be free to make use of any of these new poems, provided that Faulkner would have unencumbered right to them for his next book.

Ultimately, the anticipated publication date of November 1, 1924, was delayed and postponed again, partly because of Stone's tardiness in completing and submitting his "Preface." December 15 became the official date of publication. The earliest presentation inscriptions suggest that Faulkner and Stone received their first copies on December 19, 1924.⁴

As well as marking both the apex and almost simultaneous culmination of Faulkner's aspirations and achievements as a poet,⁵ the period prior to publication of *The Marble Faun* was climactic for the young poet in two other significant ways. After an absence of nearly six months, in 1918, spent as a civilian worker in New Haven and as a cadet in the Royal Air Force in Toronto, Faulkner had returned to Oxford to live. With one other major exception, in 1921, when he had clerked in Lord & Taylor's Doubleday bookstore in New York, he remained a resident of that small northern Mississippi town until publication of *The Marble Faun*. And although he expressed his restlessness, by traveling frequently to Greenville and Clarksdale, Mississippi, and to Memphis on social outings, he had failed to make a break with the confining environment of his family and relatives and university friends—that narrow world in which convention would have him pursue and hold a *responsible* position, and where for three years, in the guise of university postmaster, he actually tried to work at a routine job.

On October 31, 1924, under severe censure and coercion, William Faulkner officially resigned from the postmaster's job which Phil Stone had been instrumental in securing for him in 1922, through his growing influence as a young Mississippi lawyer. Although this resignation seemed to cause Faulkner no great humiliation, it must have carried with it certain embarrassment in the tightly-knit social community of which he was, at least marginally, a patrician member (his father Murray was a member of the University administration).

At just about the same time, Faulkner received an unequivocal request to cease his activities as scoutmaster of the local, church-affiliated troop which he had directed for a number of years. Although he had developed a reputation as a positive force in teaching young people the pleasures and values of outdoor camping and mastering new skills, some individuals condemned him, both privately and publicly, as a negative influence because of his notorious habit of drinking.

³ This, and eleven other poems variously dated October through December, 1924, was incorporated by Faulkner into a manuscript with the title *Mississippi Poems*. On December 30, 1924, Faulkner inscribed a carbon copy of this typed manuscript for an old school friend, Myrtle Ramey. Among the offerings contained in this group was the poem "Pregnacy." With its unconsciously misspelled title, it ended up as the final poem in the series which one can only suppose Faulkner and Stone were preparing, possibly in the process of adding to it, for eventual publication.

⁴ On the publication of *The Marble Faun* and Faulkner's difficulties in his positions as postmaster and scoutmaster, see Joseph Blotner, *Faulkner: A Biography* (New York: Random House, 1974), pp. 347-82.

⁵ Faulkner composed at least three other books of poetry either concurrent with or following *The Marble Faun*. One, consisting of twelve poems and a title page dated "October, 1924" on fourteen typed pages, was called *Mississippi Poems*. A second, lettered and bound by hand and dated June, 1926, contained sixteen poems variously dated June through September, 1925; it was entitled *Helen: A Courtship*. The third, *A Green Bough*, published in 1933 by Smith and Haas, consisted almost entirely of poems, although in most cases revised, composed before December 19, 1924. Among these, now carrying the Roman numeral XXIX instead of a title, was a revised version of the poem "Pregnacy."

Responding more than two decades later to Malcolm Cowley's last-minute request for biographical information he might incorporate into the dust jacket copy for *The Portable Faulkner* Viking was about to publish in April of 1946, Faulkner alluded to this occasion of his *resignation* from the scouts:

When I came back from RAF . . . I didn't want to go to work; it was by my father's request that I entered the University, which I didn't want to do either. That was in 1920. Since then I have: Painted houses. Served as a 4th class postmaster . . . Oh yes, was a scout master for two years, was fired for moral reasons.⁶

During the last week of November, 1924, Faulkner, accompanied by a friend, Mr. Kelly, attended a party at the home of Mrs. Homer K. Jones, in Memphis.⁷ He recorded some of the circumstances of this gathering and the incidents proceeding from it in the following previously unpublished handwritten letter which he sent to his host, from Oxford, Mississippi:

My dear Mrs. Jones—

I seem to recall, when Mr Kelly and I were with you one evening last week, giving you a copy of one of my poems. Mr Kelly and I were having such a grand time then that I dont know what I wrote; whatever it was, I am sure it was undecipherable, so I am taking the liberty of sending you a correct copy of the verse, as you are interested in literature. Also, this was [the] poem which I tried so unsuccessfully to recite.

I am sorry to have needlessly annoyed you about the pipe and scarf. The pipe I later found, having left it somewhere else. The muffler I had after we left you, I am reliably informed. What I am asking pardon for, is failing to call you again as I should. Almost immediately after calling you that morning I was arrested on a moral charge,⁸ and by the time I was a free agent again, I had forgotten it. Please forgive me, and thank you for the whisky-and-soda. I dont know whether I drank it or not, but it was a beautiful tipple.

Please give my regards to Mr Jones.
Sincerely yours,

Oxford, Miss.
2 Dec. 1924

William Faulkner

⁶ Malcolm Cowley, *The Faulkner-Cowley File: Letters and Memories, 1944-1962* (New York: The Viking Press, 1966), pp. 67-68. In a footnote Cowley says "moral reasons" refers to Faulkner's notoriety as the author of *Sanctuary*. *Sanctuary* was not actually published until February 9, 1931.

⁷ This information was supplied to me by Miss Jacquelin Jones, daughter of Mrs. Homer K. Jones, in a phone conversation on May 14, 1982. Miss Jones still resides at the address to which Faulkner mailed his letter to Mrs. Jones dated "Dec 2. 1924." Miss Jones also noted that her mother, having been born in 1884, would have been forty years of age at the time she and Faulkner, age twenty-seven, met in their home. Furthermore, she conjectured, Faulkner might indeed have been "taken" by her mother because the latter was a well-informed reader of modern fiction and poetry.

⁸ Faulkner wrote his letter to Mrs. Jones and was "fired" as postmaster within a space of a few weeks. It is interesting to compare his statement in the letter to the biographical note supplied to Cowley, on December 8, 1945, about being dismissed as scoutmaster for "moral reasons" (see footnote 6). Faulkner clearly intends the euphemism to stand for his drinking habits.

The contents of this letter suggest more than a few simple biographical facts about William Faulkner; they disclose an ambience, a sense of the youthful Faulkner in all his recklessness, his brash and dashing bravura and pretentiousness; the poet pursuing his own image of the Bohemian artist, the absent-minded genius whose main concerns are for his art. Withal, there is still the lingering hint that its author is a sensitive Mississippi gentleman aware of his social responsibilities, propriety, and good breeding.

More importantly, this letter underscores a magical time in Faulkner's life; possibly, this period between Faulkner's first officially-published book and his recent dismissals from his job as well as from his scouting duties may have been the beginning of the one, short-lived time in his entire career when he would be a "free agent," beholden to no one other than himself: he was, as this letter implies, very much aware of himself as a single male, free (forgetting for the moment his brief arrest for public drinking) to pursue his destiny as a writer, a poet; indeed, soon, a published poet. Faulkner would evermore regret the passing of this period in his career; frequently he would refer to it when responsibilities grew too weighty for him to fathom.⁹

Also, this letter indicates habits that would recur throughout Faulkner's life. For instance, in future correspondence he would often allude to misplaced pages of manuscript, pipes, or articles of clothing. And on at least one other occasion while inebriated, Faulkner would be inspired to recite and inscribe, for companions, poetry which moved him.¹⁰

Finally, implied in this letter is Faulkner's arrogance and his own enormous sense of self-worth; indeed, he must have recognized in Mrs. Homer K. Jones a genuinely sophisticated taste for great literature. Otherwise, he surely would never have deigned to recite to her from his most recently completed work, let alone inscribe for her a copy of "Pregnacy," a new poem which obviously moved him out of his usual reticence to perform for her. Nor would he have submitted for her further approbation a "correct copy" of the poem, from Oxford, had he not considered her a discriminating and worthy critic. If anything, he had very little patience with sycophants. He disdained those he judged frauds in the literary world.

On the other hand, to those whom he admired, or was drawn to romantically, or owed his loyalty, he would consistently make gifts of his books and manuscripts; those things which he regarded as most precious. This habit, like the others mentioned, would persist throughout his career. And as with so many of Faulkner's *gifts*, this handwritten copy of "Pregnacy" which he gave to Mrs. Homer K. Jones that evening in the week of November 23, 1924, at the Joneses' house survived. Like many other recipients of his gifts, Mrs. Jones must have intuited Faulkner's potential and future greatness from his own self-confidence, his exaggerated presence. Why else would this woman have saved the scribbled poem which Faulkner himself, on sober reflection, considered must have been so "undecipherable" that he felt obliged to send along a typed carbon copy in his letter apologizing for his recent behavior?

⁹One such instance appears obliquely in a letter to Saxe Commins dated December 24, 1952 (now in the Brodsky Collection) in which he complains: "I should have stayed the tramp, with one shirt, which I was born to be."

¹⁰Years later, similar revelry produced two ink-scribbled, nearly-illegible quatrains approximating James Joyce's poem, "Watching the Needleboats at San Sabba," which Faulkner entered on the endpaper of Anthony Buttitta's copy of *Mosquitoes*. See Carl Petersen, *Each In Its Ordered Place: A Faulkner Collector's Notebook* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Ardis Publishers 1975), p. 29 (item A4d).

The version of "Pregnacy," which is transcribed below, had been hastily written out by Faulkner, in brown ink, on the verso of what must have been a handy piece of letterhead stationery printed with the logo: "Dr. Willis C. Campbell/Clinic/869 Madison Ave./Memphis, Tenn." Apparently Faulkner's pen ran out of ink before he could complete his rendition of the poem; the last line and a half, as well as one correction and his signature, "William Faulkner," at the bottom of the leaflet, are in pencil:

As to an ancient music's hidden fall
 Her seed in the huddled dark was warm and wet,
 And three cold stars were riven in the wall:
 Rain and dark and death above her door were set.

Her hands moaned on her breast in blind
 and supple fire,
 Made light within her cave: she saw her harried
 Body wrung to a strange and tortured lyre,
 Whose music [was once *del.*] once was pure
 strings simply married

One to another in simple diffidence
 Her strange and happy sorrows once were wed:
 But what tomorrow's [song *del.*]
 chords be recompense,
 For yesterday's simple song unravished?

Three stars in her heart, when she awakes
 As winter's [sleep *del.*] sleep [*illeg. del.*]
 breaks greening in the rain,
 And in the caverned [earth *del.*]
 earth spring's rumor shakes,
 As in her loins, the tilled and quickened grain

A collation of this autograph manuscript keyed to the carbon typescript "correct copy" (C.C.)¹¹ dated November 10, 1924, which Faulkner sent to Mrs. Jones in the same envelope with his letter to her, dated December 2, 1924, follows:

line 4: dark] fire] C.C.
 line 7: tortured] bitter] C.C.
 line 8: married] married.] C.C.
 line 9: simple] sleepy] C.C.
 line 10: Her strange . . . wed:] Her thin . . . wed,] C.C.
 line 11: But . . . recompense,] And . . . recompense] C.C.
 line 12: simple] single] C.C.
 line 13: heart,] heart] C.C.
 line 16: grain] grain.] C.C.

¹¹ It should be noted that the "correct copy" Faulkner sent to Mrs. Jones is actually a second carbon copy, not the manifold copy, which would have been positioned just beneath the carbon paper during typing; in fact, it is a "third copy" of the poem. Close study shows that this "correct copy" is an exact, though less distinct, duplicate of the carbon copy of "Pregnacy" that appeared as the last poem in the manuscript, *Mississippi Poems*, Faulkner gave to Myrtle Ramey, on December 30, 1924. (see footnote 3)

Inebriated or not, or to what degree, remains a matter of speculation, and, ultimately, it is of little consequence. What is significant is the sense of artistic decorum which Faulkner felt necessary to maintain at this stage of his career. There are few substantive changes that the "correct copy" makes manifest; rather, the carbon copy supersedes the original recreation as much for neatness as for correctness. Faulkner was, whatever his inability in holding a steady job, an artist; specifically, a poet whose first book, *The Marble Faun*, was, at the time this letter was written, less than two weeks away from removing him from obscurity. Furthermore, he was a very proud poet, and for someone of Mrs. Homer K. Jones's caliber, it would not do for him to leave her with a slovenly impression of his newest work. At age twenty-seven, as poet at large, William Faulkner, of Oxford, Mississippi, already had a self-styled image to maintain as well as a vision to project to the literary world of Memphis, Tennessee, and beyond.

But Faulkner's poetic meteor would soon burn out. He would travel to New Orleans, settle for a time in the Vieux Carre, and discover that his true calling was not poetry at all, but prose; some of the most poetical prose the English language would ever know.