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THE MARBLE FAUN

BY
WILLIAM FAULKNER



BOSTON
THE FOUR SEAS COMPANY
PUBLISHERS

John McClure.
 "Literature and Less."
 New Orleans *Times-Picayune*, January 25,
 1925, Magazine Section,
 p. 6.

It is doubtful if there are a dozen thoroughly successful long poems in English. When a young poet attempts sustained production he is under Lloyd's or anybody's averages, predestined to failure. The most he can hope for, even if his name is Keats, is to fail with honor. Mr. William Faulkner, a Southern poet from whom we shall hear a great deal in future, has failed, it seems to this reviewer, but with real honor.

The Marble Faun, by William Faulkner, with a preface by Phil Stone, although not a completely successful work, is a book of verse rich in promise, and successful in part.

The candled flames of roses here
 Gutter gold in this still air

is a couplet of fine poetry if this reviewer ever saw one. And *The Marble Faun* contains scores of excellent passages. The book, with all its immaturity, proves that Mr. Faulkner is a born poet, with remarkable ability.

This poem was written when its author was barely of voting age. It is the forerunner of a more mature volume of shorter poems which will be brought out this year. That volume of later work should contain some genuinely excellent sustained productions. The excellencies of *The Marble Faun* are sporadic: charming couplets or passages sandwiched between stretches of creditable but not remarkable verse. The

general effect of the poem is vague. It is a prophetic book, rather than a chronicle of past performance. Mr. Faulkner possesses to an exceptional degree imagination, emotion, a creative impulse in diction and a keen sense of rhythm and form—all attributes demanded of a fine poet. The deficiencies of *The Marble Faun* are deficiencies of youth—diffuseness and over-exuberance, impatient simile and metaphor which sometimes miss the mark, and a general galloping technique which runs away with the author every now and then. Immaturity is almost the only indictment which can be brought against the work.

To say that *The Marble Faun* is a long poem is in a way incorrect. It is a series of fairly short poems, natural episodes, but it is bound into a whole by prologue, epilogue and thread of argument, and is apparently intended to achieve unity of effect. Mr. Stone in his preface refers to the book as a book of "poems." This is correct, literally, but the work is stronger when viewed as a whole, as one imagines Mr. Faulkner conceived it, when he wrote it in April, May and June of 1919.

Mr. Stone says of *The Marble Faun*:

These are primarily the poems of youth and a simple heart. They are the poems of a mind that reacts directly to sunlight and trees and skies and blue hills, reacts without evasion or self-consciousness. They are drenched in sunlight and color as is the land in which they were written, the land which gave birth and sustenance to their author. He has roots in this soil as surely and inevitably as has a tree.

The author of these poems is a man steeped in the soil of his native land, a Southerner by every instinct, and more than that, a Mississippian. George Moore said that all universal art became great by first being

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provincial, and the sunlight and mockingbirds and blue hills of North Mississippi are a part of this young man's very being.

Nobody but the poet himself ever understands all the overtones and implications in a piece of imaginative verse. *The Marble Faun*, it seems—if it must be interpreted—is an excursion into direct experience. The marble faun, with its

carven eyes
 Bent to the unchanging skies,

this creature of cold stone which “cannot break its marble bonds,” yearns to know the warm and infinitely varied life of nature. Through the necromancy of the imagination, it tours the forbidden worlds of life and motion, becoming not merely a spectator but a pulsing part of the natural scene. When we recall the not too remote similarity of flesh and marble—even though few of us are statues in a palace of art, we are all automatons in a droll wax-works—it becomes evident that Mr. Faulkner's poem is full of food for meditation. . . .

This reviewer believes that Mr. Faulkner promises fine things. He is soon off for Europe. His new book of poems will appear shortly. Those who wish to keep in touch with the development of Southern poetry will do well to acquire *The Marble Faun* and the new book when it appears. One day they may be glad to have recognized a fine poet at his first appearance.

Mr. Faulkner, who served with the British Royal Air Forces, has taken a flier at nearly everything in his time (he is only 27 now). He has been in turn an undergraduate, house painter, tramp, day laborer, dishwasher in various New England cities, clerk in a New York book shop, bank clerk and postal clerk.

Saturday Review of Literature, 1 (March 7, 1925), 587.

An attractively-made book by a young poet who has led a varied and venturesome life. He is a Southerner, having been born in Mississippi. His verse is fluent and meditative, with an occasional phrase of beauty and an occasional flaw in the rhyming. Not much more can be said. He does not strain for effects, but, on the other hand, his sensitiveness to the poetic possibilities of the language is not sufficiently developed.

Monte Cooper.
 “The Book of Verses.”
Memphis Commercial Appeal, April 5,
 1925, Section III, p. 10.

“From the time of Nathaniel Hawthorne,” writes the charming Mr. Max Beerbohm, “to the outbreak of the war, current literature did not suffer from any lack of fauns.”

It is some years since hostilities on the grand scale ceased, and current literature is again spared pain in this direction: for Mr. William Faulkner of Mississippi, has written a 50-page poem about a faun. Mr. Faulkner is splendidly atavistic, and does not in the least care how old fashioned he may be said to be; nevertheless it must have taken a fair amount of complacency to have had faith in the present significance of 48 pages of rhymed couplets—(two pages are given over to quatrains)—mostly in a plaintive minor key, where outworn phrases, such as “leafy

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glade” and its like, frequently occur.

Let us consider directly this little book so pleasantly bound in green paper boards. What has Mr. Faulkner attempted to convey in his poem? In what directions has he succeeded and what directions has he failed?

His present poetic credo is specifically expressed in an essay dated October, 1924, and entitled, “Verse, Old and Nascent: A Pilgrimage.” In this essay the author traces his poetic lineage back to its Swinburnian beginnings; admits us to a view of his precipitate alliance with contemporary free verse writers; describes his haughty withdrawal, his ultimate divorcement from their encircling arms; makes pretty bows to Shelley, to Keats, to A. E. Housman and his “Shropshire Lad,” and asks: “Is there nowhere among us a Keats in embryo—someone who will tune his lute to the beauty of the world . . . Is not there among us someone who can write something beautiful and passionate and sad instead of saddening?” The essay ends with this rhetorical question. The signature, William Faulkner, follows with magnificent simplicity.

The author would not pretend to claim, however, that his *The Marble Faun* is even embryonically Keatsian. The early allegiance to Swinburne coupled with two statements in the preface to the poem: “This is a first book . . . These are the poems of youth—” enables us to avoid all speculation as to Mr. Faulkner’s ability to carry on the sacred torch of universal beauty, unlighted, in his opinion, during these sordid times. It is with Swinburne, his master at the time of writing *The Marble Faun*, with whom we must compare him. The path for the critic is clearly marked.

Laying aside all question as to the usefulness of a return to the manner of a nineteenth century poet—(Swinburne has his admirers and his readers today)—we

then ask: “What has William Faulkner to offer that his master has not said better?”

First, he has many pages of delicate rhyming couplets, that ring in their best lines with a silvery daintiness; that evoke the image of a kitten stepping fastidiously through wet leaves. There is none of the sweep and the swing of the best of Swinburne’s verse—none of the stirring vigor of *The Atalanta Chorus*—but there is this delicacy voicing, for the most part, a sweet and rather plaintive resignation.

“Upon a wood’s dim shaded edge
 Stands a dusty hawthorn hedge
 Beside a road from which I pass
 To cool my feet in deep rich grass.
 I pause to listen to the song
 Of a brook spilling along.
 Behind a patchy willow screen
 Whose lazy evening shadows lean
 Their scattered gold upon a glade
 Through which the staring daisies wade.
 And the resilient poplar trees,
 Slowly turning in the breeze,
 Flash their facets in the sun,
 Swaying in slow unison.”

This is Mr. Faulkner at his best. But what, then? Fifty pages of monotonous, if silvery, intoning, must prove to be soporific to the most alert mind, to the most favorably interested reader. All of the verse, however, is by no means of this degree of excellence. Besides an annoying return to the stupid inversions of the Victorians—besides an even more annoying use of accented last syllables. In past participles: “golden wi-red;” “thin-branched shade;” “Lea-fed walls;” “dark etched bars;” there are glaring defects that occur, each more than once, in this poem of a faun of marble, planted in a garden and watching the seasons pass. These defects are: choice of metaphors not only mixed but only too often far from happy, indeed several times verging on the ridiculous, as

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when, after the line, “Philomel dreams naked here—” a plucked, livid, reptilian nightingale is scarcely the image that any poet who uses the word Philomel intends to summon before his reader’s eyes; second, a disregard for meaning, that, however, like his Swinburne, has yet been acknowledged by some of the long haired poet’s admirers to be a real fault; and third, sudden descents into commonplace, even stumbling lines, devoid of distinction and of grace. These are quite inexcusable. We can overlook changes in cadence that are unsuccessful—(although Mr. Faulkner might learn much of the subtleties of irregular cadences from his contemporaries from whose contamination he has so definitely withdrawn). These are faults that might be outgrown with practice and the cultivation of what might be called a sense of rhythmical irregularity; but no poet, however young, should be commonplace; no poet of great promise would have been acquiescent in printing such ugly lines as these:

“And the moon that sits there in the
 skies—”
 “To comb the wave-ponies manes
 back—”
 “Why cannot we always be—”

These are clumsy descents from grace and beauty.

Mr. Faulkner evidently thinks that the same phrases, perhaps unusually felicitous in his opinion, can bear repetition. For whatever reason, he has repeated himself several times. “Inky trees,” he has used twice and “velvet night.” Again, his faun, remaining passive when surrounded by nymphs, and thereby proving his unlikeness to the more inflammable animal drawn by Mallarmé, describes these creatures who have come to bathe in the stream, where—

“. they meet
 Inverted selves stretched at their feet.”

Only two pages farther on the “Swan’s inverted graces” proves either that Mr. Faulkner was very careless or very devil-may-care. The result is equally repetitious and tedious.

There remains one more fault for which it is difficult to forgive him. Mr. Faulkner glories in his localism. We cannot but wonder, however, if his rhyming of “rim” with “them” and again “dim” with “them” was voluntary. He was educated in Oxford—Mississippi. If these were involuntary slips, due to a provincial accent, we can but respectfully point out a slip. If they were deliberate then it is high time that Mr. Faulkner should have learned that affected localisms are as unbearable in a writer as affected cosmopolitanism.

Taken in conjunction with the two essays, one of which has been already outlined, and another called “On Criticism” in which Mr. Faulkner tells the critics just what he thinks of them, the disarming simplicity of *The Marble Faun* is dimmed in part. The essays are dogmatic; there is in them a sneering quality, especially in regard to women, that is half baked and raw, and in one or two places rather evil smelling. Such words as entrails, masculinity, prostitution, are employed in a straining after the arresting phrase, a straining that was absent in the poem. It seems that Mr. Faulkner, in his splendid isolation from his American fellows is somewhat embittered—almost angry.

One turns away from the two essays, preferring the early poem, where an undeniably sensitive nature, so evidently now abraded, expanded before the contemplation of Mississippi mocking birds, Abyssinian nightingales, Italian formal gardens, hot noons, brooks, fields, Pan and his inevitable pipes, the whirl of the tired old earth, and the softness of falling snow.

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“The soundless quiet flakes slide past
 Like teardrops on a sheet of glass,”

Pretty sounds, but who has seen tears falling on a sheet of glass? Tears went into tearbottles could once be seen any day in Greece, we are told. We must let it go at that.

But we will not end on an unsympathetic note. There is real delicacy and a pensive charm about some of the verses in this first book, for which after all, not great pretensions have been made. Mr. Faulkner, in his essay “On Criticism,” has said that: “With the American, the last word carries weight, is culminative.” The critic, according to Mr. Faulkner, too often abuses his privilege of having the last

word. In this case, the only gracious gesture is to reverse the usual order. Therefore, at the end, these quatrains from *The Marble Faun*.

“Let your finger, languorous,
 Slightly curl, palm upward rest.
 The silent noon waits over us,
 The feathers stir not on his breast.

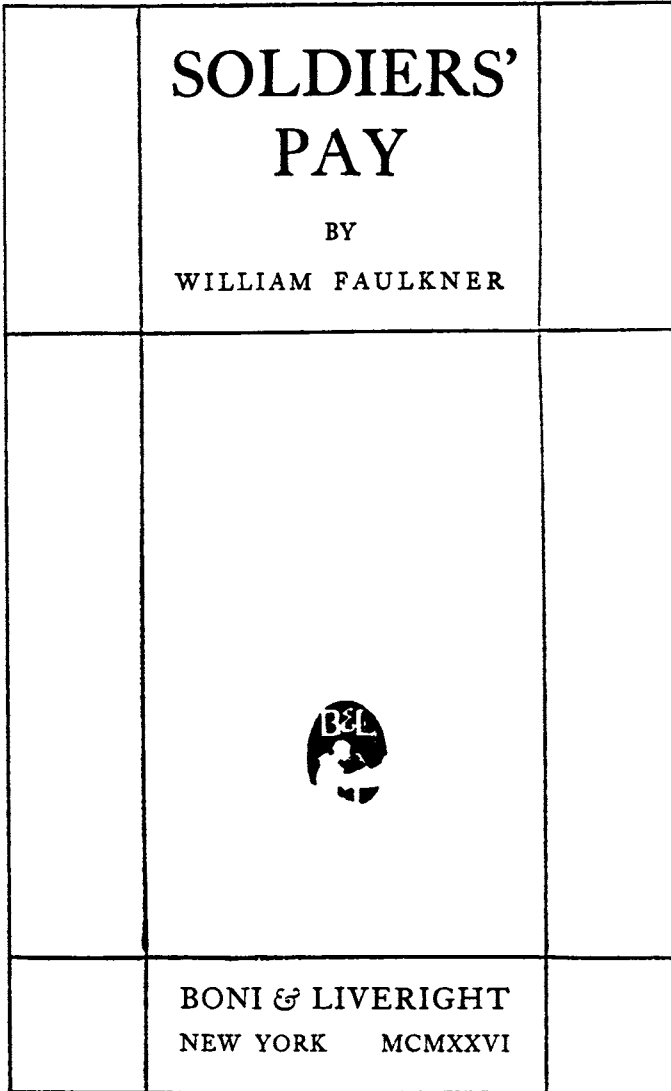
“There is no sound nor shrill of pipe,
 Your feet are noiseless on the ground;
 The earth is full and stillily ripe,
 In all the land there is no sound.

“There is a great God who sees all
 And in my throat bestows this boon;
 To ripple the silence with my call
 When the world sleeps and it is noon.”

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SOLDIERS' PAY

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E. Hartley Grattan.
 "A Book of Hatred."
New York Sun, April 3,
 1926, p. 8.

This novel revolves about the almost silent and very sinister figure of Donald Mahon. He has been shattered physically and mentally in the world war. On his face is a horrible scar. On his spirit is a slaying apathy. About him are clustered a group of major figures and several minor. The major figures are his father, a rather extraordinary Episcopal minister; Joe Gilligan, an ex-private; Mrs. Powers, wife of a soldier killed in France; and Cecily Saunders, Mahon's fiancée (an alliance contracted before the war). The scene of the action is a small Southern town, but it is the peculiar quality of this novel that the characters and their interactions dominate the book almost exclusively. Scene is reduced to minimal importance.

These characters are thrown together in a fashion rather reminiscent of, say, Dostoevsky. That is to say, haphazard. And in consequence one feels that their being together is so fortuitous as to be almost inexplicable. Joe Gilligan is introduced drunk on a train bound West from Buffalo. Donald Mahon suddenly swims into his consciousness, and he enlists in Mahon's service to the extent of taking Mahon home and spending several months in close attendance upon him. Mrs. Powers comes upon Gilligan, Mahon and a third character only fleetingly and occasionally in the action, while walking through the train, and attaches herself to the party, becomes Mahon's other attendant and eventually marries him.

Januarius Jones ambles casually into the book shortly before the party arrives at Mahon's home. He has but little direct

connection with Mahon and his satellites. His function will be indicated later. Cecily's relation to Mahon is obvious. But one is amazed that a man in Mahon's condition should be on a train unattended anyway, and that Gilligan and Mrs. Powers were so unattached that they could associate themselves with a quite casual acquaintance.

Once arrived in the Southern town the drama unrolls. Mahon sunk into apathy, terribly scarred, slowly goes blind. His fiancée is repelled, horrified by his appearance, and runs away from him. He cares for nothing that is going on around him. He is dying. His death closes the book. But whirled around him is a picture of postwar social life. And the burden of this life is sex released from the prewar restraints. Cecily is a flapper, so-called, and has her boy friends. To one of them she gives herself, to use a polite euphemism, and eventually marries him. Januarius Jones, pictured as fat and lazy, pursues women in his capacity as "magnificent hedonist" (Cf. the blurb).

Mahon is, of course, unaware of the saturnalia. But Gilligan and Mrs. Powers are actually aware of it, particularly Gilligan. So is William Faulkner, the author of the book. And into his novel he has pumped the most bitter, envenomed hatred of sex that one can well imagine. The whole passionate strength of his book is derived from his hatred. He hates it with his whole being. And I strongly suspect that he felt a relief when he finished the book and knew that to some extent he had freed himself from the burden it was upon him.

Fortunately, Mr. Faulkner is sufficiently the artist not to make his book a tract. Don't get that impression. His emotions are carefully directed into aesthetic channels. And fleetingly he writes passages of genuine beauty, showing the quality of