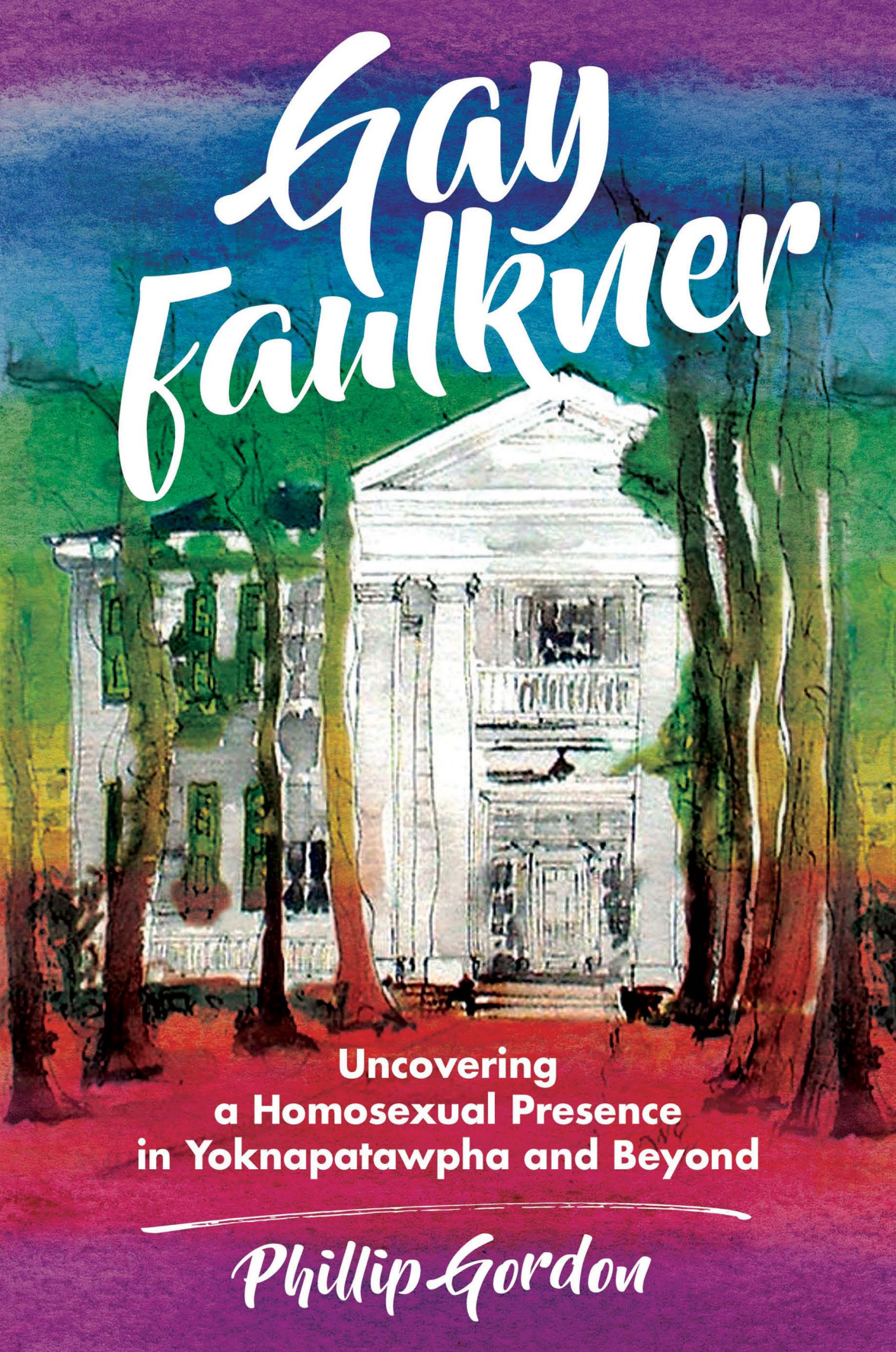
Gay Faulkner



Uncovering a Homosexual Presence in Yoknapatawpha and Beyond

Phillip Gordon

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For the "quair" kids—and the queer kids—for all the kids who have known how certain labels are meant to exclude us. Never forget that this world is our world, this life our life. This book is dedicated to you.

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Chapter 2

Queer Faulkner

In the spring of 1918, Faulkner left Oxford for New Haven, Connecticut, where he shared a room with Phil Stone, who was completing a degree at Yale. While there, he hatched a plan with Stone to join the British Royal Flying Corps and eventually moved to Canada to begin flight training. The war ended before he completed this training, and in December 1918 Faulkner returned to Oxford; but notably this Oxford did not have Estelle. From 1918 to 1929, Faulkner would leave and return to Oxford in a series of attempts to find a place for himself beyond his hometown. At the same time, he often found himself in his hometown, as a student at the University of Mississippi, originally, then as something of the town bum called "Count No 'Count." The basic arc of his life for these eleven years is outlined in numerous biographical studies: Oxford, New York, Oxford, New Orleans, Europe, New Orleans, Oxford. Estelle also made regular trips home to Oxford in a trajectory that mapped the deteriorating path of her marriage. Faulkner would often be in Oxford for Estelle's visits, but Judith Sensibar cautions that, at least for the first five to six years of that marriage, Faulkner would not necessarily have had his eye on his own eventual courtship of her. Rather, he courted Helen Baird in New Orleans in the mid-1920s, even devoting a novel and a collection of poems to her. He may have engaged in other "courtships" during this period as well.

When Faulkner got off the train from Canada in 1918, he returned a changed man in that he had begun to fashion for himself a series of new identities. As James G. Watson details, Faulkner played the part of the wounded soldier, despite having neither fought in the actual war nor been injured in it or even in his training. This performance, though important in his life, was not his only guise. In *The Origins of Faulkner's Art*, Judith Sensibar details another mask that he often wore, that of the poseur, or the Pierrot figure of the impostor, a literary trope with which he was fascinated. A more prosaic way of expressing this identity, following Williamson, would be that Faulkner took on the pose of a would-be bohemian after his return from the war. He wore old, ragged clothes and affected a detached attitude; he wrote adaptations of the imagist and symbolist poets he so deeply admired; and he experimented with pen-and-ink drawings

clearly inspired by Audrey Beardsley. To an extent, he modeled his notion of the bohemian on decadent and other fin de siècle luminaries such as Oscar Wilde, whose "art for art's sake" commitment to aesthetic pleasure greatly influenced Faulkner as he made his first forays into being an "artist," the bridging identity that links these other manifestations of Faulkner's developing sense of self.

Faulkner's performances all deserve the critical attention that has been paid to them. In particular, his performance of the wounded soldier, and how that performance would work its way into his fiction, bears great relevance to this study and its search for gay themes in Faulkner's writing, but to understand the deeper implications of that performance, we first need to consider another performance that so far has not received the critical attention it deserves but is also at the heart of this nexus of identities that Faulkner appropriated in the wake of World War I. Taken as a whole, Faulkner's various performances speak to the degree to which he wanted to set himself apart from his hometown; he wanted to be different. One way in which he did this was through a performance of an emerging "queer" identity that extends from his earlier "quair" designation. Beginning in 1918, Faulkner began to pose as a homosexual.

Faulkner was, apparently, keenly aware of the cultural value of the various roles he played and how, at that moment in history, the signs of these other performances also bled into a "queer" identity that was coming into focus as a discernible "gay" identity. We know that Faulkner embraced this identity because of the multiple times he placed himself directly into the milieu of gay subcultures and surrounded himself with gay men. We also know that he embraced this identity because of the way that he treated it in his writing. When Faulkner returned to Oxford in 1918, he returned not as the youth with a degree of freedom allowed him until he embraced expectations but as the queer man who had failed to follow the natural progression of life via the Victorian pathways recognizable to his hometown. His reaction to his new role in town was to enroll in the university, write queer poems and stories, and befriend—in fact court—a young man he met before the war, Ben Wasson.

Ben Wasson, who would prove to be one of Faulkner's few lifelong friends, was a homosexual, though he was not the only homosexual on the campus at Ole Miss in the late 1910s. He was simply the one whom Faulkner chose to court. We could almost intuit that in a social space such as a university that attracted young men and women from all over the state and the South, we would find a greater diversity of people in the student population than the local town population (though at Ole Miss, that population would not include any racial diversity until 1962). That greater diversity would seem, we might hope, to allow that homosexuality surfaced on the campus. Unfortunately, intuition fails in this matter, thanks largely to the degree to which homosexuality was, as Eve Sedgwick terms it, an "open secret," but it was perhaps still more secret than open. What was generally known on campus then has largely disappeared

over the gap of time as memory has consolidated into the erasures of hindsight. Nonetheless, proof for such an intuition does exist. It comes from a series of letters that Joseph Blotner received from an Ole Miss alumnus named Paul Rogers, a contemporary of Faulkner's and Wasson's from their undergraduate days. Rogers took it upon himself to write Blotner after the publication of his original two-volume authorized biography of the late William Faulkner. As Blotner was composing his revisions for his one-volume edition of the biography in early 1980, he exchanged letters with Rogers, who insisted that, despite the evidence of Faulkner's publishing lesbian-themed homoerotic poems in *The Mississippian* in 1919, homosexuality was neither known nor discussed on campus. He also insisted repeatedly in his letters that Wasson was not gay, though Rogers also claimed that he never knew Wasson intimately. However, what Rogers claims that no one knew sketches in outline what seems to have been well known on the Ole Miss campus at the time: the open secret of homosexuality. At numerous points in his letters, Rogers's denials function as a kind of backhanded admission, as if his rhetorical gestures are escaping his control to occlude in his version of early 1920s undergraduate life the actual state of affairs at the university.

The first letter in this series relevant to campus homosexuality arrived from Rogers in April 1980. In it, Rogers constructed an imagined campus innocence as he ruminated nostalgically,

> The University of Mississippi is the one place where I have lived as an adult that homosexuality was a theme of no interests to the students. In fact, I never heard that word during the four years I was there. There was another, but so seldom heard that it is fair to say that the matter was almost never discussed. I wish it were that way now.[1]

First, "it" is not that way now, and we might question to what extent to which it was "that way" then. Second, that Rogers offers this information about homosexuality at all implies a degree of anxiety that suggests a closeting of what was, perhaps, more well known than Rogers wants to remember. Thus, his letter reads like a kind of revisionist nostalgia, a purifying attempt to make his memories of Oxford great again.

To Blotner's credit, he did not buy Rogers's version of events. In his reply from May 1980, he gently pushed back by addressing Wasson's homosexuality more explicitly than he ever allowed himself to address it in published form in either of his two biographies. To Rogers's denials, Blotner replied:

> A propos of "Sapphics" and homosexuality being a theme of no interest to the students at Ole Miss, do you think they were naive about it, or would the conventional gentlemanly code have precluded such attention to it? A couple of recent

> books have tried to assess WF's sexuality, along predictable and, I think, somewhat unlikely lines. I do remember, though a Charlottesville doctor, a member of the Farmington Hunt, asked me about it obliquely, because of his own orientation, I think. I don't know if you knew Ben Wasson. It has been suggested to me that Ben was homosexual. Do you recall how he was regarded on the campus. One man said as a boy he was beautiful, angelic, taken up by older students and perhaps spoiled by them.[2]

Rogers responded in June to deny that Wasson was a homosexual, while simultaneously denying that he knew Wasson very well except by reputation for his striking features. In his efforts to defend the reputation of his alma mater, however, Rogers produced one of the most striking statements of the letter exchange: that Faulkner, not Wasson, was more "sophisticated" in regard to gay life. Rogers wrote, "I would suspect now that WF [William Faulkner] himself was more sophisticated about homosexuality than any student at Ole Miss, if only because of his numerous trips to Memphis and his acquaintance with the Victorians."[3] With this statement, Rogers effectively placed homosexuality in close proximity to Ole Miss—in this case in nearby Memphis, Tennessee—but only by way of reiterating the basic premise of the myth of homosexuality: that it is urban (Memphis) in relation to the rural (Oxford). Rogers, also, firmly placed Faulkner into this myth. Faulkner did, in fact, travel to Memphis often in the early 1920s with Phil Stone. The "Victorians" in Rogers's letter probably refers to Swinburne and other poets whom Faulkner imitated in his early published poems in the campus newspaper. Finally, to justify his nostalgia, Rogers effectively constructed another myth about homosexuality: it comes from elsewhere or is somehow a foreign infection, such as one that a soldier might be exposed to when he goes off to war and returns, bringing the infection with him.

Most striking in Rogers's letters is his dichotomy of urban and rural. The rural, including the pristine Ole Miss campus, inevitably transforms in these letters into the only place in Rogers's adult life not infected with the viral homosexuality apparently so rampant in the rest of society. Elsewhere, Rogers would go so far as to provide, "In 1925, I was a graduate at Cornell University. This was the time, and almost the very year, in which homosexuality burst, so to speak, upon the country and became a subject of open interest and conversation."[4] His sense of the timing is considerably off, historically speaking, as is, again, his geography, but his nostalgia in these passages is tied to a larger myth of gay life.[5] The proximity of Cornell to the cityscape of New York would make it, mythically at least, more susceptible to the gay influences found therein. Meanwhile, Mississippi could never harbor native homosexuality, or so the myth goes, at least not until it has had the insidious opportunity to spread itself slowly southward. This myth of isolation, best epitomized in John Howard's study *Men Like That*, traces gay history as a history of urban spaces, originally New York,

San Francisco, and Los Angeles, that over time extends to the hinterlands of Memphis, New Orleans, Atlanta, and even Birmingham. Howard implicates gay historians as complicit in upholding this historical pattern that gay life means urban life: as he says, "Where many are gathered, there is the historian" (12). He means to imply that where homosexuals live in less robust and discernibly coherent communities, historians often disregard that they exist at all, or, put more plainly, where few are visible, historians fear to tread. This pattern leads to a perpetuation of a variety of myths of rural gay life, including themes of isolation, suicide, and self-loathing, as if the lack of a gay community in small towns, particularly in Mississippi, the focal site of Howard's study, self-eradicates any gay presence that might rear its head therein.

At another point, Rogers claimed that the word "homosexual" had no currency at Ole Miss during the early 1920s. He instead supplied the expression more common on campus:

> But one thing is certain, the subject of homosexuality was not [a]t that time of much concern, as it is now and has been for the last fifty years. In fact, at the university there was only one word for it (indicated by the two letters C & S), and the male student's pundonor, or point of honor, was phrased as follows, "If one ever approaches you, sock him."[6]

If homosexuality was not of much concern, then why were the boys on campus trading a phrase to remind each other to defend their honor with their fists if they were ever confronted with it? Despite Rogers's attempts to other homosexuals into a different species from the rest of the undergrads with the derisive "If *one* ever approaches you," clearly the students had to know *a priori* to "one approaching you" that "one *might* approach you," and "you" better know what "one" is before "one" does. Also, to call gay men "Cock Suckers" (the letters C & S) instead of "homosexuals" hardly makes them disappear. But then, even Rogers could not fully reconcile the myth to the reality. While wishing in his earlier letter that it "were that way now," he admitted that "the matter was *almost* never discussed" back then before claiming that it exploded into the national consciousness in 1925 while he was a student at Cornell. "Almost never discussed" is quite different from saying "never discussed"; furthermore, things exist in the world that are never discussed, which does not mean that they do not exist. Finally, as I will discuss in more detail in chapter 6, the word *queer* had acquired its homosexual connotations as early as 1915; the *Oxford English Dictionary* credits this earlier date as when those connotations had so saturated uses of the word as to be worth recording as part of its definition.

In these small ways, Rogers's letters give away clues to the open secret of homosexuality on campus and Faulkner's proximity to it, but Ben Wasson's memoir better serves as the source for why other students thought Faulkner

was more "sophisticated" about matters of homosexuality than most fellow students would/should be. Read with Rogers's comments in mind, Wasson's memoir outlines what looks a lot like his courtship by William Faulkner, a courtship that certainly would seem to have been noticed by the other students milling about on the grounds of campus as these two young men read poems to each other in the plush grass in the historic Grove or wandered off into the woods north of campus together.

As Blotner and Rogers exchanged their letters in 1980, Wasson was composing his memoir, which he would finish as a rough and unedited draft just before his death on 10 May 1982. Wasson first met Faulkner before the war, though only briefly, in that period which Rogers insisted was free of homosexuality on campus. In his memoir, Wasson particularly revised his account of first meeting Faulkner. This first meeting set the stage for the friendship that followed. Close inspection of this first meeting is useful because we have two versions of it, which, read together and through an appropriate frame of reference, demonstrate the keen level of sophistication in Wasson's own rhetoric about homosexuality in that distant past. Wasson described this first meeting in two places: first in an essay that he wrote for the *Delta Democrat-Times* in Greenville, Mississippi, on 15 July 1962, in the days following Faulkner's death, and later, right before his own death, in his memoir *Count No 'Count: Flashbacks to Faulkner*, published posthumously in 1983. As with Estelle's accounts of her first seeing Faulkner and falling instantly in love, Wasson's accounts have the advantage of hindsight to fortify them in a larger narrative of his and Faulkner's relationship. As with Estelle, Wasson also seems determined to reconstruct a narrative of shared understanding and, possibly, love. Wasson, however, admits in his memoir that he is telling stories based in truth but that are not necessarily perfectly accurate. He seems as well to have preferred to adhere to his own "gentlemanly code," which participates in a long history of such coded language in memoirs, letters, and other documents that recount gay life. Despite revisionist histories and cultural predilections for silence, the love that dares not speak its name has long found ways to express itself.

Writing about the history and structure of gay memoirs, Bertram J. Cohler explains that "[h]istorical and social change enters into the individual life story but in somewhat different ways for life-writers of different generations" (13). We can couple this general assessment with his other observation: "Being part of [a] hidden world," as gay men were until very recently,

> gave [these] men an identity counter to that of the larger social world order. [. . .] Gay men tell about these experiences in coded narratives, which [. . .] are often told or written as a kind of confession. Writing about these experiences provides a way of remembering and making sense of the past and helps these men overcome feelings of shame. (12)

Though Cohler's study focuses on memoirs written by gay men born after 1930, his assessment of the form of these memoirs seems to hold true for earlier periods, at least for the first decades of the twentieth century when gay men would have had some sense of identity and community forming in the world around them different from the sense of identity in the mid-nineteenth century or before. For Wasson's memoir, the "feelings of shame" in conflict with his sense of making a "confession" might explain the lack of an explicit declaration about his sexuality or saying openly what he and Faulkner might have done together. Also, Wasson wrote his memoir at the end of his life, nearly sixty years after the events on campus that he describes in its pages, so in addition to "feelings of shame," the lingering "gentlemanly codes" of campus from that earlier moment may explain Wasson's lingering reticence, even though he wrote at a much later date when gay men were experiencing a modest degree of openness and cultural acceptance relative to their previous decades of pariah-status. However, sodomy was still criminalized in the early 1980s and would remain so emphatically until 2003, and Mississippi is one of several states that have kept antisodomy laws on the books to this day despite the Supreme Court ruling them unconstitutional in *Lawrence v. Texas*. Outing himself explicitly in the early 1980s may not have felt wise for Wasson as that period may have felt more stultifying for Wasson coming to them from the 1920s than they appear when looking back on them from the 2010s and beyond. Or perhaps, at the end of his life, Wasson wished to record a story focused on the heart, not the glands, following the advice of his former courtier from a speech that courtier once gave in Sweden for an award he had recently won. Nonetheless, there is more to Wasson's account than meets the eye.

Although Wasson's account is a memoir, reading it as a highly coded, perhaps even purposely manipulated, account is also justified by its preface and by its publication history, which serve to bolster the impressionistic, as opposed to factual, nature of Wasson's memories. The publication history is complicated. Wasson drafted the manuscript of the memoir shortly before his death, and he died before its editing was complete. Final revisions fell to the staff at the University Press of Mississippi, which published the memoir, and primarily to then-editor-in-chief Seetha Srinivasan, Martha Lacy Hall, a freelance copy editor, and marketing manager Hunter McKelva Cole, all of whom worked to clean up the manuscript to meet the approval of Wasson's surviving sister, Mary Wilkinson. As he completed his one-volume revision of Faulkner's biography, Blotner wrote to Cole to ask to see the manuscript (a quick glance at the notes from that biography demonstrates that he not only saw it but also used it extensively in his revisions). In his response, Cole provided a photocopy of the manuscript in its then-current form along with a note to explain its unfinished state and how the editors had worked to revise it. He explained that the UPM team worked from "a photocopy of a very poorly typed version in

cursive script" complete with handwritten marginal revisions from Wasson and additional editing by an unnamed third party. Cole noted that, even after Mary Wilkinson approved the manuscript, problems remained, but he also explained:

> In its present state, although it has many stylistic flaws, it retains both Wasson's rhetorical mannerisms and the accounts as he presented them. He made few attempts to pinpoint dates. The preface was created from extracts taken from rambling explanatory passages at the beginning and ending of various accounts.[7]

Stylistic flaws and inexact dating aside, the memoir "retains [. . .] the accounts as he [Wasson] presented them." Thus, the preface constructed by the editors highlights a single rejoinder. In it, Wasson stresses that "the reader will understand that I make no pretense at recalling Faulkner's words exactly as he spoke them, but I do say that our conversations—and those we had with others—are substantially factual and are faithfully reported" (x). Wasson explains that he hoped his memoir would "creat[e] a truthful portrait of William Faulkner in the days I knew him" (x). From Wasson's perspective, we can infer that the dates do not matter; rather the accounts that Wasson wished to present and the way he presented them without fleshing out selected details prove to be the central value of the book.

A perfect example of how the substance of the account meets with Wasson's hopes to relate faithfully the import of his story can best be seen in Wasson's recollection of his first conversation with Faulkner. What follows is a look at how we might read for "truth" beneath the elisions in Wasson's account of his life with Faulkner, starting with a comparison of the two versions of his first meeting with the man who would be so important to him throughout his life.

In his first account of their meeting, from the *Delta Democrat-Times*, Wasson explained that he was sixteen, had just arrived on campus, and was walking with "a newly made friend" whom he identifies as a senior but never explicitly names. Robert Farley, a fellow student, would tell Blotner in an interview that the young neophyte Ben Wasson "looked seraphic like a seraphim when he first came to Old Miss. He was a sweet kid and was taken up by upper classmen. He was as pretty as he could be."[8] On the one hand, in all his recorded memories of his first few weeks at Ole Miss, Wasson fails to account for what made him so popular with the older boys on campus. On the other hand, in his first telling, he did offer that his unnamed senior friend "gave me a special sense of sophistication."[9] The senior and Wasson encountered Faulkner, and the senior and Faulkner began to talk about clothes and then moved into a discussion of poetry. Wasson recalls Faulkner's "neatly trimmed mustache which struck me as quite worldly and daring." Wasson admits to being mesmerized by the conversation, which enhanced his already romantic feeling for the early autumn atmosphere of the campus, when "the world then seemed mostly green. Everything

was so alive, so vital, and now I had met a fellow-man who was green with fresh thoughts, full of a love for creative things." Then, in his mesmerized state, Wasson realizes he has not yet actually spoken to Faulkner; he has only watched him talking to his senior friend. So, naturally, Wasson spoke up and "told him in over-flowering politeness that I was glad to meet him," to which Faulkner "turned to me and his eyes held amusement." Wasson thus elicited from Faulkner the bemused response: "'Ah,' he said, 'we seem to have a young Sir Galahad on a rocking horse come to our college campus.'" Wasson concludes the story by reporting that a few days later Faulkner "in kindly fashion, looked me up: me, a lowly freshman." Their friendship had begun.

On the surface, this version and the later version of the meeting in Wasson's memoir appear virtually the same, but Wasson's later memoir version shifts the timing of the meeting to create an even more sophisticated account of the subtle interactions he means to implicate. A perplexing subtext permeates the original 1962 version. Wasson is mesmerized and spends moments just watching Faulkner, taking in his clothes, his appearance, and his voice. When he finally does speak, Faulkner is amused, as if Wasson's attentions had not gone unnoticed. The story could have ended there; Faulkner could have been amused by Wasson's obvious crush but moved on, uninterested in having a love-struck freshman tag along after him around campus. In this light, we can read "Sir Galahad on a rocking horse" as possibly a slight on Wasson, whose angelic charms stood out at this moment as a bit naive and childish. The image of a handsome, courtly knight riding a rocking horse—a child's toy—offers a rather humorous take-down of Wasson's youth. Still, Faulkner looked up Wasson a few days later, so clearly the comment was not intended to dismiss Wasson and might very well have been a way to compliment him.

Innocent though this meeting seems, it teems with subtle markers that Wasson would later embellish with more detail in his memoir and which point to a code of gay encounter on the Ole Miss campus in the years surrounding World War I (and notably, Faulkner never "sock[ed] him," as Rogers explained to Blotner, which was how boys at Ole Miss were expected to act around a "cocksucker" like Wasson). The new details that Wasson included in his memoir retelling of this first encounter change the tone in important ways. Wasson dates his first meeting with William Faulkner to the fall of 1916, his first semester at Ole Miss. Wasson, a freshman, had made friends with some upperclassmen, "one among them, to my great pride, a senior," when "Bill Falkner" strolled along (Wasson 24). Faulkner was wearing clothes that Wasson later learned were meant to look "regimental," though Wasson found them "quite British" (25), descriptions that align Faulkner's self-presentation before the war with his faux-soldier act from after it. Also, Faulkner was already known as "Count No 'Count" on campus and around town. That he had this nickname *before* the war aligns this slight on his personality given him by Ole Miss students among

whom Faulkner circulated after World War I with Faulkner's "quair" self-presentation from before Estelle's marriage; thus, we can trace some consistency in his prewar and postwar performances—he was always a little queer and would amount to nothing. While Wasson considered Faulkner sartorially, the senior student in whom Wasson took such pride introduced Wasson to "the Count" and quickly rejoined, "You two fellows should get along fine," before adding after a pause, "You both like to read poetry and highbrow books. Don't you?" (25). We may not be mistaken to hear something accusatory in that final question.

The subtext of this exchange merits attention. Ben Wasson was a homosexual. He was also, in 1916, a sixteen-year-old freshman finding himself surrounded by older boys who included him in their group. One can easily interpret the "pride" that he takes in his senior friend as a coded reference to a crush, though the gentle but razor-sharp teasing that follows when Faulkner arrives on the scene leaves a reader with no real sense of the extent of that relationship, whether it was acknowledged but unreciprocated or was reciprocated to some degree, perhaps along the lines of what Howard delineates as "men like that" (Wasson, the homosexual) and "men who like that" (the senior, who may have had a sexual interest in the boyish and attractive Wasson but did not identify as gay). The clues in the story do suggest that the senior at least tacitly acknowledged Wasson's attentions, as it is the senior who cuts so deftly into Wasson's pride with the assertion, "You two fellows should get along fine." The implication here is that Wasson and Faulkner are both "men like that." That Faulkner may not have actually been a "man like that" would in no way prevent the senior from making that accusation, given Faulkner's reputation as the town "quair." Of course Wasson and Faulkner will get along, the senior implies; they both like poetry and books, those less-than-manly pursuits that marked Faulkner as "quair" in Oxford in the first place and now take on a different and more pointed significance in relation to Wasson and the other boys in the group. Thus, the senior is quick to throw a punch toward Wasson, a recognition of what he is, in that final question: "Don't you?" To paraphrase the senior, he is stating that Wasson and Faulkner will like each other. Why will they like each other? Well, the books and poetry, right? Only by adding that final question, the senior turns the previous assertion on its head. Maybe it is not the books and poetry at all. The final question implies that maybe it is something else.

The cracks in Wasson's storytelling show. Indeed, Wasson seems to want to let us know that Faulkner was, proverbially, in on the sly rhetorical coding in that first meeting. If there were subtexts abounding between Wasson, the lone freshman, and the group of older upperclassmen surrounding him, we can imagine that Faulkner, already acquainted with Stark Young and so not a completely sheltered novitiate entering a larger world, could have easily inferred those subtexts himself. Just to be sure, however, that we understand Faulkner's sophisticated understanding of the situation, Wasson separates Faulkner's compliment,

delivered on the spot in the earlier newspaper account, from the moment of their original meeting in his memoir, making it not a spur of the moment off-hand comment but a calculated phrase passed through a messenger and meant to take the measure of this angelic young man. In his memoir version, Wasson explains:

> A few days later, my *special senior friend* stopped me on campus as I was hurrying to class.
>
> "Saw the Count [Faulkner] in town yesterday. You know what he said about you? Man alive!"
>
> "What?"
>
> "Said you looked like a young Galahad who's just gotten off a rocking horse. I told you he's nuts." (26, italics added)

Wasson never explains why the senior friend from the previous anecdote has become, over the course of "a few days," a "special senior friend." That the cutting recognition of a few days prior has become "special" is highly suggestive, but Wasson, magnificently opaque, leaves the word to hang in the sentence, alliterative but undefined. He does, though, admit that "I took [Faulkner's] remark as a compliment" (26). How could he not have! Faulkner's comment describes a carved, boyish face on the body of the (sexually) purest knight of Camelot. In this version, the "rocking horse" becomes a positive reference to his youthful beauty, not a slight on his immaturity. Furthermore, by adding the passage of time for the patient and star-crossed lovers to communicate with each other via messenger, Wasson takes a loaded exchange and puts it into the terms not of male bravado and challenge but of knightly courtship a-la Castiglione.

Given Wasson has already established his literary pretensions—he reads poetry and highbrow books just like Faulkner, right?—we can read this literary reference in its most purely literary way as a high court romance with shades of Arthurian chivalry. According to Wasson, Faulkner described him as an idealized beauty, all the more for his sexual purity. Wasson stages this meeting and Faulkner's compliment in terms of high romance; it is a courtship. In fact, it even occurs over time, not in any immediate passing moment, and requires a messenger to exchange a message between the two "lovers" separated by time and distance. Whether or not these were the actual words exchanged between these men is suspect, but what we are left with as the *truth* of the story is that Wasson and Faulkner, from their earliest meeting, deeply understood each other. They can communicate on this high literary (and courtly) level, but the "special senior" can only exclaim, "I told you he's nuts."

The dichotomy Wasson sets up with this transference of timing is marvelous. The messenger is the very same "special senior friend" from a few days prior, but whatever the extent of the relationship between that "special friend" and Wasson,

the senior does not understand the higher sophistication of Faulkner's remark. He thinks it is just "nuts." Wasson establishes that what follows with Faulkner is a relationship that is more meaningful because it is a relationship of the minds of these two men, not merely a sexual attraction. Wasson figures the senior as something of a clod. He lacks the sophistication and charm, or what might best be described as the courtliness, of Faulkner. To prove his own sophistication, Wasson used his memoir, more than half a century later, to return to Faulkner the compliment paid to him all those years before. If Wasson is Galahad, then Faulkner is himself a "Count" of some account; Wasson's memoir serves, over its own span of time, to account for his courtly friend and the special relationship they formed in the past and that Wasson, who outlived Faulkner by twenty years, still acknowledged and respected like fire carried in a horn across a lonely and distant mountain but still burning and capable of creating warmth. Unlike the senior, Faulkner played the part of the errant knight out to defend the honor (the sexual purity) of a maiden, though in this case the "maiden" was a young male with an angelic face, not a (female) virgin guarded by variously colored knights as in Malory's famous version of the old round table stories or the poetics of the Victorian Tennyson in his verse retelling.[10] Therefore, Faulkner is a better partner and more deserving of Wasson's "pride" and love than that senior, and will, in fact, win Wasson's devotion. As a courtship, Faulkner's initial salvo into Wasson's heart worked. Before his death, Wasson used the title of memoir to reclaim Faulkner's Count No 'Count nickname as a point of honor, not local ridicule for his pretentions. In a more immediate sense, just after World War I, and some three years after their first encounter, they would continue their friendship and move it into a performance of intimacy that even their classmates would call "queer."

The brief meeting and exchange of compliments before the war blossomed into a full-fledged courtship when Faulkner returned from Canada and reencountered Wasson at Ole Miss in the fall of 1919, which is also when Faulkner became a member of the Sigma Alpha Epsilon fraternity and began to spend intimate time with Wasson both on campus and off in the private setting of the Stone family home. I would offer this courtship as the primary example of Faulkner's actively and intentionally acting out a homosexual identity. Unlike the "quair" dandyism of his youth and his wounded soldier and bohemian personae, this performance is not merely a suggestively or latently, or even metaphorically, homosexual identity—though it is, alas, apocryphal. With Wasson, Faulkner played at an actual homosexual relationship with a homosexual in a model courtship. Nor was this courtship a minor incident but a long, drawn-out affair of true minds (and maybe even true hearts); and let us not unto the marriage of true minds admit impediments. The sophistication of these men allowed them to meet each other on a higher level than as merely co-literary companions. After recounting his first meeting with Faulkner, Wasson proceeds

in his memoir to detail with sophisticated suggestion to rival any coded narrative of gay love the intimate bonds of his and Faulkner's mutual affections.

Wasson epitomized his courtship with Faulkner through two examples from after Faulkner's return from the war. The first began privately but culminated in a public display on campus as they began to be reacquainted through their fraternity. Wasson confesses to having loved the ritual practices of the fraternity, "especially that of initiation," which he considered "to be almost holy" (31–32). The bonds that Faulkner forged in their fraternity would have long and, at the time, certainly unforeseen effects in his later life. In the immediate moment, however, Faulkner's primary bond in the fraternity was with Wasson. Wasson had been initiated in SAE at Sewanee, where he transferred after his freshman year at Ole Miss; he returned to Ole Miss in 1919 for a law degree. Faulkner's own initiation in the fall of 1919 at Ole Miss left him less impressed than his starry-eyed companion. After his initiation ceremony "at the country home of Jim Stone," Faulkner asked Wasson to walk home with him some "three miles" to his parents' house on campus. Wasson narrates:

> It was a dark night, and the way led through a thick wood of leafless trees. Bill was completely familiar with the terrain. I was filled with awe, imbued by the performance and words of the ritual, the ceremony having left an almost hypnotic effect on me. I said to Bill what a splendid choice the goddess Minerva had been for our patron.
>
> "Don't you think the ritual's beautiful?" I said.
>
> "All that mythological hash?"
>
> "You're joking." I scarcely believed him.
>
> "Can't you tell when Roman gods enter or Greek gods crash the scene?" It's almost uncanny how those exact words remain in my memory when much more important things have long since faded.
>
> "I miss flying," he said, cutting off further discussion of the ritual. (32)

If these are the "exact words" that Faulkner spoke, there is much to them. In this scenario, Wasson plays the initiate, Faulkner the guide, even as Wasson describes attending Faulkner's initiation into the fraternity of which Wasson has been a member for two years. Wasson allows himself to be led, playing his part in this performance. Faulkner scoffs at the other performance at the fraternity initiation, but perfectly fulfills his role in the woods. He is sure-footed and never loses his way. He pretends he is a pilot who misses flying; he plays the part of the war hero for the eyes of his captive audience of one. These "exact words" place Faulkner in the role of teacher to Wasson's wide-eyed innocence, a relationship bolstered also by Wasson's assertion that Faulkner "was completely familiar with the terrain" of his hometown, whereas Wasson is not. These woods represent a kind of in-town isolation away from prying eyes, though the actual

distance from the site of the original Stone home to campus was, at best, a mile or so, and likely followed closely the railroad tracks and the edges of the local Freedman's Town where a bike path runs today. Amplified sense of distance and isolation aside, they "continued [their] stroll to the campus through the dark woods, with [Faulkner] leading the way" (32), and their relationship changed after this intimate time together. Each had played his part in the relationship accordingly, and the relationship, accordingly, began to grow.

"In a day or so," Wasson continues, Faulkner "came to my room and held up a slim book, then handed it to me. The author was Conrad Aiken. Titled *Turns and Movies*, the book recounted in an unconventional manner moments in the lives of some people in the worlds of music and the stage" (32). This book proved an apropos selection given Wasson and Faulkner's later collaborations in the campus theater troupe that they founded together, the Marionettes; like Aiken's subjects, they are men interested in the world of music and the stage, right? To read the book, Faulkner led Wasson out of his room and to "a place near one of the ubiquitous Confederate monuments" on campus where they "sat there together in the grass, and he read the book aloud to me as students passed to and fro, glancing questioningly at us" (32–33). A conversation ensued between them over the merits of Aiken's poetry with Faulkner as his proponent, Wasson as his detractor in favor of Keats and Shakespeare. Their talk was surely very high-minded and literary, or so it would seem on its surface.

As is often the case with Wasson, he has implied more in his description of this day of reading than might immediately meet the eye. Those passing students, we are told, "glanc[e] questioningly" at Wasson and Faulkner reading to each other from a book of poems. Perhaps those students passed at just the right moment to hear Faulkner read aloud from "The Apollo Trio" about a group of traveling actors described as "damned degenerates" who have "women's hips, With penciled eyes, and lean vermilioned lips" and who "eat up cocaine" and "[simper] sweetly in falsetto tones" (lines 4–6, 13, 20). Perhaps they recognized Aiken's allusions to drag culture and effeminate homosexuality. Or perhaps, just in passing, they overheard Faulkner reading from "Gabriel de Ford," a poem about a ventriloquist, "a grotesque manikin" with "fixed and smiling lips" (lines 5, 7), a poseur in mid-performance and a fitting description of Faulkner himself whose reputation as Count No 'Count preceded him on campus and raised its own set of questions about this strange local and his strange ways. These students may even have slowed enough in passing to hear Faulkner finish the poem:

> And since he always sings and never talks,
> And flits by nervously, swinging his cane,
> Rumors are thick about him through the circuit.
> Some say he hates the women, and loves men:
> That once, out West, he tried to kiss a man,

> Was badly hurt, then almost killed himself.
> Others maintain a woman jilted him. (lines 14–20)

As a matter of purely passing detail, after the war, Faulkner often walked around with a cane for an injury he claimed he got in the trenches, though the other details of the poem likely caught the attention of passing students just as much as the mention of the cane would. It should come as no surprise that the other students would "glance questioningly" at these two young men reading Aiken's poems to each other.[11] Also, as another passing detail, Faulkner, at nearly this same time, was publishing poems in *The Mississippian* inspired by Mallarme and Swinburne, among other writers. Later he would claim to have used his poetry to "further various philanderings" of his youth. Scholars may be guilty of misidentifying the object of Faulkner's philandering.

The other example appertains to what can best be described as a series of private dates between the two men, sequestered dates away from the public eye of campus. "There were nights," Wasson recounts, "when [Faulkner] would invite me to go to the family home of Phil Stone, where Bill was apparently welcome at all times," even when the Stones were not home, as is the case with this story in Wasson's memoir (33–34). Faulkner led Wasson into the family library where "he watched me read the book titles, and waved a hand to a brown leather chair where I sat down." Then he offered Wasson "the treat [he'd] been promising," a private concert of several Red Seal records the Stones owned, including one Faulkner claimed as "maybe [his] favorite—Beethoven's Fifth," which Wasson had never heard (34). Wasson and Faulkner, intimate and alone on an evening in the Stone family library, "were caught up in the spell and surge of the great musical composition" and listened in complete silence to the recording a second time through (35). Wasson recalls that they "had several such music sessions when the Stone family was away" (35), though he pauses to address this relationship in terms other than as a simple mentorship:

> I doubt he felt he was acting the role of mentor; it was more a sharing. There wasn't anyone else, other than Phil Stone, who cared deeply for things like literature that were thought on the campus to be quite far afield, outré, and, probably, effeminate. He had found in me a young malleable person who liked the things he liked. He wasn't, and never became, a gregarious man. But maybe by being with me and talking with me, there wasn't so much loneliness for him. (36)

We could pause here and consider what Wasson means by "sharing" and tease out the possible euphemism of the "several such music sessions" that he and Faulkner enjoyed together at the Stone house while the Stones were away. After all, this space has loaded implications. Wasson lived on campus with a roommate, Faulkner with his parents, but in the privacy of the Stone house, they

could create an intimate setting for a type of exchange that coeducational institutions strive to prevent occurring on campus grounds among members of the opposite sex and must turn a blind eye to in all-male dormitories. In this case, lacking a shared room on campus, they retreated to an off-campus site, specifically, according to Wasson, to assuage Faulkner's "loneliness."

Whatever might have happened at the end of these nights together, to label these interactions *homosexual* is a fair assessment of them. In general, it is reductive to assume that this relationship—or any relationship—can only be homosexual if it progresses to the stage of physical sexual intercourse. Homosexuality is not a purely mechanical function, and throughout the twentieth century, and especially as men took on performed identities for homosexuality in the early twentieth century, the sense of *being* homosexual has long superseded simply *doing* "homosex" for men who apply the term to themselves as a marker of identity, as Wasson did, though he avoided such explicit words in his memoir.[12] Nonetheless, this homosexuality is, in multiple ways, *apocryphal*. First, evidence for it relies on context not explicitly spelled out in print (Wasson never formally outs himself). Second, Wasson's various accounts are not necessarily part of an authorized account of Faulkner's life, even if Blotner chose to include some of Wasson's memoir anecdotes in his revisions of the authorized biography. Third, as I said at the beginning of this discussion of Wasson's memoir, we need to consider alongside Wasson those claims in Rogers's letters, which are part of the archive but, until now, have not been included in the published scholarly record; just as the Bible has its apocryphal gospels, so, too, it appears does the life of William Faulkner. To reconstruct Faulkner's performances of homosexuality is to dig into the ephemera that never made it to final print.

In the case of this apocryphal homosexual relationship with Wasson, there is as much to be said about the public perception of this relationship as about Faulkner's private performances of it. As Wasson points out, the interest he and Faulkner had in literature and the arts was perceived by many as "far afield, outré, and, probably, effeminate." To be blunt, there is nothing "probably" about it. These public and private performances did not go unnoticed on campus nor did their implications remain unremarked. As Louis Cochran, a friend of Faulkner's from this period and a fellow student at Ole Miss, noted of Faulkner in an interview with Joseph Blotner: many on the Ole Miss campus "thought him queer" (qtd. in Blotner 80). Blotner does not inflect the word here to signal some type of local or colloquial usage like "quair." The word is pure and pointed: queer. The people calling Faulkner this word are not just the locals of Oxford anymore with their peculiar "quair," but the students at the university, twenty-somethings from around the South, New Orleans to Memphis, and in some cases veterans of a foreign war. This crowd is a more cosmopolitan and educated group, more familiar with broader national slang terms and their uses. Such a distinction matters because the word itself in the early 1920s was far

less nebulous than just a few years previously; *queer* was coming into its own and taking on a specific denotative meaning in government documents and elsewhere to refer specifically to homosexuals. By 1920, *queer* meant *gay*. The students on campus were calling Faulkner a homosexual.

As this relationship between Wasson and Faulkner also highlights, the performance of these elaborate courtship rituals between these two men would give Faulkner ample experience of a homosexual perspective as a mode of being and living in the world, not simply as an act of two bodies touching with no context or larger implications for the lives of the men who claim those bodies as their own. With or without sexual intercourse (Wasson is not one to kiss and tell), Faulkner would prove himself capable of producing fictions the profound truths of which are not hindered by the minutiae of his experience but by his understanding of the all-encompassing whole of how one defines their life. In this private setting, Faulkner could have learned much about what it means to be gay, to define oneself as gay, and to perform that definition of self as a means of interacting with the world. For Faulkner, just this much could easily become more than enough for his fictions. Wasson's stories are not, however, the only evidence for Faulkner's apocryphal homosexuality.

Faulkner only spent a little more than a year enrolled at Ole Miss. He withdrew from the university in the fall of 1920, but after his withdrawal, he stayed in Oxford doing little except adding to the impression that he really was just a count of no account, though he would continue to publish poems, stories, and even reviews in the campus newspaper. Among those reviews was one of William Alexander Percy's volume of poetry *In April Once*. Percy read the review and did not appreciate it. When Wasson introduced Faulkner to Percy in Greenville in 1921, the meeting did not go well (Blotner records that Faulkner was also thoroughly drunk when he met Percy, which did not help mitigate any cool reception between the two). Seeing his friend wasting away in Oxford, Stark Young inserted himself into Faulkner's life in the fall of 1921. Faulkner accepted his intervention.

The *Oxford Eagle* social column ran an announcement in September 1921 to say that, after studying a year in Italy, Stark Young would be returning to Oxford briefly on his way to his teaching post at Amherst College, though Young was effectively in the process of resigning that post to move full-time to New York to work as a drama critic.[13] The *Eagle* also reported on 8 September that Dr. A. A. Young, Stark's father, had fallen off a ladder at his home and was hurt. In his notes, Blotner connects the two items to conclude: "So he [A. A. Young] was home at this time; so Stark could come to visit him & find WF [William Faulkner] 'discontented.'"[14] Emily Whitehurst Stone, Phil Stone's wife, would also remember that Stark Young "rent[ed] a room over the Square to write, over New's Drug Store [. . .]. One hot summer day there, PS [Phil Stone] and WF were laughing at D'Annunzio, when SY [Stark Young] said, ['] But you know he

still has quite a following.' WF and PS laughed and SY was furious."[15] The version of this account that makes its way into Blotner's one-volume biography—Blotner merely says that Faulkner and Young did not agree on the merits of D'Annunzio's poetry—omits the jovial intimacy of Emily Stone's telling. In the full version of the story, the men are joking around in Young's upstairs rented room. Young's fury does not eclipse the comradery of the setting and circumstances. Seven years after being introduced to Young, Faulkner clearly maintained a good relationship with him and enjoyed his visits home to Oxford.

Blotner was not unaware of the bonds among Young, Stone, and Faulkner. Emily Stone also mentioned in her interview the critiques of Young's writing by the citizens of Oxford, including by his own father, "who talked about his writing" and, noting the details that appeared in it, "would only wonder how he could remember all that."[16] In an undated note to himself concerning Emily Stone's comments, Blotner added:

> WF once remarked to me (perhaps to FLG [Frederick L. Gwynn]) wryly, that Mr. Stark Young once told him that people in his home town (Oxford?) wondered how he could remember so much (his Dr. father too?) as appeared in his stories. WF sardonic about the fact that they couldn't understand imagination or writing fiction so true it would be what people would do, perhaps people the writer never knew of. (This last unspoken by WF, but part of what he meant I'm sure).[17]

Blotner is conceding in this note that Faulkner's ability to turn the actual into apocryphal might have had a source more directly in Young's tutelage than is often credited, though Blotner's note also implies that Faulkner felt that all writing—Young's, Balzac's, Dostoyevsky's, or that by any number of other authors considered influential to Faulkner's development—comes from precisely this process of apocryphization. Still, Young's proximity to Faulkner would have made Faulkner, perhaps, more attuned to the criticisms that the local population laid against Stark Young. In fact, regarding *The Hamlet* in 1939, Faulkner would claim that he faced almost the same criticism from his fellow Oxonians. In a letter to Malcolm Cowley, 16 August 1945, Faulkner would claim that his character V. K. Ratliff/Suratt left many in Oxford wondering, "How in the hell did he remember all that, and when did that happen anyway?" (*SLWF* 197). Maybe in his letter to Cowley, Faulkner was not repeating actual criticisms made of his own work but was remembering and appropriating the criticisms made of his former mentor and wishing the same could be said of his writing as well.

In his notes, if not in the published editions of the biography, Blotner would continue pondering Young's influence on Faulkner. At one point, Blotner summarizes an announcement from the *Oxford Eagle*, 6 March 1924, about Young's two new books, *Three Fountains* and *Italian Sketches*. The same announcement

also says that Young would be "staging" the play *Welded* by Eugene O'Neill. Appended to this summary, Blotner comments,

> He [Young] must have been an example for F [Faulkner] long before Sherwood Anderson. F may very well have been thinking of Y [Young] in those reviews he did for the MISS [*The Mississippian*], reviewing those plays, O'N's [O'Neill's] among them, thinking maybe of making a career for himself as a reviewer at the same time that he was writing his plays.[18]

Later in Faulkner's career, after winning the Nobel Prize, numerous writers and literary figures would remember connections to the great writer that are, at best, suspect; even many Oxonians would suddenly recall having been Faulkner's biggest fans all along. Young, on the other hand, was accused of *not* caring for Faulkner in those earlier, formative years. To this charge, he would respond in the *Eagle* in 1950 that he had long been a friend of Faulkner's and long had faith in Faulkner's brilliance.[19] Young, it appears, was not merely an ex post facto hanger-on. His influence on Faulkner was older and more involved than many contemporaneous (and contemporary) observers presumed.

In 1921, when he returned home to Oxford, Young would accordingly make an offer to Faulkner that would have tremendous ramifications for his developing career. Earlier than his comments in the *Eagle* in 1950, Young wrote an essay for the *New Republic* in 1938 about his connections to Faulkner. Worried that Faulkner was "bruised and wasted" in his provincial hometown, Young "suggested that he come to New York and sleep on my sofa till Miss Prall, a friend of mine, could find him a place there and he could find a room" (qtd. in Blotner 102).[20] Elizabeth Prall managed a bookstore in New York where Young found a job for Faulkner. This same Elizabeth Prall later married Sherwood Anderson and moved to New Orleans, where she would be instrumental in Faulkner's migration to the Vieux Carre in the mid-1920s. In 1921 Faulkner did not realize the lasting effect this advantageous trip would have on him; rather, he just wanted out of Oxford. He accepted Young's offer and traveled north, though he spent the majority of October in New Haven with friends whom he had met while living there with Stone in 1918. Faulkner would not return to New York until November to rendezvous with Young.

Blotner coyly says of Young that he was a "rare bird in the eyes of the average Oxford resident" and a "true exotic" (102). Frederick Karl offers a more explicit rendering of the tension to which Blotner obliquely refers: "Given his sexual preferences, Oxford was clearly not the territory for [Young]. He needed large cities and travel abroad, where he could blend into the landscape and escape unnoticed" (174). Karl's comments establish the same mythic geography as Paul Rogers in his letters to Blotner. In this myth, the rare bird Young does not belong in Oxford; he does find a place for himself in New York, specifically in

Greenwich Village. *If* Oxford was a rural space completely nonconducive to gay life (and that is a big *if*), Greenwich Village certainly was its opposite. Young would be the first of two known homosexual roommates of Faulkner's in the 1920s: Young in Greenwich Village, William Spratling in the French Quarter in New Orleans. Both locations have long histories of being associated not only with artistic communities, but also of functioning as gay enclaves in the larger American landscape. Greenwich Village functions as a kind of white elephant in discussing Young and Faulkner; it delineates against an otherwise homogenous background a distinctive shape, a feature of the landscape that, to say the least, stands out. Greenwich Village, even in 1920, had already established its place as a gay haven. If Young was gay in Greenwich Village where he could live his life more openly than he felt he could in Oxford, then Faulkner's moving in with him in the Village would have put him into gay living quarters with an openly gay man. Perhaps even Young's sense that Faulkner needed a change of place was predicated off his sense that Faulkner, like Young himself, would thrive in the less (sexually) repressive atmosphere of gay Greenwich Village. These two queer men needed a space outside of the rigors of the normative boundaries they perceived in their hometown.

Jay Parini has been willing to suggest that Young's "interest" in Faulkner "was, also, perhaps, a sign of sexual attraction: he relished the company of younger males, especially those with an artistic bent, like Faulkner, who either had no explicit knowledge of Young's sexual inclinations or didn't much care" (58). There is no reason to believe that Faulkner was unaware that Young was a homosexual, so it follows that he "didn't much care," or, a third option, cared and appreciated Young the more for his "inclinations" and his openness about his sexual orientation. Of Faulkner's life in New Orleans in later years, Parini concedes that "[o]ne sees that Faulkner was clearly at ease with homosexual men" (76) and that "I suspect that he identified with homosexuals as outsiders and considered himself—as an artist—an outsider as well" (77). We can easily apply these statements retroactively to Stark Young and Faulkner's brief time in 1921 in Greenwich Village and even earlier, to Faulkner's friendship with Young from their first meeting in the mid-1910s all the way back in the low hills of north Mississippi.

Faulkner's stay with Young proved minimal, lasting only a few days. According to the postmarks on his letters home, he went to New Haven, writing his mother from there on 6 October 1921. Evidence in the letter suggests that he had stopped in New York first, as he explained, "Mr. Stark hasn't come yet, so I left an address at his office in New York so he can tell me when to come down to get work" (*Thinking* 144). The letters from New Haven continue through 1 November 1921. After a nine-day hiatus, Faulkner's next letter home, dated 10 November, is postmarked from New York. In the interim, he had come to New York, moved in briefly with Young, and met Elizabeth Prall. "Mr. Stark,"

Faulkner wrote, "lives in Greenwich Village, a lovely basement room where you can be lulled to sleep by the passing of the subway trains. I stayed with him last night and spent today looking for a room of my own" (156). Faulkner stayed with Young for only a night or two, and his letter very clearly explains that Young's apartment consisted of a single basement room. His letter otherwise describes the crowds of New York and briefly details the eccentricities of style for its denizens, notably all in the Village. "Miss Prall" wears "[h]orned rimmed glasses, bobbed hair, and smocks," style choices that elicited from Faulkner the observation: "Styles are queer" (157). He also noted that the first important poet he met, Edwin Arlington Robinson, is "a real man," which is to say he is "not a Greenwich villager" (157). At some point in Faulkner's journey through Greenwich Village, William Alexander Percy came by to visit him, apparently all in good faith as a friend from down South, any transgressions for Faulkner's drunkenness in Greenville or his review of Percy's poems forgiven (Blotner 108). Young, it seems, was not the only gay Mississippian who acted differently in New York than he did at home.

That Faulkner arrived in New York on Young's invitation only to stay a night with him and wanted to find his own place certainly seems odd, at least on the surface, and leaves one to wonder if something happened to drive Faulkner away from Young's home. In a later interview now collected in *Lion in the Garden*, Faulkner would claim of his stay with Young, "He had just one bedroom so I slept on an antique Italian sofa in his front room. It was too short. I didn't learn until three years later that Young lived in mortal terror that I would push the arm off the antique sofa while I slept" (14). Young would recall the situation differently. Along with saying that he had only a one-room apartment, which Faulkner's 1921 letter verifies, he also noted that the sofa was just "a homely denim sofa, bought at a sale" and quite different from what Faulkner claimed was "an antique I so preciously feared would be ruined by the wild young genius!" (qtd. in Blotner 104). Faulkner's embellishment of this brief stay strikes an odd note for the degree to which it participates in a coded homophobia almost to the point that it sounds like an inside joke. First, Faulkner seems reluctant to admit that he shared *one* room with a man, a known gay man no less, in Greenwich Village. He places himself in a front room, not in the bedroom, even though the apartment, by both Young's account and the admission of Faulkner's earlier letter, allowed for no such spatial differentiations. Second, despite making sure that no one thought he slept in the same room with Young, much less on the same bed (or sofa), Faulkner alludes to his sleeping habits enough to suggest that he is a rambunctious sleeper given to breaking the bed during his nightly tumbling. Though the sofa is "too short," Faulkner himself was a very short man and often felt self-conscious about his height. Finally, in much the same way that "sleeping with" someone is a euphemism for sex, Faulkner's fear of breaking the sofa in his sleep comes across as a humorous

euphemism for other nocturnal activities as well, and at the least suggests that, if he was actually sleeping, he was tossing and turning the whole night through. One can only speculate why.

I am reading so much into Faulkner's anecdote not because I believe that he is trying to cover up the truth about having sex with Young but committing numerous Freudian slips that reveal something about his "real" sexuality but because the evidence clearly suggests that he is telling a fiction about his stay with Young that deserves to be read for its deliberate ironies and subtle implications. In this case, in an interview from 1931, ten years after his night with Young, he creates an apocryphal homophobia and plays his part splendidly, though in actuality he is simply admitting that he understands what connotations might arise from his admission—in a letter to his mother—that he slept, even for just one night, in the same room as gay Stark Young in gay Greenwich Village. Though one need always be careful about reading Faulkner's letters from the late 1910s and early 1920s too literally—these are, after all, the letters that Faulkner used to craft his apocryphal wounded soldier identity—the letters do offer some understanding of Faulkner's real motives for moving out from Young's apartment so quickly. In his second letter home from New York, postmarked 12 November, he begins right away by assuring his mother, "I am settled at last," in an apartment near Central Park (*Thinking* 158). While he does not like it, since it is "about ten miles from Mr. Stark" (159), he allows that "[i]t will do until I find a place I like better" (158). "I want," he makes clear, "a place down toward Greenwich village where Mr. Stark lives, but rents are cheaper in this part of town" (158). Faulkner did eventually move to the Village, finding an apartment at "35 Vandam Street" (161).

There is ample circumstantial evidence in these anecdotes to claim that Faulkner was comfortable around, knew about, and lived with and among homosexuals, even preferring to live in their neighborhood rather than elsewhere in the city where rents were cheaper. He also seems particularly devoted to "Mr. Stark." George Chauncey dates the gay reputation of the Village to the 1910s and 1920s when the neighborhood "constituted the first visible middle-class gay subculture in the city [. . .] even though its middle-class and bohemian members are better remembered" (10). Blotner says of the Village that it was a place "to try free expression and perhaps free love, but also to try to paint, sculpt, compose, and write" (105). Gary Richards offers as well that Faulkner's next *habitue*, "the bohemian Vieux Carre of the 1920s was one of the few urban areas of the United States outside Harlem and Greenwich Village with a significantly open homosexual population" (22). Though no evidence survives that Faulkner ever "slummed it" in Harlem to take in a drag show in the early 1920s, he would hardly need so overt a homosexual escapade to experience the gay life of the city and of one of the preeminent and most openly gay subcultures in the country (also, he would slum it in Harlem in 1932 with Ben Wasson to visit a drag bar along with Carl Van Vechten and his boyfriend).

The existing record of this digression from a life firmly planted in Oxford points to Faulkner's desire to find a place for himself in the world beyond the Victorian, and implicitly heteronormative, confines of his hometown. He did not want to live *with* Young; instead, he wanted to live *like* Young, unfettered by tradition, expectation, and convention, the free life of an artist in a brave new world. These desires implicate a homosexual life, at least when laid against the expectations of his upbringing and alongside the model he followed to find this different way of being the person whom he wanted to be. Although he was invited by Young to New York, the invitation of a place to stay only lasted until Faulkner could find a place of his own. He did so quickly, having some money from home to live on and having landed a job with Elizabeth Prall shortly after he arrived. Faulkner attempted this trip to New York to forge his own life, not merely to flop on a friend's couch like a bum. He does not seem interested in courting Young in the way that he courted Wasson nor sharing an intimate emotional relationship with him. His excursion was mostly professional; as Young had moved beyond the confines of Oxford, so would his friend, William Faulkner. That the path that he would follow was forged by a homosexual whose trailblazing is related to his sexual identity is mostly a coincidental result of time and place. At that time and in that Oxford, gay life appeared unbearable, so Young sought a new life elsewhere. That time and that place are Faulkner's as well as Young's, and Faulkner followed in Young's footsteps. There is no reason to believe that he was blind to where this path led; in fact, his 1931 recounting of the trip, in which he plays with the implications of his one-night stand in Young's apartment, suggests that he knew perfectly well the multiple levels of meaning in his following in the footsteps of Young's attempt to escape the confines of home and in spending the night with him. Though other options did exist, Faulkner saw a choice between two options, the same options understood by Stark Young: the (heteronormative) life of Oxford or this (queer) life in a different city with a different set of standards to mold his sense of self. He chose Young's path, and with it he inherited its accoutrements. Rather than shun them, he embraced them and let them become part of his sense of self and, later, a part of his fiction.

Unfortunately, this sojourn only lasted until Christmas 1921. Worried about Faulkner, Phil Stone, with the help of Estelle's father, Lem Oldham, secured Faulkner his infamous job as university postmaster in Oxford. After a brief stay in New York, Faulkner agreed to come home to accept the job, making this foray to the Village something of a failure. He would stay in Oxford until 1924, where he would continue his friendship with Ben Wasson. Though Wasson graduated with his law degree in 1921 and moved home to Greenville, he often returned to Oxford, and one of his visits, which coincided with one of Estelle's visits, offers further insight into Wasson and Faulkner's interactions in the elaborate performance of their courtship and lifelong relationship.

About the Author

Photo courtesy of Katlyn Churchill

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