

# Treating Manuscripts from the William Faulkner Collection

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## INTRODUCTION

William Faulkner was born in 1897 in New Albany, Mississippi, and died in 1962. He has been described as the premier American modernist novelist and the most inventive experimenter in American modernist prose. His novels, many of which are set in the imaginary Yoknapatawpha County, deal with the decay and anguish of the South since the Civil War. Some of his better known works are *The Sound and the Fury*, *As I Lay Dying*, *Sanctuary*, *Light in August*, and *Absalom, Absalom!*. He was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature in 1949, and a Pulitzer Prize in 1954.

While most of Faulkner's papers are owned by the University of Virginia, and a small collection of his later work is at the University of Mississippi, the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas at Austin, has a small, but important and heavily used collection of Faulkner manuscripts. The 28 linear feet of materials include manuscripts, poetry, correspondence, corrected galley proofs and several handmade books.

The materials in the Faulkner collection illustrate the range and complexity of conservation problems found in modern archival collections where access is a primary consideration. The objective of the archives and manuscripts conservator is to retain the original format while allowing fairly aggressive use of materials. For this reason, treatment and housing considerations for manuscripts are often different than those for works of art on paper.

As part of a comprehensive approach to care for the collections, the Ransom Center's Conservation Department has worked with other Departments in the Center to develop a system to determine what will be selected for conservation treatment. The system allows input from all levels of staff and patrons. Collection materials are identified as potential candidates for conservation attention. The items are assessed by the appropriate curatorial staff in terms of their importance to the HRC collections overall. They are then evaluated by conservation staff in terms of their physical condition and treatment or housing options are suggested. The materials are ranked by curatorial staff and the objects that are determined to be both in the greatest need of physical attention and most important in terms of the entire collections are selected for conservation treatment.

Under this system, three pieces from the Faulkner collection were selected for treatment. The first is a large group of typescript leaves, the second a pair of hand made books and the third, a bound manuscript. In every case,

the desire to allow access played a critical role in the treatment decisions.

## BURNED POETRY FRAGMENTS

The Ransom Center has a collection of 3 linear feet of typescript poems and revisions, which suffered serious damage when they were stored in a garage behind the home of Phil Stone, a close friend of Faulkner, and a fire broke out. Many of the leaves were unharmed or only slightly damaged, but almost 400 were moderately or severely burned. The burned leaves were extremely fragile and could not be handled without losing bits of the charred and brittle paper. By necessity, access to these materials was severely restricted.

The decision of what to do to the burned fragments was clear. They were washed and lined to stabilize and consolidate the fragmented leaves and encapsulated in polyester film to facilitate handling. The curator of the Manuscripts Department agreed that this treatment was well worth the considerable time it would take to complete. Because the treatment required such a substantial commitment of time, we approached it as a group project involving every conservator in the department and the group dynamics were valuable in streamlining the process. We developed a skeleton report on the computer that could be adapted for each leaf. We moved the leaves through two washing baths, then an alkalization bath, and then lined each leaf with lens tissue and wheat starch paste. The final step was encapsulation and labeling. We batched the treatments, developed an assembly line approach and got into a rhythm of work that allowed us to reduce the treatment time for each leaf from an initial estimate of 8 hours per leaf to 1.5 hours, slightly more for the severely mold damaged leaves.

The group environment allowed us to make discoveries about the treatment that we might not have found working alone such as a method of getting burned paper into a bath without breaking off any of the burned edges as the paper expanded upon contact with water. After extensive experimentation with methods of slow humidification, we found that if one conservator dropped a leaf into a bath and a second conservator sprayed it from above at the same time, the leaf stayed flat and no fragments were lost.

The project gave us a chance to develop and refine a specific set of techniques and increase production without sacrificing quality. It was a project which contributed to the further development of the skills not only of the staff conservators, but for every student,

volunteer and intern who passed through the department during that time.

### THE MARIONETTES

Two copies of a book titled "The Marionettes" were designated as conservation priorities. Faulkner is thought to have produced eight copies of this book in 1920 when he was a student at Oxford, Mississippi. "The Marionettes" is a romantic one act play involving two main characters based on Faulkner and Estelle, a woman with whom he was passionately in love and would later marry. At the time it was written, Estelle was married to another man and had a daughter who was almost a year old. Each copy is written and illustrated entirely by hand, and crudely bound with cardboard covers, a cloth spine and metal staples. The Ransom Center holds two copies of "The Marionettes", one of which (Copy 1) bears a sensuous dedication to Estelle's daughter, Cho-Cho on the fly leaf.

Copy 1 is in relatively good condition. The binding is intact and the paper is in fair condition. The book is fragile but could be handled carefully without causing significant damage. No treatment was performed on Copy 1. Nevertheless, the book is delicate and use of that copy is severely restricted. The restricted use policy allows that in the interest of minimum intervention one copy is retained in unaltered condition.

Copy 2 was in poor condition. The boards were completely detached and most of the spine cloth was missing. The staples that held the folios together had rusted and caused the surrounding paper to deteriorate. The center folios were detached from the rest of the book. The paper was weak overall, especially in the outer margins.

It was felt that limiting access to Copy 2 would not give it adequate protection as any use of this copy in its deteriorated condition would be likely to cause some damage. Minimal mending without disrupting the original binding structure would not strengthen the paper enough to allow safe handling. Copy 2 was given a full conservation treatment. The staples holding the folios together were removed and retained. The text block was washed and de-acidified in a weak solution of CaOH. The medium, a heavy black writing ink, was in good condition and apparently unchanged by the washing process. The paper was guarded and the fragile margins mended with a combination of L tissue, Japanese tissue and wheat starch paste.

The book was rebound using the same basic structure Faulkner had used for his original binding. He had stapled through the text block of a thin, typing paper weight paper and the cloth spine with heavy gauge metal staples. While the weight and quality of the materials he had used caused the binding to fail, the structure was

essentially sound, allowing the leaves to turn freely and open flat.

A new spine piece was fabricated with dyed airplane linen and worked underneath the existing spine fragments on the boards. Two Japanese tissue free-guards were wrapped around the outermost folio of the text block and a smaller strip was placed inside the innermost folio to protect the text block paper from the sawing action of the linen thread. The text block was sewn using a pamphlet stitch with moderate tension in the existing sewing holes. The sewn text block was attached to the cover using two linen loops in place of the original staples. The Japanese paper flaps were pasted down inside the boards.

The slight modifications to the structure offer somewhat more strength without interfering with the overall feel or function of the book. The binding opens easily, and the mended leaves can be turned without causing damage to the paper. Access to Copy 2 will also be limited, but less restricted than to Copy 1. A good facsimile edition of "The Marionettes" has been produced from the copy held by the University of Virginia and is held in the Ransom Center's collection, and access to this copy is unrestricted beyond normal HRC protocols.

### ABSALOM, ABSALOM!

The manuscript of *Absalom, Absalom!* was designated as a priority for conservation attention in 1993. The manuscript was bound in dark blue "fake grained" leather with false raised bands and gold tooling around the perimeters of the boards. In 1939 Faulkner, who was rather desperately in need of money at the time, sent the manuscript to a Mr. Sheean who apparently had it bound for sale.

The decision of how to treat the manuscript *Absalom, Absalom!* involved a series of discussions among the curator, a Faulkner scholar and the conservator. The curator was concerned primarily with security issues and with allocating conservation time wisely in terms of the entire collection. The scholar was enticed by the prospect of new information which might become available and the conservator was troubled by the fragile nature of the manuscript.

Heavy use had caused several leaves to come loose from the bound volume and the manuscripts curator wanted them re-attached. By his estimation, this was a minor treatment that could be accomplished in a few minutes. But there was reason to consider a more extensive treatment than simply reattaching the leaves.

Faulkner wrote the manuscript on one only side of single leaves of medium weight, unlined, machine made paper. Normally, books are sewn through the fold, but single leaves present a problem. One method used to

bind single leaves is oversewing, which involves taking a small group of single leaves, sewing diagonally through the paper and repeating that stitch at intervals along the binding edge. After the first grouping is sewn, another grouping is aligned on top of the first, and a second series of stitches is made, avoiding the first set of sewing holes. This process is repeated until all the leaves are sewn together. Sewing cords can be incorporated into the sewing process. The *Absalom, Absalom!* manuscript had been over-sewn by hand around cords and then bound using a hollow tube structure.

Oversewing, either by hand or by machine, is a very strong structure, usually stronger than the paper being sewn. It is a dangerous alternative for early 20th century papers because as the paper ages and becomes brittle it is likely to break off along the sewing perforations. It was this potential for losing all the leaves along the perforations that led the conservator to recommend that the manuscript be disbound.

Another disadvantage of oversewing is that it requires an extremely wide gutter margin. Even though the manuscript did have wide upper and left margins on every leaf, which Faulkner had drawn to create space for annotations and pagination, some annotations and corrections were partially obscured by the oversewing structure. The obscured text, and the promise of what else might be found in the margins, was a good reason to disbind the manuscript. This consideration proved to be pivotal in the curator's decision to treat the manuscript.

As part of Faulkner's working method, rather than recopying text, he cut fragments from previously written leaves and pasted them onto new leaves. There are 509 such pasted fragments in the *Absalom, Absalom!* manuscript. Eleven of those cover previously written text.

The covered text had not gone unnoticed by researchers and almost every fragment that covered text had been pulled back. Little by little the covered text was being revealed, and in the process a great deal of damage had occurred. The adhesive and media were tested the it was decided that the fragments could probably be removed, but it would be a delicate treatment that would require that the manuscript be disbound.

The manuscripts curator, who has ultimate authority for the treatment decision, did not want the manuscript disbound at first. Not only does binding provide some level of protection, but the binding probably had been done with Faulkner's consent and could be considered part of the provenance of the piece. But the curator's greatest hesitation was over the amount of time required to disbind the manuscript, separate the fragments adhered over text, and rehouse the manuscript and which had been estimated at 300 hours. Every conservation treatment has to be evaluated in terms of

the other work on the collection that will not be done and he was not easily persuaded to surrender 300 hours of conservation treatment for one object. Ultimately he decided that revealing the new information and eliminating the opportunity for researchers to further damage the manuscript was sufficient reason to make the treatment worthwhile. The damage caused by oversewing had little to do with his decision.

## TREATMENT

Disbinding the manuscript did not present any unusual problems. The oversewing threads were cut each section was pulled free and the leaves separated. Excess adhesive was easily removed with moisture.

Removing the fragments that covered text was more complicated. The paste was easily soluble in water, but of course the ink was more soluble. A Gore-tex humidity chamber made it possible to separate the pieces and in most cases the fragments separated cleanly with no loss of media.

The leaves that had been partially removed by scholars presented the greatest challenge. The verso of the fragments had been delaminated leaving some of the ink adhered to the recto of the primary leaf and some on the verso of the attached fragment. The ink was extremely soluble. In order to separate the leaves, I had to accept that some of the ink would remain on the recto of the leaf of manuscript, but some of it would remain caught in the paste or delaminated fragments on the verso of the attached piece. If it were not for the fact that the attachment had been partially removed and delaminated already, I probably would not have attempted this treatment.

The leaves were separated, and although some of the ink was effectively split between the primary leaf and attached fragment, none of it was lost. Our staff photographer was able to create 4x5 positive films of each surface, sandwich the films together, and print a negative image of the complete text.

One fragment offered a surprise. The two pieces separated easily, but after they were apart, the writing was a partial reversed image on the verso of the attached fragment. Nothing had been lost and there was no image on the recto of the primary leaf. Apparently, Faulkner pasted out the verso of the fragment, laid it down on top of text somewhere, and changed his mind while the paste was still wet. He then lifted the fragment and pasted it to a blank portion of another leaf. The reverse image of the first text he covered was preserved in the paste. Our staff photographer, produced a 4x5 positive film of this image, and then printed a reverse image of that so the partial lines are now legible.

The information gained in this treatment has turned out to be more significant than was apparent at the

beginning of the project. Faulkner's original pagination was hidden in the gutter margin. The manuscript is written in several different colors of ink, primarily blue and black, and one section is written in green. The color of the ink shifts gradually as the fountain pen was filled with blue, then green, then black ink. The subtle shifts in color, the colors of the pasted fragments and the crossed out and reworked pagination allow one to speculate on the working chronology of the manuscript. Faulkner's struggle with certain passages is evident.

Jim Watson, a prominent Faulkner scholar from the University of Tulsa, Oklahoma, said "it represents a new step in understanding the process of creation and composition of Faulkner's most complex novel." Mr. Watson and I worked together to produce a chart showing variation in the inks, the placement of the attached fragments and Faulkner's pagination. The chart will be stored with the manuscript.

The paper will not be alkalized or deacidified. Aqueous treatment was not an option due to the solubility of the inks. The inks were tested with non-aqueous deacidification spray, but this also had some small effect on the color of the inks. Often, with

manuscripts a slight change in the color of the media is acceptable, but in this case, the importance of the subtle variations in the inks led us to decide that the possibility of any change in the colors was unacceptable.

The manuscript leaves were sonic welded in polyester sleeves. The fragments were placed in front of the leaf to which they had been attached and sealed into place. The sleeves were attached together with a Velobind. This will allow the paper to be handled aggressively and still be protected. The leather binding was retained and is stored with the manuscript. The chart outlining the colors of inks is also stored with the manuscript.

The preceding treatments represent some of the decision making processes involved working with archival collections. The amount and type of use something will receive plays a large part in the treatment decisions and a strong dialogue between conservation and curatorial staff benefits the decision making process.

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