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James E. Savage

University of Mississippi

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STARK YOUNG AT THE SOUTHERN LITERARY FESTIVAL

by John Pilkington

Although there has been no lack of critical and scholarly interest in the life and work of Stark Young since his death, January 6, 1963, no full length study or biography has yet appeared. When a biographer does undertake this service to the history of American letters, he will undoubtedly recognize the necessity for analyzing Stark Young's attitude or relationship to the South and, in particular, to his native state of Mississippi. One of the keys to an understanding of that relationship may well be provided by an examination of Stark Young's last visit to the University of Mississippi, April 22, 1949, as the featured speaker at the Southern Literary Festival.

Because of Stark Young's long-standing connection with the University of Mississippi, the invitation to speak extended him by Professor W. Alton Bryant, president of the Southern Literary Festival and chairman of the Department of English, was singularly appropriate. In 1901, Stark Young had been graduated from the University of Mississippi with the B. A. degree. He had done well in his major subjects—Greek, Latin, French, and English. Later, in his autobiography, *The Pavilion* (1951), he was to analyze the virtues—and shortcomings—of the education he received.¹ Four years after he was graduated, he returned to the university to serve as assistant professor of English until 1907. During this time he published a volume of poems, *The Blind Man at the Window and Other Poems* (1906), and a verse drama *Guenevere* (1906). The two books indicate the nature of the interests that were to shape the remainder of his life. He left the University of Mississippi to teach first at the University of Texas and afterwards at Amherst College. By 1935, when the Commencement Committee invited him to return to the University of Mississippi as the commencement speaker, Stark Young had already published *So Red the Rose*

¹Stark Young, *The Pavilion: Of People and Times Remembered, Of Stories and Places* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951), pp. 141-159.

which, added to his dramatic criticism, had made him perhaps the most distinguished graduate of the university. Regretfully he declined the invitation because of commitments in Europe, but his disappointment at not being able to accept may have made him all the more receptive to another invitation extended to him during the celebration of the centennial of the University of Mississippi during the academic year of 1948-1949.

When Professor Bryant wrote Stark Young in January, 1949, asking him to address the Southern Literary Festival Association, which was to meet on the campus of the University of Mississippi, he responded warmly. "The invitation for April," he wrote, "is very alluring and full of good promises. I appreciate it highly."² As the principal address of the festival, Stark Young's lecture was scheduled to follow the morning and afternoon sessions and the banquet. In the morning, John Crowe Ransom was to read selections from his own poetry, and in the afternoon an open forum on creative writing was to feature the following participants: Miss Elizabeth Spencer, a member of the University of Mississippi English Department faculty and author of *Fire in the Morning* (1948); Harry Harrison Kroll, author of *Fury in the Earth* (1945) and other novels; Paul Flowers, literary editor of *The Commercial Appeal* (Memphis); and Barrett C. Keisling, who had done public relations work in Oxford in connection with the filming of the motion picture version of William Faulkner's *Intruder in the Dust*. At the banquet, the speaker was Professor W. L. Kennon, chairman of the Department of Physics and Astronomy of the University of Mississippi.

By early March, Stark Young had made the necessary rearrangements in his schedule to permit him to come to the university and was outlining the contents of his lecture. In a letter to Professor Bryant, he remarked that "the subject I would most prefer is Translating as an Aid to writers."³ He wanted to show, as he said, "various passages and the elements involved when one translates them, as to language, style, detail, emphases, special qualities of a language as distinguished from other languages." Lest Professor Bryant

²Letter to W. Alton Bryant, January 17, 1949, in the library of the University of Mississippi. Quotations from the letters of Stark Young have been made with the permission of Mr. William McKnight Bowman, executor of the Stark Young estate.

³The same, March 4, 1949.

think that the speech would be too technical for the audience, Stark Young added a significant comment: "This sounds far more academic than it is. In my own case this is the route by which I learned most about writing, the greatest school I have had." A month later, he again wrote Professor Bryant about the nature of the lecture:

I still think I want to make the address on translating, which to me is a very living subject. I should be talking about other languages as means by which to develop our own and to see the special points in writing, such as emphases, sound, and so on, plus a variety of qualities. I don't think I would be stuffy about all this. I can't think of a promising title. *Translations*. Or *Lights from Strange Lamps*. . . .⁴

The title finally chosen was "Lights from Strange Lamps."

Stark Young's address, delivered in the auditorium of the Alexander L. Bondurant Graduate Building (named for Stark Young's former Latin professor), was a stunning success. Many of the audience of more than two hundred writers and professors who crowded into the small auditorium to hear the lecture were deeply impressed by Stark Young's command of his material and his ability to convey the specifically poetic qualities of individual lines. In his address, he endeavored to show how a knowledge of foreign languages could enrich the study of English poetry. Paul Flowers noted that Stark Young "had not a scrap of paper to prompt his memory—like the peripatetics of old he paced back and forth, from one side of the stage to the other, upstage and down, giving life and eloquence and breath to his performance."⁵

Afterwards, Professor David Horace Bishop, who for many years had been chairman of the Department of English, described the lecture in *The Ole Miss Alumni Review*. Professor Bishop's account reveals how closely Stark Young followed the tentative outline he had earlier suggested to Professor Bryant:

⁴The same, April 4, 1949.

⁵"Paul Flowers' Greenhouse," *The Commercial Appeal* (Memphis), January 13, 1964, p. 6.

The announced subject was mystifying to all: "Lights from Strange Lamps." The speaker at once made clear the secret underlying the cryptic title. It would be his attempt to relate selected English poems to their sources, to reveal the light gained for the poem by knowing an influencing source, and also, alas, to recognize what had been lost in translating. But, over all, the value of Mr. Young's address, it was proved, appeared in the demonstrated importance of foreign languages, classic and modern, in influencing the art and ideas of much English and American poetry.⁶

Evidently, Stark Young, as he had promised Professor Bryant, had been neither "stuffy" nor too technical. After explaining the meaning of the title of the speech, Professor Bishop continued his account:

All this, as recorded here, sounds forbidding. But the event proved otherwise. The response in attention to the speaker's apt illustrations of his theme and the enjoyment of the wit and humor, casually cropping out or penetrating the expressed fact or idea, manifested an appreciation rarely experienced by one who speaks on a strictly literary theme. Perhaps there was something else, something to a degree extraneous, that added a fascinating feature to the performance. Mr. Young was able to quote, promptly and fluently, extended stretches from French, Italian and Latin, at ease and never hesitating. A few caught phrases kept them in sight of the problem. A very few, perhaps, followed fairly well now and then. But a large part of the audience heard with admiration the agility of Mr. Young's speech, listening as attentively as if whatever language the speaker quoted were their native speech.⁷

⁶David H. Bishop, "Stark Young Remembers the University with Gifts," *The Ole Miss Alumni Review*, IV (April, 1950), 3.

⁷The same.

Professor Bishop's final comment seems to summarize the reaction of the audience to Stark Young. Wrote Professor Bishop, "The ovation at the close would have been thrilling to any speaker."

There can be no doubt that Stark Young was pleased with the reception of his address. He had wanted to be appreciated in his own university, and he had succeeded impressively. In a letter written to Miss Ella Somerville a few weeks after the lecture, he commented: "Dr. Bryant has written me a very fine letter saying in his opinion and that of various others that was the finest lecture he had ever heard. Very kind. If anywhere in the world I'd like my words to go right it would be there in my own country."⁸ Several months later, he remarked to Miss Somerville that "it will take a good many years to digest that perfect visit to Oxford."⁹

In other letters he emphasized his sense of kinship with the people of the South. During his visit to the University of Mississippi, he had renewed his ties with those he called his own. In November, 1949, he wrote Dean Pete Kyle McCarter: "I still remember my visit there with pleasure and with great pride in my own people. It warms my heart—I who have seen a lot, perhaps too much, of the world—to think of their beautiful manners and gentle bearing, along with an impression of plenty of good sense."¹⁰ To Professor Bryant, he wrote that he had never lectured "to an audience that I liked so much as I did that at the University of Mississippi. My own people, justifying all the good things I have been saying of them for years."¹¹ To Paul Flowers, he expressed the quality of his feelings in somewhat different terms. Wrote Stark Young:

Many years ago that dear place seems, and going home again did me good and reinforced my morale. I was very proud of my own people, seeing them again like that—their fine looks, their very good manners and so on. In my time I have

⁸Letter to Miss Ella Somerville [May 3, 1949], used by permission of Miss Ella Somerville.

⁹The same [July 21, 1949].

¹⁰Letter to Pete Kyle McCarter, November 11, 1949, in the library of the University of Mississippi.

¹¹Letter to W. Alton Bryant, April 26, 1949, in the library of the University of Mississippi.

seen a good deal of the world, the humble and the grand, so that I have a scale of values that is at least not founded on ignorance. To see in my own people the splendid qualities and to feel a surge of love for them in my heart is a blessed experience.¹²

Was Stark Young overstating his emotional response to his visit to the University of Mississippi? The warmth of the audience's response to his lecture and the praise and admiration expressed in the letters that went to him from members of the Department of English and the administration of the university could be expected to have prompted him to take a courteous, even affectionate tone in reply. Were the comments in the letters already quoted merely the result of his Southern politeness, or did they represent the deeper feelings of Stark Young towards Mississippi and the other parts of the South? The length and forcefulness of language in the following letter, written to Dean McCarter in August, 1949, suggest that he meant what he said:

Dear Dr. McCarter, since your letter is so warm and cordial and settles so happily into my heart and mind, I want to repeat what I said in Oxford about my talk to that most responsive and gentle audience. I lectured in Italy, in Italian, 1931, on the Westinghouse Foundation, for the Italian-American Society, at the most distinguished places in Italy. The lectures were four, on aspects of American literature and the theatre. The American Ambassador took me under his wing, the newspapers under Fascist orders I imagine were wonderful to me, Mussolini invited me to call at the Palazzo Venezia and kept me two hours or more, Grandi, Minister of Foreign Affairs had me to dinner, and finally the King sent me the highest decoration in the Order of the Crown of Italy, *Commendatore*. The great princess left their cards at my hotel, et cetera et cetera.

¹²Letter to Paul Flowers [August, 1951], in the library of the University of Mississippi.

There are two points to that. The first is that the audience there at the University was much closer to my desire and much more blessed in their quality. Nothing could have been easier—though I have long since quit lecturing, because it is so full of tricks and is apt to make one cheap—than to talk to such people. The quotations I used in my talk were already in my mind; only one of them I looked up because I was not sure of the repetitions—that from San Juan de la Cruz—and anything I said of interest was more than half the thing that came to me from such lovely people. I have made it a point in Europe to meet and to observe diverse cultures and social patterns, and always with the purpose in view of seeing our Southern culture in some light different from that here in this Eastern Seaboard. I had a friend in Florence the Marchesa Bacciocchi, Princess Imperiale, great-grand-daughter of Napoleon's sister Elisa, whom he married to Bacciocchi, the more or less king of Bologna. The mother of my friend asked me to come to see her, she wanted to ask me how an American could have written my books. I said it all came from the same thing, a people whose social ideals were based on the land, the love of it and the responsibility. That is an excellent case of the parallel that I wanted to find.

If you knew New York as well as I do, though I don't circulate to any extent these days, you would be horrified to see the people from whose columns they are able to pour the vulgarity and confusion that is abroad. It seems pathetic that our South with its excellent qualities left still, however strangled and fuddled by the general drift, cannot be secure in itself and cannot study what high rightness they may in many respects have inherited.¹³

¹³Letter to Pete Kyle McCarter, August 28, 1949, in the library of the University of Mississippi.

Written a year later, Stark Young's letter to Professor Charles Munro Getchell, chairman of the Department of Speech and Theater, shows that he continued to think of his visit to the university in the same way. "I did appreciate and value your too kind and gracious letter more than I can tell you," wrote Stark Young. "It is I who remember all that gentle cordiality and friendly response in that world of my old University, and I recall that visit to your class with a warm heart. It was delightful to me to see that the new men on the faculty are of the calibre they are. One could see at one glance that your class was not taught by anything mediocre, anybody without wit and theatre practice and wisdom."¹⁴ His words were, of course, a graceful tribute from one man of the theatre to another; they were also an indication of the consistency of Stark Young's attitude.

The accounts of Stark Young's address to the Southern Literary Festival and the subsequent references in his letters to his visit to the University of Mississippi tell the story of a successful and gratifying experience and emphasize the closeness of Stark Young's ties to the South as well as his warm response to southern people. It remains for his biographer to determine the extent to which his visit influenced the writing of *The Pavilion* and to place it in terms of his total relationship with the South.

¹⁴Letter to Charles Munro Getchell, August 28, 1950, used by permission of Mrs. Charles Munro Getchell.