

WILLIAM FAULKNER'S "IMPRESSIONS" OF "DANZAS VENEZUELA": THE ORIGINAL MANUSCRIPT

by

LOUIS DANIEL BRODSKY

IN April, 1961, under the auspices of the Department of State, William Faulkner made a two-week visit to Venezuela as a cultural emissary of the United States government. On Thursday morning, April 6, in Caracas, at the Ministry of Education, he accepted that country's most coveted civilian award, the Order of Andrés Bello.¹ And on that same evening, in the company of Mr. and Mrs. William Fielden, Faulkner's son-in-law and step-daughter with whom he was also staying, and with others from the American entourage, he attended a performance of indigenous music and dancing at the Teatro Municipal.²

The performance itself was divided into various acts, one of which had its première and was dedicated to William Faulkner. This act, inspired by three poems composed by Andrés Eloy Blanco, consisted of three dances which had been choreographed by Mrs. Paulina Ossona. Later that evening, perhaps backstage or at the formal dinner party given by Dr. and Mrs. Arturo Uslar Pietri, the lady in charge of the production, Mrs. Isabel Aretz de Ramón y Rivera, made a request of the celebrated American author that he put in writing his "impressions" of their offering.³

Even had Faulkner considered the request that he write this occasional piece a nuisance, doubtless he would have felt a sincere obligation to give it his best effort; after all, he regarded his position as cultural representative of the United States and his presence in Venezuela as matters of State importance. Furthermore, protocol demanded of him nothing less than compliance. Possibly the following day, working from a general outline of "Notes" most likely supplied him by his assigned interpreter Hugh Jencks, and drawing upon felicitous impressions from the previous evening, Faulkner composed a one-paragraph, 202-word encomium celebrating the occasion. And in the end, the impressions to which he did give written form, ostensibly intended to extol a specific event, became an eloquent tribute to the people of Venezuela.⁴

1. See Louis Daniel Brodsky, "The 1961 Andrés Bello Award: William Faulkner's Original Acceptance Speech," *Studies in Bibliography*, 39 (1986), 277-281.

2. See *Faulkner: A Biography*, by Joseph Blotner (1974). The notes accompanying pages 1779-1786 detailing Faulkner's Venezuelan trip in April 1961 appear on pages 213-214 of the Notes section of the second volume. Blotner cites "Charles Harner, American Embassy, Caracas, to Dept. of State, 27 Apr. 1961; Hugh Jencks, 'Report to the North American Association on the Visit of Mr. Faulkner,'" as his sources for the description of events and for the specific fact that Faulkner "wrote out a short speech of thanks to the dancers." But Blotner does not date the Jencks' report (it was May 10, 1961) and he supplies no supporting evidence that Faulkner ever delivered a "speech." Furthermore, from the information disclosed in footnote 3 below, it would seem unlikely that Faulkner had his thoughts formulated in time to present them that night to the dancers; in fact, not earlier than Friday, April 7, 1961.

3. From the reference to "last night's program," there seems little question that the sheet containing "Notes which may be of help in writing a few lines on 'Danzas Venezuela,'" was typed out on Friday, April 7, 1961, and given to Faulkner, doubtless by Hugh Jencks, his interpreter and go-between. This sheet and the holograph manuscript of Faulkner's impressions of "Danzas Venezuela," cited below in footnote 4, were clipped together, apparently as they had been joined and set aside by Faulkner twenty-four years before I discovered them.

4. I found both the "Notes" cited in footnote 3 and this holograph document while examining myriad family effects and artifacts in the possession of Victoria Fielden Johnson, daughter of William and Victoria Franklin Fielden, Faulkner's son-in-law and step-daughter, his hosts on that 1961 trip to Caracas, Venezuela. I am deeply indebted to Victoria Fielden Johnson for graciously welcoming me on my visit to her in Cape Coral, Florida, from May 20-24, 1985, and for letting me inspect and acquire these and various other documents, letters, manuscripts, and photographs relating to William Faulkner and his family which formerly had belonged to her parents.

An examination of the one-page, blue ballpoint ink holograph manuscript on which Faulkner's impressions of "Danzas Venezuela" are recorded reveals that in contemplating his subject, Faulkner initially was struck by one key phrase and that he set it down as if it were to be his first paragraph: "I saw the spirit & history of Venezuela caught and held for a moment with skill and grace, in bright and happy motion". Actually, this phrase would set the tenor and the focus for his overall impression which would address itself toward the widest possible audience and attempt to lend to it a universal application.

Having written three lines into his second paragraph, Faulkner seemed to sense that the real significance of the three "poem-dances" (Jencks had referred to them as such in his "Notes") performed in his honor was as vessels, conduits for Venezuela's entire history and spirit. Breaking off his third sentence, Faulkner drew a line from it up to the top of the sheet and formed a bracket containing the first two lines of the original "key phrase" with which he had begun to record his impressions; the result was to prepare their fusion into what eventually would become a similar, though more highly stylized and expanded, opening for his final version.

Faulkner's third paragraph consisted of seven lines devoted to expressing his appreciation of the principals involved in the performance. This concluded, he was ready to condense, compress, and blend all the strands he had provisionally recorded in his first three paragraphs. The fourth "paragraph" on the sheet represents Faulkner's fused draft; actually, rather than being an isolated paragraph, it forms a version that approximates completeness and in the apparent absence of other extant manuscripts or drafts, forms the most advanced self-contained version of the author's impressions on this specific subject. Whether Faulkner revised the present preserved draft before his "impressions" were conveyed to Mrs. Ramón y Rivera is not known. At least only the "Notes," presumably typed by Hugh Jencks, and Faulkner's original single sheet of holograph starts and "final draft" have survived. The texts of these two documents are transcribed below for the first time.⁵

Notes [by Hugh Jenks?] which may be of help in writing a few lines on "Danzas Venezuela."⁶

The group is sponsored and its expenses defrayed by the Cultural and Social Welfare Section of the Ministry of Labor. The dancers receive training at the School of Artistic Formation (Development), whose directress is Mrs. Isabel Aretz de Ramón y Rivera, the determined lady of stentorian voice who asked if you would "write a few lines" about your impressions of the Thursday performance.

The three poem-dances which formed one group were given their premiere in your honor. They were "Hilandera" (The Spinning Woman or Weaver), "Silencio" (Silence) and "Giraluna" (a coined name which doesn't mean anything), three poems by Andrés Eloy Blanco, Venezuelan poet who died several years ago. The choreography was done by Paulina Ossona (Mrs.), of Argentina, who has been working with the Danzas Venezuela group recently.

It is my impression that what Mrs. Ramón y Rivera would like is not necessarily something referring specifically to the individual numbers on last night's program, but rather something of a general nature on your impressions which they could proudly reproduce on programs and in literature about the group. I put clown the specific data merely as background.

5. I wish to acknowledge my appreciation of Jill Faulkner Summers for allowing me to make public the texts of the outline and William Faulkner's "impressions" of "Danzas Venezuela," as well as all other items in my Faulkner collection in intervening scholarly publications which call attention to the multi-volume series, *Faulkner: A Comprehensive Guide to the Brodsky Collection*, edited by Louis Daniel Brodsky and Robert W. Hamblin, and in which subsequently they will appear.

6. The system of transcription is that recommended by Fredson Bowers, "Transcription of Manuscripts: The Record of Variants," *Studies in Bibliography*, 29 (1976), 212-264.

I saw the spirit & history of Venezuela caught and held for a moment [in bri *del.*] with skill and grace, in bright and happy motion [*transferred by guideline to follow to see the at end of the next paragraph*]

Of course I was aware of the honor which was offered me, but ever since I reached Venezuela I had been offered [honors *del.*] the warmest of sympathy and honors, and so I was not surprised by it this time. What I experienced was more than the honor. It was this opportunity to see the [I saw . . . motion *brought down by guideline*]

This done with grace and skill by the young men and women who gave the impression that they did it for love of it, for their pride in the spirit and history of their country which they showed to the foreigner who will take home with him that remembrance, [never to forget the gesture *del.*] and with fuller knowledge of Venezuela which he had already come to admire, never to forget the gesture nor the inspiration of it, or the young men and women [who performed it *del.*] [in *del.*] <from> the [words *del.*] <poetry> of Andres Blanco [& senora Oss *del.*] which senora Ossona portrayed so wonderfully, nor senora Ramon y Rivera who directed it and the young men & women who performed it. I thank them all.

Anyone who had received as many honors as myself since reaching Venezuela, might have supposed that there was no new honor he could be worthy of. He would have been wrong. In this performance of Danzas Venezuela I saw not merely another warm and generous honor, <gesture from one American country to a visitor from another one,> I saw the spirit and history of Venezuela caught and held [for a moment *del.*] in a bright and [happy *del.*] warm moment of grace and skill and happiness, by young men and women who gave one the impression that they were doing it out of love for what they were doing, to show to this stranger, this foreigner, so that he could carry back home with him the [remembrance of *del.*] fuller poetic knowledge of a country which he had already come to admire [and respect *del.*], never to forget the gesture nor the inspiration of it from the poetry of Andres Blanco and the other Venezuelan poets whose [names *del.*] perhaps had no names, which senora Ossona translated [so wonderfully into *del.*] <into spectacular and significant> motion, nor senora Ramon y Rivera who directed it and the young men and women who performed it. He thanks them all. He will not forget [it nor them. *del.*] the experience nor those who made it possible.