Falkner in West Egg
A Fourth Novel Revealed
Christopher Hawtree

Mistakes can be valuable, and cost even more.

That is to say, a work of art - or even an article about it - rarely emerges fully formed into our world, just like that, but leaves behind a trail of bosh shots which can have their own fascination. Even now there are contrary views about which versions of Bruckner's symphonies or Fauré's *Requiem* are definitive. T. S. Eliot died without realising that the original incarnation of *The Waste Land* had survived, and it can now be readily studied as a way of seeing how Ezra Pound's strictures made it a far more incisive work. Similarly, one might reasonably wonder whether Scott Fitzgerald's novel would have resonated as much as it duly did had it remained *Trimalcho in West Egg* rather than evolving into *The Great Gatsby*. By contrast, there are some who prefer the novel now published as *The First Lady Chatterley*: Lawrence's way of working was to rewrite his novels from start to finish, and that version has a more elegiac tone while, a decade earlier, *The First 'Women in Love'* (1915) gained from its caricatures becoming subsumed within something greater in 1920.

There are many fragments now available by E.M. Forster (who admired Falkner) and there is surely an opportunity to publish the first drafts of *Howards End* and *A Passage to India* as such, rather than in the Abinger Edition's system of printing them line by line, with every emendation subjected to a complex series of arrows.

On coming further into our own time, which has seen worldwide fascination with Harper Lee's *Go Set a Watchman*, one could buy - until it swiftly went out of print - all of Bob Dylan's 1965-66 recording sessions (during which several lesser songs went through the most takes, as did one of the best, the never-finished *"She's*

Your Lover Now"). In due course, there will surely emerge more concert try-outs of Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon*: that multi-million-selling disc which had been a disaster when first performed at the Brighton Dome but did better the next night in Portsmouth. As such, it is surely unfortunate that such works cannot now evolve on the road lest they be posted upon the internet and there risk discouraging castigation. A phrase which prompts the thought that the original typewritten roll of Kerouac's book is widely available, as are the Raymond Carver stories before they were whittled by editor Gordon Lish. One could write at length about Henry James's rewriting of works in his later style (nobody agrees which are better) while some might yet hanker for *The Bonfire of the Vanities* as Tom Wolfe first wrote it as a serial for Rolling Stone: a Dickensian's means of getting it from his head and onto the page. Few, though, would favour the serial version of Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* over the revised and expanded novel although it is available in an Oxford edition and was a Norton one.

Such is the market that those with a taste for matters Forsterian, Fitzgeraldian or Floydian have to pay far more for the versions supplanted by the finished one. As one has to do for last year's eternal temptation: the complete 1955 recording sessions for Glenn Gould's disc of the Goldberg Variations.

All of which is perhaps a diverse preamble - or prestroll - to matters Falknerian. It has become a matter of course to lament the loss of his fourth novel but, equally, what one would give for the manuscripts of the other three. How did these come to be? We know, from a letter which he wrote to Lord Rendel, that he felt he had written *The Nebuly Coat* on the hoof/train, with a tired part of his brain, amidst a busy working life. Even more tantalising is his letter to the agent J. B. Pinker whom he hoped would be willing to sell his short stories (these have, it seems, vanished but, who knows, they could yet turn up in an attic, such as the one in which I found the letter written to Edward Stone from Baden-Baden, where

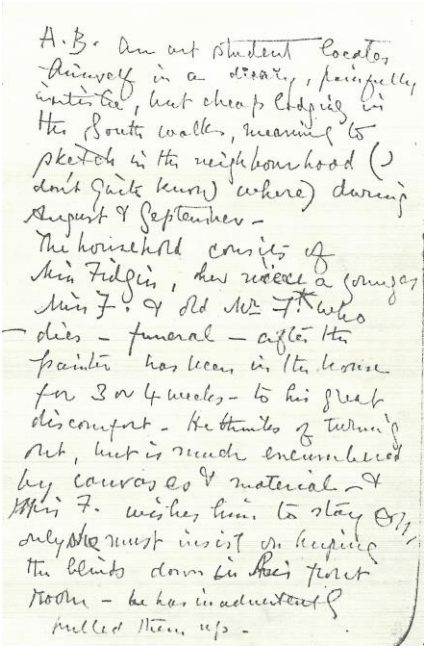
Falkner was regaining necessary energies a week before his marriage).

Falkner continues to astonish, whether it be in the letter to John Noble where he describes the discovery that, hard pressed in the middle of the night he had relieved himself ("pumping ship" is a phrase worthy of revival) in what turned out to be a shoe; or, even more startling, the one to Lord Rendel which supplies well-nigh, precisely-located Joycean details about the operation upon his piles as an explanation for his absence from ever-hairy Armstrong-Whitworth matters.

Falkner was a complex man (as was Kipling, whom he knew, but there is nothing more than a passing reference to this, and only a few more to his meetings with Hardy).

What excitement there is, however, in being able to come close to Falkner at work: the notebook which sets out a scenario for something which anticipates *The Nebuly Coat*. It would be fanciful to liken this to *Jean Santeuil,* that precursor of Proust's great novel. It was, however, with a Proustian delight that I picked up this manuscript notebook of some fifty pages at whose end are printed calendars for 1898 and 1899. Indeed, I constructed a transcript of it to provide as an Appendix to the edition I made for the World's Classics (1988) of *The Nebuly Coat*. In the event, this was deemed to be too much for general interest (that said, one recalls with esteem OUP's late Michael Cox, who himself, author a cogent guide for new vegetarians, duly wrote two novels which have something of Falkner about them).

Falkner begins with the simple note: "A. B. an art student locates himself in a dreary, painfully [illegible], but cheap lodging in the South Walks, meaning to sketch in the neighbourhood (I don't know where) during August & September."


A.B. An art student located himself in a dreary, painfully unartistic, but cheap lodging in the South walks, meaning to sketch in the neighbourhood (I don't quite know where) during August & September –
The household consists of Miss Fidgin, her niece a younger Miss F. & old Mr. F. who dies – funeral – after the painter has been in the house for 3 or 4 weeks – to his great discomfort. He thinks of turning out but is much encumbered by canvases &c & material – & Miss F. wishes him to stay on, only she must insist on keeping the blinds down in his front room – he has inadvertently pulled them up –

Even there, we can see how Falkner would transform such a setting by turning the visitor into a junior architect who visits a more remote place than Dorchester.

“The household consists of Miss Fidgin, her niece a younger Miss F & old Mr. F /her grandfather/ who dies /of old age/ - funeral – after the painter has been in the house for 3 or 4 weeks to his great discomfort. He thinks of turning out but is much encumbered by canvases and materials / & in a frenzy over some sketches most unwilling to spare time to look.”

What's more, “Miss F. wishes him to stay on, only she must insist on keeping the blinds down in his front room - he has inadvertently pulled them up.”

That element of the plot - a dead character - becomes something much greater in the novel itself. Meanwhile, here is the first glimpse of a crucial element. “Among the horrible 'ornaments' in his sitting room, a glass lustre gaselier with half the pendants gone, & other old-fashioned frippery is a frightful painting of a wreath /bouquet/ of flowers - in a great gilt frame.”

In this incarnation of the story, Miss Fidgin thinks it a fine work of art and, confronted by poverty, asks the painter how much he thinks she might get for it. “He gently informs her that, though old, paintings are practically impossible to sell.”

(It is perhaps worth remarking at this point that the notebook is not in what came came to be Falkner's medieval hand but written in a version of his early one, and at what infers to have been quite a clip.)

Gentle though the painter has tried to be, Miss Fidgin “is indignant, quite certain it is a valuable painting”. It has been in the family, much treasured and her grandfather insistent that it never be sold. The weather duly turns bad, the artist cannot venture out into the persistent rain. Anxious not to lose time, he wonders what to do. “He thinks he will paint a portrait of Miss F's niece. She is pallid & has indifferent features except fine hazel eyes – but she has a rather distinguished carriage & the painter admires her in her “black dress”, a noun which Falkner crosses out to replace with “and white collar”.

He likens the potential painting to a Vandyke or Moroni. (“I don't remember any women though by Moroni,” notes Falkner as he draws upon that well-stocked mind: he evidently knew the National Gallery well.)

“Miss F. is again very indignant. Her niece shall not sit like a model - & even if she could so demean herself, she could not possibly sit without being chaperoned by Miss F. who has not the time to spare.” Miss F. makes an alternative proposal, another model, but “The niece is rather shocked at her aunt from time to time. She is 3 or four & twenty, quite as old as the painter in age - & older in a way. She is rather nice & quiet & sensible.”

Unable to paint inside, he goes out, through the elements, to Poundbury or Maiden Castle before returning to look through his work, despairs of it, turns the canvases to the wall while again deriding the gilt-framed one on the wall and looking closer at the

watercolours made by Miss F's sister who had won prizes at the School of Art in Kensington.

That is perhaps suggested by Falkner's sister Anne, whose manuscript memoirs of their Dorchester childhood merit publication; such is her vivid eye, these are a minor masterpiece, worthy to be set beside those he wrote in the mid-Twenties. At this point in the notebook, the painter looks closer at the hideous painting, takes it into the light and realises that, beyond the flowers, there are looking out at him... hazel eyes.

In this version, Falkner plays his hand too soon. Added to which, the painter shows it to Miss F. and proposes to have the surface cleaned. As you can imagine, “She is once more indignant & refuses” while insistent that even if this is the case, the depiction of the flowers is a better use of the canvas. The niece, however, can see the painter's point, and says that with her having at least an equal stake in it, he should take it with him when he goes back to his classes. In due course, with help, a painting of a young woman is revealed and a seventeenth-century date. All of this will fit in with a Fitzjohn estate which has “been in Chancery – or whatever is the right place – for some years – wanting heirs”, something perhaps inspired by the Moule family. The last Fitzjohn had disappeared abroad while “his wife or widow - for she never knew which - had an annuity paid her from her husband's estate, according to an arrangement he had made a good while before his disappearance, for he was of roving habits”.

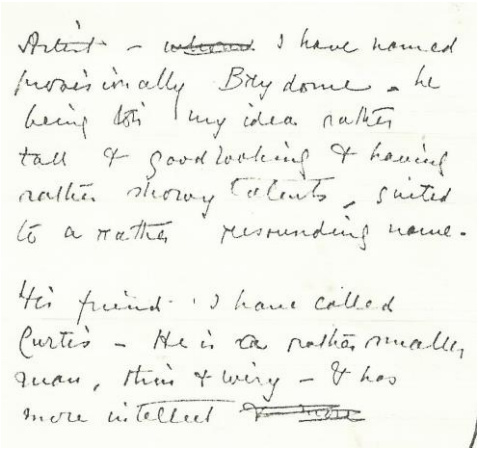
In this version there is something made of the gaselier while it becomes clear in a note added opposite that Falkner had been discussing the plot with others, at any rate his brother who suggested that in place of a hidden seal such a thing could be part of a salt cellar or mustard pot. Particularly interesting, as Falkner ponders who could be the famous painter of the portrait, it occurs to him that, what with the Stradivarius and the diamonds which

have fuelled his earlier novels, it might be stale to turn another variant; in effect, in his words, that's “enough masterpieces”.

In the tangle of past events (and that is a feature of the finished novel), Falkner thinks the woman in the picture was executed while his brother suggests that she was transported abroad and the family sank to labourers, something suggested as “a sort of Jane Shepherd (J.S's father was a labourer, & in her family nevertheless there lingered a vague tradition of better days)”.

Such is Falkner's ready way of incorporating things around him while adding that “in the dreadful drawing room must be a stuffed parrot (alive once) or a Buddha or a lyrebird's tail, or some 'common object of a far country' which my poor brother brought home.”

Amidst all this Falkner - or perhaps his brother, as the handwriting appears to change for a few pages - reflects on a lodging house at the South Street end of the West Walks and recalls meeting the family who had a brown and white pointer. “People are very stupid about dogs in books. I met with one once that at the lowest calculation was 25 & still capable of pulling down a burglar.”


Artist - ~~indecent~~ I have named provisionally Brydome - he being this my idea rather tall & good looking & having rather showy talents - suited to a rather resounding name.

His friend - I have called Curtis - He is a rather small, lean, thin & wiry - & has more intellect ~~than~~

Every novelist needs an outside eye upon such chronological matters; as we shall see.

Part Two of the outlined novel begins by reflecting upon what has gone before. The hidden painting will now include a coat of arms which matches one upon the salt cellar. “Artist I have named provisionally Brydome, he being my

idea rather tall & good looking & having rather showy talents, suited to a rather resounding name. His friend I have called Curtis. He is a rather small man, thin & wiry - & has more intellect & more stability & is quite efficient […] I am not sure whether he is an illustrator or writer, but he had wanted to be a painter in his youth, only his father was dead or incapable somehow, & his family's 'lifelode' - I think painting - or house decorating, or something more or less akin to art."

With the revelation of what lay behind the painting, Brydome and Curtis look further into the matter of the property, only to find that has been claimed by somebody whose name is not Fitzjohn.

A further visit is made to Dorchester, where Curtis is smitten with the niece (now named Anne) but suspects "that she is rather taken by Brydome, & fancies that Brydome has a liking for her & he, Curtis, though now supporting himself & hoping to do fairly well, does not as yet feel justified in thinking of marriage. I believe his is almost 40."

Which is perhaps of an echo of JMF, who was just over forty when marrying. Meanwhile, Curtis "having had no chance in his early life is interested in Brydome who is getting a good start, & whom he helps by his criticism & interest."

Perhaps in this outline there is something of the friendship between Falkner and John Noble. The plot moves forward with advertisements put in newspapers which seek the help of Parish clerks and the suchlike as the pair attempt to unravel the FitzJohn mystery.

In due course a letter arrives from an old clergyman in a remote spot where he has spent forty-five of his happiest years. He has tantalising information, and Brydome is excited by the letter. "Curtis begins to think that Brydome being only mildly interested in the

younger Miss Fidgin is eager to prove her claim to a fortune and marrying her when she has it." Brydome announces his intention of going there for a "week end" (Falkner's quotation marks) after classes finish on a Friday, conducting investigations the next day before riding back on the Sunday in time for the next week's lessons. "Curtis is rather surprised that he does not come in on Sunday or Monday night, to tell him the result" but he assumes there is a reason and does not "trouble much until a student meets him in the street & asks what has become of Brydome."

Curtis plans to go and look the following "week end" (again Falkner's quotation marks). On the opposite page of the notebook Falkner notes that his brother has now read this section and thinks that there should be a longer time lapse, and Falkner then adds "all this could be arranged quite differently. I do not write any of these suggestions as anything but mere suggestions".

Down there, Curtis meets the church clerk's wife, "a very cross old woman" who says that somebody had indeed come to look at the Registers, and he learns from her that there had indeed been one - who never brought back the key. Eventually she allows Curtis to use hers while telling him that the current vicar is not interested in the Registers but the previous one was very much so. "Curtis finds the registers lying about in the vestry, as we found them at Windrush." Curtis then realises that, despite the previous incumbent being fussy about them, there is in fact a gap in the chronicle, lost, indeed ripped-out pages. Also, he wonders if he has come to the wrong church - until, rootling about, he notices upon a stone ("if you think this advisable") a design similar to the FitzJohn arms. As for the clerk's wife, she does not tally the man to whom she gave the key with the description which Curtis gives to her of Brydome.

All of which takes another turn when, on return to London, Curtis finds that his friend has come back - and claims to have stopped en route to do some sketches but does not produce them when asked

as he apparently threw them away, so disappointing were they. When Curtis tells him about his own discovery of the missing pages, Brydome agrees that they were not there, that it was a fool's errand and that the old clergyman was probably in his dotage. Curtis infers that he does not want to pursue the matter “and comes away” but is uneasy.

“Next could be an announcement in the daily papers - 'Horrible discovery in a country church'. The old woman thinks that she can identify this man as being the one who did not bring back the key. Curtis “appears to be the only person who knew that Brydome had been there at all & he naturally keeps his own counsel. There follows another sensation, the murdered man is identified with the Mr. Vance who had shortly before succeeded in making good his claim to the well known 'FitzJohn' estate.”

What becomes apparent is that before making his halfway genuine claim, Vance had come across a stronger claim which began at the time of Sedgemoor and comes down to Miss Fidgin and her niece. Vance sees Brydome's advertisement, and hastens to the church to remove the salient pages, at the very moment when Brydome arrives, catches him in the act; with which Vance launches an attack upon him, during which Vance dies: manslaughter, the body concealed with a little-visited room at the church.

At which point, with two pages of the notebook to go, everything fizzles out in a series of unresolved alternative possibilities. One might add that, for some, the same can be said of the finished novel.

There is, of course, much interesting material in this scenario but it is all a first flap or two of the wings, the narrative and all that it brings with it is not yet airborne. During the next two or three years Falkner, while perhaps thinking it through on a series of trains and boats (or in that spa at Baden-Baden), evolved something much

more subtle than this. Melodrama would find its place in *The Nebuly Coat* but to far more subtle effect, just as the events first posited within the Marabar Caves of *A Passage to India* would do so. Falkner was fortunate in having somebody as a sounding board, perhaps as every writer needs before facing what can all too often be the disheartening reaction of a publisher.

Falkner stuck with it, and once again we can all be glad of that, marvelling time and again at a novel which reveals more on every reading. As for "week end", the *Oxford English Dictionary* dates this to 1870 as first gaining some popularity, although it revived a seventeenth-century usage, and was first used in the North (indeed upon a railway poster at Durham). Even so, Falkner appears to have been one of those who regarded it disdainfully. Be that as it may, could anybody use the English language if simultaneously aware of every word's origins? The brain might become unproductively overloaded. Similarly, there is a case to be made for simply enjoying an author's finished work; that said, Forster - in an uncollected 1958 article about manuscripts - enthuses about the sight of "words - each of them clearly inscribed - dance all over the page as if they were waiting to be swept up by a net into a final form... the illogical scriggles known as handwriting, which have occasionally been the medium for immortal thoughts."

Falkner's illogical scriggles show that, by trade a practical man, he could have been a collaborative screenwriter (and he liked the idea of a filmed version of *The Nebuly Coat*). As it is, this humble notebook – of which I have quoted a small part - was as much a gateway to immortality as the performance on the back of a van at a suburban Liverpool fete twenty-five years after his death. Oh, for a recording of that - but there was: the surviving reel emerged in the Nineties and appears to have been bought by EMI who deemed it too scratchy to include on the *Anthology* discs but those who have heard it say that here is a vintage John Lennon vocal. I can picture Falkner tapping a foot to that.