William Faulkner’s Jackson Square

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Jackson Square, until 1844 called the Place d’Armes, gives New Orleans an element of Old World charm. When William Faulkner came to the city in 1925, the square was in decline because the center of city life had moved up the Mississippi River to the American side of Canal Street. The decadent atmosphere and the near-Mediterranean light attracted and affected writers and artists, including Sherwood Anderson and William Spratling, both of whom provided Faulkner a place to stay near the square.

Clearly the light in New Orleans inspired William Faulkner, as his letters to his mother, his sketches in the Times-Picayune and his novel *Moonglow* suggest. He also must have felt the influence of other artists and writers in the city, such as William Woodward, whose paintings bathed the French Quarter in Mediterranean pastels and honored the tensions between light and dark in its shadows. Also working in the French Quarter at that time was Pope Whitewell, a photographer who manipulated photographs to achieve light and dark effects, especially soft light.

In *Moonglow*, a fictional treatment of the artistic and literary colony in New Orleans, Faulkner portrays Jackson Square at dusk, one of the more magical moments for the interplay of light and dark in this warm, humid atmosphere:

*The Visitors dark held to soft suspension lights also as belltriske. Jackson Square was now a green and quiet lake in which whole lights round as jellyfish, feathering with silver minnow and pomegranate and hibiscus beneath which lanternewebbed and black. Pondaluas and cathedral cranes cut from black paper and pasted flat so a green sky above them taller palms were fixed in black soundless explosions.*

As another point in the book, Faulkner describes the square an hour later in the evening. While his emphasis continues on the effects of humidity, the light is now characterized in terms of the coolness of the moon, not the last glow of the warm sun:

*Looking through the tall pickets into Jackson Square was like looking into an aquarium—a moist and minutiae multirhythm clouds green of all shades from ink black in a thin and rigid feathering of silver on pomegranate and minnow-like coral in a dusky sea, amid which gillular lights hung dull and unceasingly as jellyfish, inscapable yet without seeming as comatose light, and in the center of St. Andrew’s baroque plunging stellar [Clark Mills’ equestrian sculpture of Jackson] nimbo-cast with thin glumes as though he too were recently vetted.*

In the 1920s, the French Quarter was slowly recovering from abandonment by the old Creole families today the neighborhood reflects its role as New Orleans’ greatest tourist attraction. Jackson Square literally forms the
city's spiritual center. By day in "banquets" course with visitors listening to street musicians, watching dancers and jugglers, and smelling the aromas of gumbo and etouffee mixed with the odors of the Mississippi River.

The crowds move less hurriedly at dusk, and the Pontalba apartment build-
ings, which flank the square, begin to reflect the rays of the setting sun. A trio of visitors pass through the square, the blue and red neon lights of restaurants and jazz clubs flash on like disorderly codes in the darkening narrow streets that adjoin the square. The birds disappear into trees and building corners. As darkness advances the lights across the square come on suggestively, their rays blunted by the rising humidity. Since Faulkner's time the riverfront warehouse, dark places from which Faulkner observed the lights of both the river and the city, have been removed. The passing lights of ships gliding along the river remind us that the square now is less a destination itself than a space across which people travel to dance and music. As greater numbers of people avail about this public park, the light in Jackson Square remains a catalyst affecting people and environment.

Notes
2. Ibid., 49.

Aerial view of Jackson Square from the Mississippi River, circa 1940. Photo by Ralph Lindo. courtesy The Historic New Orleans Collection, Museum/Research Center, acc. no. 1976.25.16.179.