

Michael Zeitlin, *Faulkner, Aviation, and Modern War* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), 239 pp.

Reviewed by **Peter Lurie**, University of Richmond

Michael Zeitlin's new book is a singular achievement. He is the first Faulkner scholar to take on the whole of the author's flying corpus, and Zeitlin shrewdly analyzes the role of aviation, and, in particular, wartime flight in Faulkner's writing and thought. He uses this topic to study what defined a particular version of masculinity in the World War I context of Faulkner's youth and in key dimensions of his fiction. More importantly, he uses this focus to show how Faulkner's aviation narratives responded to a nexus of technology, militarism, and gender that would have cataclysmic impact well into the twentieth century.

Among its major accomplishments is Zeitlin's sustained attention to the tension between the fliers' own sense of their "work," its extreme contingency and lethal threat, and the popular and journalistic writing of the period that insisted on seeing pilots and aerial combat as a modern variation on knight-errantry. Indeed, this tension informed Faulkner's own flight "career," the Mississippian's failed attempt to enlist in the Great War and the truncated training he pursued in Toronto as part of what became the Canadian Royal Air Force. This attention enables Zeitlin to trace some of the tensions between romance and modernity that also defined Faulkner's oeuvre. Above all what Zeitlin does so artfully is weave the language of the pilot's own letters and memoirs into the prose of Faulkner's aviation narrative, which we should consider as one encompassing story that includes the tragic account of the deep bond between the Sartoris brothers, John and Bayard. As a founding part of the Yoknapatawpha saga, the Sartoris mythos is one that Faulkner examined across his career in ways that Zeitlin grounds in the early work's account of their piloting.

Zeitlin shows a stunning care for the deep humanity of the early fliers of Faulkner's time and the extraordinary risks they took for often complicated personal and psychological reasons. Additionally, he sees in Faulkner's effort at his own aerial career a model for understanding Faulkner's art. Alone among Faulkner scholars – on his own brave solo flight – Zeitlin shows how piloting and service in the RAF and, crucially, Faulkner's later embellishing of his training and flight experience combined actual experience with his wildly fecund imagination to produce Faulkner's many war and flying stories. This combination yielded some of his most memorable and formative characters. Indeed, it is the figure of the veteran or the young pilot/soldier whose vulnerability in the face of modern martial technology captured Faulkner's interest. And this susceptibility to the

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rapidly changing modernity Faulkner encountered is what, Zeitlin shows so fully, animated not only his early work.

One reason for this interest emerges in Zeitlin's account of the story "Love." Probably written in 1921 but only published in *The Missouri Review* in 1988 (160), it is among Faulkner's earliest pieces of prose fiction. At its heart is an achingly poignant moment of either failed courage or social comeuppance when a young pilot takes on a dare of sorts in an effort to impress a woman romantically. The loss of nerves at the prospect of actually flying in front of an assembled crowd may or may not be real; it may (or may not) be the result of the protagonist Bob Jeyfus never having learned to fly this type of plane properly at all. Here the biographical shadings are evident, as the self-formulated legend of Faulkner's fake combat injury makes clear to readers even passingly familiar with his early life. For what Zeitlin shows so sensitively is that, while Faulkner may not have had this experience himself, he certainly understood the pressures on young military men, and he drew on accounts by fliers like Victor Chapman, Dana Carol Winslow, James McConnell and others in fashioning this narrative. To suffer a crisis of confidence in the face of onlookers expecting a display of aerial daring-do, a group that included a love interest, would be among the most agonizing experiences imaginable. What Zeitlin shows is that the neither the story nor its author condemn the possible sham display. Rather he suggests that the failure to *become* a pilot in this era could have produced psychic strain akin, if not equivalent to that suffered by men who genuinely lost their nerve due to battle strain.

He carries this sense through Faulkner's work, making a crucial landing in a reading of the non-canonical, non-Yoknapatawapha novel *Pylon* from 1936. Here Zeitlin shows how this tale of barnstormers – a seeming anomaly among Faulkner's novels – cuts to the heart of a rising, interwar fervor about technology and power that would see its most brutal outgrowth in Europe a decade on. The novel's reflexive account of an unnamed writer – a reporter for a fictional New Orleans paper – who becomes fascinated with a group of aerial stuntmen suggests its importance. Part of the reporter's interest (like Faulkner's) was with the increasing menace of the planes being used in the airshows. For in them, the pilot Roger Shumann recognizes the role of capital and the state to marshal energies beyond what either could control. Extrapolating from the newly powerful vessels in the book, the planes that Shumann calls "over-souped" (as real pilots said of even earlier, World War I models), Zeitlin sees the novel anticipate a gathering storm abroad. "The 'viciously powerful' aeroplanes are there [in the story; elsewhere] ostensibly to defend the nation, but they also menace their own pilots while signaling the presence of an international system organizing itself for an apocalypse" (181). Zeitlin refers to the arrival and display of Italian airpower in Chicago in 1933—following Japan's 1931 invasion of Manchuria and Hitler's rise in Germany—and its "ecstatic" welcome by an adoring

American crowd. Drawing on Walter Benjamin, Paul Virilio, and other philosophers (clairvoyants?) of modern martial technology, Zeitlin sees this novel's awareness of a gathering destructive power in the West. Indeed, in his hands *Pylon* anticipates not only Percy Grimm in *Light in August* but also the rise of fascism abroad and the lingering postwar impact of fascination with male vigor, nationalism, and technology.

The book thus ends with a stunning treatment of the figurative role of the unspoken word "Jew" in *A Fable*. In a reading of Levine and the white, phosphorous burning of both his sidcott flight suit and "the 'stuff' of Levine's romantic, martial soul," (198) Zeitlin shows the way "every enlisted man is either Semitic or conceptually so" and "is marked for death by" an increasingly uncaring State. He shows one of Levine's last visions before he dies, one that could have applied to Faulkner in his youth: that of Levine as a "newly commissioned pilot in the RAF" seeing a real, and genuinely experienced pilot, Jimmy McCudden, walk into the lobby of the Savoy Hotel and into the adoring gazes of women, including that of Levine's own mother. But this is also a vision in which, after his wartime experience, "everything that Levine had ever loved or dreamed about being a flying officer ... slowly burn[ed] away" (199) in a knowledge of a modernity that "seeps into [Levine]'s inner organs of feeling and apperception" (198). This sense seeps into others' knowledge of what flying had once represented — before the age of mass annihilation of civilians as well as soldiers.

Zeitlin's technical grasp of the design and workings of airplanes is thorough, and his grasp of the pilots' reflections on or memoirs about flight is encyclopedic. Even so, Zeitlin's rendering of their expressions and felt impact on Faulkner's work is consistently lively and attentive to telling, often life-saving details. The book is the fruit of many years' devotion to a critical aspect of Faulkner's work. In it, Zeitlin sees and shows something no one previously had: Faulkner's understanding that flying and aerial maneuvers were a kind of writing, a new way of seeing the world and space and motion, expressions of a modern masculinity that was uniquely vulnerable but in urgent need of being understood as such. When Zeitlin observes the not-infrequent sight in these early twentieth century years of "a pilot fall[ing] from his machine, drop[ping] through the clouds, and vanish[ing] into air, or water," we might add that he falls into the embracing blank pages of Zeitlin's study in addition to the "simple white panel, gravestone, or newspaper obituary [that] commemorates him" (2). All of this comes to us in a prose as graceful as those pilots' soaring and dipping as well as through a writerly voice as unassuming and assured as that of men like Chapman, George Guynemar, and Raoul Lufbery were in flight.