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(review)

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The Faulkner Journal, Volume 34, Number 1, Spring 2020, pp. 95-104
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Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

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Review

Review of *Faulkner, Aviation, and Modern War* by Michael Zeitlin

For many Faulkner critics, including some of his earliest and most admiring, the story of Faulkner's service in World War I as an RAF cadet in training, then a combat fighter-pilot seriously wounded in two plane crashes in France, was initially accepted as fact. Months of training in Canada followed by nearly fatal combat abroad was hardly unique in a war in which the deaths and injuries suffered by fighter-pilots were not only notoriously high, but often reported in bold-faced headlines in the news media. However, as more information gradually surfaced (much of it after his death), it became clear that Faulkner's tales of combat were pure fabrication. What once had been regarded as an entertaining, even humorous, and, since he had managed to survive, a resourceful, even oddly heroic war history—improbable but not impossible—became a puzzling, if not appalling, act of willful deception. Especially disturbing was that Faulkner continued to imply, if not firmly claim, the veracity of that history well after he had become recognized as a major writer, especially by other writers in the United States and abroad. Nevertheless, with the exception of a couple of quite private admissions to individuals, he never made public the fact that the whole story was completely untrue.¹

Michael Zeitlin's extraordinary study is an attempt to get at the multi-layered meaning of Faulkner and flight as it evolved during the First World War and the decades following. He lays out in elaborate detail Faulkner's

¹Faulkner's readiness to sit squarely on the fence regarding his combat experience is evident in his correspondence with Malcolm Cowley over the editing of *The Portable Faulkner*. In general he was very pleased with Cowley's work. At one point, however, he erupted in anger over Cowley's emphasis on Faulkner's combat experience, based of course on the stories Faulkner had circulated: "you're going to bugged up a fine dignified distinguished book with that war business." He insisted that the well-known editor, literary historian, and critic leave out any specific reference to Faulkner's plane crashes in France (which Cowley considered crucial to an understanding of Faulkner's fiction), instead stating "only what Who's Who says and no more: Was a member of the RAF in 1918." The request might appear to be a somewhat veiled public admission by Faulkner of years of equivocation. A little over a week later, however, Faulkner, mollified by Cowley's readiness to accommodate his request, qualified the confession with simply another version of what in fact never happened: "The mishap was caused not by combat but by (euphoniously) 'cockpit trouble'; i.e., my own foolishness; the injury I suffered I still feel I got at bargain rates."

service as a twenty-one-year-old cadet, the roughly seven months of enlistment, training, and demobilization from the RAF, far more fully than all earlier attempts. He quotes liberally from Faulkner's letters home to his parents during this period, marked by an almost boyish enthusiasm for the technical training and patient acceptance of what Zeitlin describes as RAF "daily routine": "physical conditioning, military drill, and menial work in the barracks." Zeitlin's focus, like Faulkner's, is on the rigorous curriculum: "The work here is very interesting. I wish they allowed us to go into detail about it. We have all sorts of engines, map reading, wireless, artillery observation." Daily classroom hours are spent, for example, sitting on benches looking down on projected maps "built to represent the earth at a height of 5000 feet, everything complete, with tiny electric bulbs to represent shell bursts. We pin point them and send the location . . . by wireless to the instructor, who replies by a series of white strips of cloth laid upon the floor. It is going to be very interesting, and if you find it interesting, you never have any trouble in passing it" ("passing" refers to the final exams, which will partially determine the cadets' rank after completing training).

Outside the classroom there are long days of marching—"We average ten miles per day . . . for the last six days, not counting 2 ½ drill in the morning"—observing planes in flight at Leaside Airport, and, on one occasion, coming into hands-on contact for the first time with an airplane: "we went out to flying camp yesterday afternoon," Faulkner writes his parents September 25 (Faulkner's twenty-first birthday), 1918, "and I learned how to crank an aero motor by swinging the propeller. I was rather surprised when I did it. It's rather scary though, the thing goes off with such a roar. Saw lots of flying, as yesterday was very clear, a great flying day."

The most intriguing aspect of Zeitlin's critical approach is his abundant quotation and his fascinating use of it as an account of Writing and Reading as a dynamic merging of seemingly distinctive acts of mind. *Faulkner, Aviation, and Modern War* comes to us as if it were born of quotation, over three-hundred citations from roughly two-hundred and thirty writers, ranging from generous paragraphs to two or three-word phrases. Our overall sense, despite the very different purposes and contexts at work in such an accumulation, is not so much a company of individual writers and their writings, completed in the quote marks of publication, but rather multiple voices opening outward, as if still searching among the countless possibilities, indeed the virtual world of writing afforded by Zeitlin's astonishingly wide-ranging reading—an act of reading that turns out to be a compilation that is simultaneously a creation. To read a text already written and write a text that seeks to complement it, attempting to conjoin the written with a current process of creation, represents a dynamic of opposing forces, driven by a desire to bring the "older" and the "newer" into a confluence that alters both, yet refuses to drain either of its oppositional power. Reading/Writing is a dynamic of desire for a reality of complementary vision.

Zeitlin invokes a semblance of the whole of utterance, as written in this triple-subject book (Faulkner, aviation, modern war) by inventors, scholars of modern aviation in war, veteran combat-pilots, memoirists, biographers, historians, scientists, psychoanalysts, philosophers, novelists and poets, literary theorists and critics, accompanied by quotations from their writings, every one of which is identified by author, text, date, and page numbers. The result is an ongoing series of simultaneous turns to the *already written* and the *being written*. The goal is to find a place of advantage in another writer's words. These turns are at once active and passive, re-cognition of a vaguely re-sponsive familiar as a forerunner of change, yet the pleasure of a place is always "knowing its place": a passed and a current process that together seek the possibility of a common ground of coherent, collective expression, the consequent meaning of which is confirmed by its shared making.

In the long passage that details the young cadet's initial contact with at least part of an airplane, Zeitlin supplements his commentary with quotation interspersed within it, drawing on three scholars of aviation during the First World War, one of them focusing specifically on Faulkner's experience as a cadet. Zeitlin distributes the quoted material, identified by quote marks, distinguishing it from his comments. In the following passage I put all of Zeitlin's comments in two double quotes at the beginning and the end, with all the quoted material in single quotes:

"The engines, Curtiss OX5s, stand behind protective screens through which the cadets can 'smell the reek of castor oil and feel the heat from the flames that leaped from their exhaust stacks.' Unprotected by any screens, the cadets are exposed to the propellers at 'the starting end' which is the entire point of the exercise. At full throttle the nine-foot propellers spin at 1,500 revolutions per minute, their 'blade points cutting the air at the rate of eight miles a minute.' The object of this phase of the training is to 'drill' the operations of the machines 'into all pupils under conditions which simulated those on active service as nearly as possible.' A simulation, perhaps, but the fear and the danger of what the spinning blades would do to human flesh were real enough. The aeroplane-mounted versions of these model 'instruments of war, new and strange and dangerous' were capable, moreover, of shooting machine-gun bullets through their propellers in synchronized bursts. Facing the engines, the cadet might shrink at this prospect before remembering (in a reversal of perspective mandated by his overall course of study) that he was being prepared to sit in the cockpit or gunner's seat of the attacking aeroplane on the Western Front where, in the fall of 1918, the strafing of enemy troops 'retreating along roads and rail lines' was a primary mission for Allied combat planes."

The distribution of already published work is relatively unobtrusive, verbs completing their action absent their subjects, largely dependent clauses, occasionally just a word or two, yet they add significantly to the scene of Faulkner cranking the propeller, deepening its ominous implications well beyond the sound of its roar. The tone, the sharp vivid imagery, the sense of impending violence blend with Zeitlin's heightened prose, creating a choral harmony less of professional scholars practicing their specific expertise than four voices sounding a communal expression.

The gathering of published sources sufficiently effective to be consistent with the tenor of the whole, yet structurally limited to briefer, more moderate secondary qualification than Zeitlin's longer, complete subject-verb declarative sentences, suggests a collective voice, but a curiously imbalanced one. That seeming imbalance, however, disappears according to the dynamic at work between the two sources of expression. The quotations not only fit the sense of the whole passage perfectly, they participate, over a published-date span of ninety years, in registering a major shift in the history of the war. Between the already published writing and the writing going on now there exists an eloquent complementarity.

How does that complementarity come about, and what does it say about reading and writing? Did Zeitlin select the quoted material first and then write the sentences that freshly complete its seemingly random insertions? Or did the quotation, sensitive to the energy of current creation searching for an already existing place to share, insert itself into the process to complete what Zeitlin has written? If both questions are equally bizarre, it is because Zeitlin is proposing that language in our time finds itself in the paradoxical crisis of an overwhelming presence of available expression, ranging from the mighty to the mundane, leading to the effect of facilitating and frustrating how we read and write. The response to that crisis, which Zeitlin is tracing and illustrating, is that language may thrive as a comparably paradoxical action, which ultimately is to borrow more language: whatever is imminent for whatever one has to say. In the borrowing, however, to open to *being* borrowed; *written* and *writing* to live *on* each other *for* each other. What Zeitlin seems to be proposing is that complementarity can project a conditional yet possible expression of reality, a "grounded process," the strength of which is always dependent on the fact that its voices interact endlessly.

Over against these sentences and phrases coordinating into a form of complementary meaning is Faulkner, whose major presence in this book is to be the bearer of a second identity wholly and exclusively his own: the combat-fighter-pilot who never flew, never saw combat, never crashed, was never wounded. He is the figure of radical invention, an absolute "originality" sealed off even from the heroic models he has borrowed since they have no purpose other than providing the imagery of his imaginative play. The singular "truth" of originality is indifferent to the dynamically engaged dual voices of reality.

Faulkner, like many young American men, from 1914 to 1917 was “waiting, biding” until he “could get to France and become glorious and beribboned too,” but it was not until he was inducted as a cadet in the RAF that he began to imagine the identity he would not fully abandon for the rest of his life. He creates it in the letters to his parents, primarily his mother, as something they could share: his mother in the hope of its fulfillment, Faulkner in the pleasure of its creation. Zeitlin characterizes it perceptively: “From the beginning the aviation pose signified the cadet’s intimate link with his mother, a special way of performing for her, an admission that this was how he desired to be seen by her because he also knew she desired and indeed fully expected to see him in this way too.”

Within a week of his induction on July 9, 1918, Faulkner is already writing letters home consisting of groundless accounts of what he is doing and to what purpose. He begins modestly enough, inventing flights he has or will soon take as a passenger with another cadet pilot, eventually progressing to solo flights, none of which—as passenger or flier—has in fact occurred or will occur. Five months later, on the verge of discharge, he is still writing total fabrications emphasizing solo flights—“I have got my four hours solo to show for it”—boasting of the privileges, which, having successfully completed the training course (which he has not), he will accrue: “a pilot’s log-book all my own . . . a pilot’s license for use in civil life,” and membership in the “Royal Aero Club which is affiliated with the International Aero Club, so that anywhere I ever go, I’ll be able to find friends and so forth.” In his final letters, now presumably deeply disappointed (at least for his mother’s sake) at the RAF’s apparent refusal to honor his illusions, he writes that he will not be receiving “pilot’s certificates” after all. “Nothing but discharges as second airmen.” He adds that they “might at least have let me have another hour solo flying, so I could have joined the Royal Aero Club and gotten a pilot’s certificate.”

What is so remarkable at this point is that Faulkner—who never seemed to be confused about what his experience as a flier actually was—is capable of writing quite outside the realm of what has actually happened to him. He has never been in an airplane that was not sitting safely on the ground, yet he is bemoaning the loss of another hour of solo flying that might have made a difference in his military status—his rank, his uniform, his flier’s license—when he arrives in Oxford two weeks later. He is perfectly ready to accept the absolute fact of the November 11, 1918 Armistice—“they had stopped the war on him”—leaving him with that identity he had begun creating at the outset of his cadet training. He knows that his dream of flying in combat in what will become known as The Great War will depend entirely on his imagination. Well after his cadet days he will begin telling these stories publicly to various people, occasionally including them in brief bios accompanying published stories. His reputation as a wounded combat veteran of the war will become widely known; he will add to his months of training at least one crash, ending upside down as in

his “future” crashes, along with newer stories he will embellish over the course of his career as a fabulous gloss on it all.

On the first page of his preface, Zeitlin quotes a passage from Murry (Jack) Faulkner’s *The Falkners of Mississippi: A Memoir*, in which he recalls his receiving a Purple Heart from Marine Headquarters, “several years after the war was over,” and the date and location of his wounding. “When I mentioned this unexpected, happy turn of events to Bill, he considered it a moment [and] smiled (after all, he had been in the war too).” Zeitlin follows this apparent confirmation of Faulkner’s by now often repeated bogus claims, with a quick announcement of the theme of his book: “*After all, he had been in the war too*. This is true, in ways this book seeks to understand more fully.”

True in what way? He quickly lists Faulkner’s major untruths, from the supposedly failed attempts to enlist to the crashes during training or in combat, his war wounds, including the steel plate in his head, and their enduring symptoms. At the silent center of it all is the never fully intelligible decades-long repetition of these untruths. To my knowledge, the only attempt at even remote explanation Faulkner ever offered was in a 1944 interview with Stephen Longstreet published in 1965: “It seemed to me then the thing to do.”

The most striking account of Faulkner “*in the war too*” lies in Zeitlin’s reading of his first published short story, “Landing in Luck” (1919). Although Faulkner does not appear in the story, it is built entirely out of his experience as an RAF cadet, which ended almost exactly a year earlier. Cadet Thompson is the main character on the verge of making his first solo flight. The flight turns out to be challenging, ultimately hazardous, involving the loss of a wheel owing to his flying through a crossing telephone cable during takeoff, and ends in an almost fatal crash landing. Thompson manages to survive, but his plane lands tail in the air and nose to the ground, very much like the crashes Faulkner imagined for himself in combat.

Along with the considerable action of the story there is the triangular drama of the character who performs that action, the writer of the story whose own history as a cadet reflects to a degree the character he has created, and Zeitlin, who has nothing to do with the story except to provide a brilliant reading of it—which also makes him the latest and current writer in the mix. His reading here, an essential part of which is his attempt to demonstrate that Faulkner was “*in the war too*” is also an example of *writing* opening itself to the already *written* of the story and the published excerpts of twenty-two writers he is bringing to bear on it. It might appear that the already written becomes the prey, the hunting ground, of the reader now writing, but this overlooks the complementary nature of the dynamic going on, for Zeitlin’s writing is bent on reading the published quotations and the written story—without changing or leaving out a sin-

gle word—toward further ranges of possible meaning of the communally understood reality that may come forth. The urge is not to abandon the written, but to find in it a reality on the brink of writing, to recognize the abiding vitality of the written, which is to find in Faulkner's story, say, a writer writing "in the war too." The task of the reading writer here is not to depict "accurately," as if from an objective exterior, Thompson's actions and attitudes, but to write *through* him. That is, Faulkner's portrayal must conjoin with Thompson's character as *writing* conjoins with the *written* in a mutually creative act of language.

Given the rich and continuing engagements of writing and written that characterize Zeitlin's study of Faulkner, the notion of the published fiction generating out of its vaunted independence, paradoxically, a monumental availability, the emergence of significant *difference* will seem at first contradictory, but, in the nature of paradox, perfectly true. If one of the major themes of *Faulkner, Aviation, and Modern War* is that Faulkner had "been in the war," it is precisely that abiding vitality that Zeitlin is talking about. He is not altering the books, he is telling what, at least in certain books, among them Faulkner's best, is there and has always been there.

In "Landing in Luck" it is there in the story's treatment of cadet Thompson. Or to put it a very different way, it is there in the vehicle of the biographical "fact" that Faulkner made known throughout his literary career, namely, that "he too had been in the war," but in his case dishonestly, in fable and wholesale imposture. That creation, of course, is not mentioned in the story, and so far as we know, Faulkner had revealed it only in letters to his parents during his RAF cadet training. Nevertheless, it is his own private inspiration, virtually a grotesque muse, that enables him to bring to literary life the character of Thompson. For all his limitations, which are rampant in the story, he achieves distinction, but it is solely *for Faulkner* by virtue of what Faulkner alone recognizes is Thompson's "difference" from Faulkner, which has been released out of the always implicit reality of the *written* story.

In the story's opening scene, as Thompson prepares himself for his first solo flight, distinction of any kind is nowhere in sight. The cadet's flying instructor, Bessing, mercilessly criticizes him: "you cut your gun and sit up there like a blind idiot and when you condescend to dive the bus, you try your best to break our necks, yours and mine too." In contrast to the flight instructor, however, in several of Thompson's key scenes Faulkner elevates Thompson to those levels of achievement Faulkner did not come close to as a cadet. Thompson's first solo flight is the solo flight Faulkner never had, especially not the necessary hours of flying time: "Seven hours and nine minutes," almost twice Faulkner's imaginary four. Flying time and solo time are the central fable of his letters home during his six months of training. That in his first published short story he immediately puts his character alone in the air suggests that Faulkner is already using his fictional imagination not as a way of reversing his own history, but rather to use that

history, and the stories he made up to compensate for it, as a celebration of Thompson.

In the climax of "Landing in Luck," Faulkner has Thompson endure a crash-landing. Although "an American pilot's chance of dying in a training accident was 40 percent higher than his chance of dying in combat" (99), Faulkner is daring to describe what only a pilot is likely to know, namely the panic, the fright of sudden death, as, finally out of petrol, he has no choice but to bring his plane down with a missing wheel: "He watched the approaching ground utterly unable to make any pretense of leveling off, paralyzed; his brain had ceased to function, he was all staring eyes watching the remorseless earth. He did not know his height, the ground rushed past too swiftly to judge, but he expected to crash any second. Thompson's fate was on the laps of the Gods."

He writes the scene of paralysis, of brain no longer functioning ("eyes at first closed and then wide shut," Zeitlin puts it). Faulkner has imagined his own non-existent crashes at least three times, once apparently almost left for dead, another time, preferring the comic route, he ends up inside a hanger, with the plane, himself, and a bottle of whiskey, all upside down. In his invented accounts, he has never tried to describe this kind of panic, of senselessness in the terror of helplessness. Now, however, he does, through his talent not as a fantasist but as a creative writer. This is not the war "he had been in too," it is the war that Thompson was in, and that Faulkner is putting into fiction on his behalf in the only role of "being in the war" he can play.

The crash is immediately followed by the appearance of his flight instructor, Bessing, "the first to reach him," who has been so harsh with him prior to his take-off: "'Lord, Lord!' he was near weeping from nervous tension. 'Are you alright? Never expected you'd come through, never expected it! Didn't think to see you alive! Don't ever let anyone else say you can't fly. Comin' out of that was a trick many an old flyer couldn't do! I say are you all right?'" Thompson's "eyes filled with utter adoration. Then he became violently ill." As the one man in the story who apparently recognizes Thompson's achievement, Bessing's acknowledgment is different from Faulkner's. Whether the flight instructor knows what Thompson has deliberately done or accidentally performed is not clear. Faulkner's title of the story, "Landing in Luck," suggests a much less laudatory interpretation, not to mention, more significantly, his wholly imagined description of Thompson's "paralyzed" condition as his plane descends. And yet, there is a glory in the praise, and in the pilot's possibly miraculous survival, a gift, for the created character in the real war.

Finally, there is the last scene in the story, the "retrospective narrative account" by a perfectly relaxed Thompson: "—and so when the petrol gave out, I knew it was up to me. I had already thought of a plan—I thought of several, but this one seemed the best—which was to put my tail down first and then drop my left wing." Thompson's account, given the descrip-

tion Faulkner has provided of the descent itself, certainly seems nothing but a post-crash rehearsed concoction. Yet Faulkner seems provisionally approving. He inserts the one sentence that repeats Bessing's remark "muttered half aloud. If he only remembers to land on his left wing—the fool, oh, the blind, bounding fool." Of the three cadets whose response to Thompson's summary are quoted, two are unconvinced: "He's the 'f' out of flying. Biggest liar in the R.A.F."

But Thompson's assurance is in Bessing, whose praise no one but Thompson has heard. The two of them reappear arm in arm, with Thompson giving his doubters "a cheerfully condescending: 'Hello, you chaps.'"

"Landing in Luck" happens with a certain suddenness, given the impostures Faulkner is performing in Oxford at the time, while taking courses at the University of Mississippi as a special student owing to his status as a veteran. He purchases an RAF uniform and "wings," repeats his stories to his family, and not long after will be telling them to anyone he deems a fitting listener. He will do this often enough to establish a reputation as a combat fighter pilot in the war. However accomplished and well known he became, he never publicly repudiated the pose. Nevertheless, he repudiated it in his best fiction, as Zeitlin has well-argued, by demonstrating "*he had been in the war too*" as a writer.

In "Landing in Luck," Zeitlin's reading of which occurs at virtually the exact center of his book, Faulkner creates a plausible, brave, imperfect fictional character of whom he himself is the shadow, writing with pencil and paper while the cadet makes his way, solely through and for the writer who has created him, to a kind of heroism the artist will never know. Although Faulkner will continue to tell the stories, it seems to be a heroism he does not need. He has practiced an art of skill and generosity, ennobling Thompson, this fictional character whose arrogance and pride contribute to his failure to see what is going on with his plane, or with his fellow cadets trying to give him crucial information from the ground, one of whom has to fly up to literally wave a wheel in his face in order for him to grasp his danger. No matter. As a writer Faulkner plies the art of an invisible echoing accord.

Faulkner is content with the results of his own cadet experience: the knowledge necessary to create a character who can carry out his mission. With his first published short story, he is already displaying what he has learned from his half-year in the same place where his imagined character trained and flew. As Zeitlin puts it: "Faulkner came to possess a profound understanding of the military institution, the realities of combat flying, the horrors of battlefield killing, and the First World War as 'the great seminal catastrophe' of the twentieth century."

At the close of his reading of the story, Zeitlin eloquently summarizes:

The medium itself of 'Landing in Luck' as a work of literary art is its primary message. It is as if Faulkner is saying, I am more than what

I pretend, and greater than you imagine, a flyer of a special kind, for whom writing is already a superior form of flight, an incandescent sublimation of that “allegory whose master narrative is the story of desire itself, as it struggles against repressive reality, convulsively breaking through the grids that were designed to hold it in place” (108).

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