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Faulkner, Aviation, and Modern War by Michael Zeitlin (review)

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Review

Michael Zeitlin, *Faulkner, Aviation, and Modern War*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022. ISBN: 978-1-5013-5677-3, xvi + 232 pp. $35.95.

In *Faulkner, Aviation, and Modern War*, Michael Zeitlin, a renowned Faulkner scholar and professor of English at the University of British Columbia, looks closely at how aviation and modern war, particularly World War I, shaped William Faulkner's writing. Zeitlin discusses Faulkner's brief training as an RAF cadet, his engagement with aviation literature, and his lifelong fascination with flying. He explains how these experiences gave Faulkner ideas and inspiration for his fiction throughout his career. Zeitlin also points out that Faulkner's writing about aviation often shows two sides: the pursuit of transcendent glory in flight and the constant threat of catastrophic failure.

Chapter 1, "The Original Accident," draws on Paul Virilio's concepts and begins with analyzing a pivotal childhood event in Faulkner's life: his failed attempt at age 12 in 1909 to launch a homemade aeroplane. This incident left Faulkner "suspended upside down" (qtd. in Zeitlin 136) in the wreckage and, as Zeitlin suggests, encapsulates the core themes of Faulkner's aviation fiction: "the passionate desire to fly, the brave testing of limits, the inevitable failure of the machine, the humiliating loss of control, the dumb gaze of the witnesses, the division of labor between pilot and ground crew" (2). This chapter sets the stage for understanding how Faulkner's aviation writings engage the "dialectic of enlightenment" (8) inherent in modern technological progress. For Faulkner, the invention of the aeroplane inherently contains the aviation accidents.

Chapter 2, "New Haven, Spring 1918: The War and the Newspapers," captures the social and cultural atmosphere of the period when Faulkner was employed at a munitions factory. Drawing on Faulkner's letters, Zeitlin illustrates how the young author became enthralled by newspaper accounts of the Lafayette Escadrille, which appeared almost daily and were "always boldly pronounced" (30). This fascination provided the imaginative groundwork for Faulkner's decision to enlist in the RAF as he became "caught up in the universal fascination with the air war" (24). Chapter 3, "Transfiguration: Chapman, Guynemer, Lufbery," builds on Chapter 2 by examining how three fighter pilots underwent a kind of secular canonization in the newspapers and aviation literature of World War I. Zeitlin analyzes this "transfiguration," revealing how their feats and fame contributed to the romanticized yet harrowing image of the aviator in early 20th-century culture. By linking these themes to Faulkner's aviation writings, such as the screenplay "War Birds/A Ghost Story," Zeitlin demonstrates Faulkner's acute awareness of these heroic narratives and how he integrates their motifs into his pilot characters.

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Chapter 4, "Faulkner and the Royal Air Force," reworks sections of Zeitlin's earlier paper, "Faulkner and the Royal Air Force Canada, 1918." It describes Faulkner's RAF cadet training in Canada in 1918, exploring how romance associated with aviation sharply contrasted with the harsh realities of wartime experience. Stories like "Turnabout" vividly capture this tension, depicting acts of courage alongside tragedy, and portraying the cruel indifference of commanding officers. Continuing this exploration in Chapter 5, "The Embryo Pilot," Zeitlin highlights how "Landing in Luck" masterfully combines "aviation realism and oneiric symbolism" (103) to depict the pilot's struggle between his will to fly and the paralyzing fear he experiences at the controls. Zeitlin sees Cadet Thompson as a fictional avatar for Faulkner's anxieties as an "embryo pilot." This chapter also documents Faulkner's direct encounters with the formidable machinery of modern flight, shaping his emerging awareness of a new, mass technological society.

Chapter 6, "Wounded Flyer," traces the recurring figure of the wounded flyer throughout Faulkner's life and work. Using psychoanalytic theory, Zeitlin illustrates how this figure consistently appears in Faulkner's aviation writings, exemplified by characters such as Donald Mahon in *Soldiers' Pay* and the Sartoris twins in *Flags in the Dust*. Zeitlin begins with the well-documented biographical details of Faulkner's post-RAF behavior when he adopted mannerisms and mystique of a "wounded warrior persona" (136), inspired by the injured combat pilots he read about in newspapers and aviation novels. Although he never saw combat, Faulkner affected a limp, drank heavily, and claimed to have a silver plate in his skull from a supposed wartime plane crash. Zeitlin argues that this behavior was more than youthful romantic posturing; it reflected Faulkner's profound fascination with the aviator's precarious balance between glory, trauma, technology, and vulnerability. This chapter also examines *The Marionettes*, whose dreaming protagonist, Pierrot, anticipates Mahon's death-haunted consciousness.

Chapter 7, "'Love,' *Manservant*, and Faulkner's First Screenplay," examines one of Faulkner's lesser-known stories, "Love," as a key text in what Zeitlin calls Faulkner's "aviation matrix" (160)—a collection of writings reflecting his RAF experiences and their aftermath through avant-garde styles and unsettling dream imagery. The story revolves around a "wounded flyer," Bob Jeyfus, whose combat record is met with deep skepticism by his postwar community. Only a mysterious squadron commander, "the Major," knows the truth about Jeyfus's French flying service and its devastating impact. When Jeyfus faces a public flying "test" to prove his credentials, he suffers a breakdown, muttering, "Nerve's gone" (163). Zeitlin asserts that the story is at once "a confession of Faulkner's postwar anxieties" and "a major scene of self-discovery: Faulkner's RAF experience, his worries, his humiliations, his fantasies, all were rich material in a life that was becoming richly writable" (160). The chapter then traces how Faulkner adapted this personal material into his screenplay *Manservant*. Although the script removes many autobiographical elements, Zeitlin still identi-

fies Faulkner's enduring focus on "the matter of the wounded veteran and his transferential fantasies and relationships" (172).

Chapter 8, "*Pylon*: The Last War and the Next," incorporates three of Zeitlin's earlier papers and new material. Zeitlin connects *Pylon* to Faulkner's anxiety over the rise of fascism in Europe and the escalating arms race of the interwar period. The novel centers on daredevil aviators like Roger Shuman, whom Zeitlin interprets as a humanist counter-ideal to the fascist cult of technological mastery. Unlike the fascists' glorified aviator heroes, Shuman is depicted as human—imperfect but capable of responsible action in moments of crisis. According to Zeitlin, *Pylon* embodies Faulkner's critique of modernity and the aviation era's transformative impact on society, encapsulated by "phallic pylons, the revolving airplanes, the mesmerized crowd gazing skyward, the inevitable smashing of machines, the burning of the pilot's corpse, the front-page, boldface publicity" (184).

Zeitlin concludes in "Coda: Faulkner and Jimmy McCudden at the Savoy: *A Fable*" by analyzing the character David Levine, a young RAF pilot whose disillusionment and eventual suicide represent Faulkner's deepest anxieties about his military experience. Zeitlin also examines photographs of Faulkner in his RAF uniform, revealing how the reversed wings and their connection to Estelle Oldham's marriage to Cornell Franklin reflect Faulkner's conflicted feelings about his masculinity and wartime service.

While earlier scholars have examined Faulkner's brief RAF service and the presence of aeroplanes and pilots in his works—most notably in Robert Harrison's *Aviation Lore in Faulkner* (1985)—Zeitlin's study is the first to thoroughly investigate how Faulkner's aviation experiences and sustained interest in aviation shaped his literary imagination. Zeitlin's work significantly enriches Faulkner scholarship by offering fresh readings of well-known and lesser-known texts.

A key strength of Zeitlin's work is his rigorous examination of biographical and historical sources, clearly dispelling long-standing myths about Faulkner's life and demonstrating how aviation details and imagery found their way into his fiction. Another major strength is the book's ability to integrate diverse analytical approaches—intertextual, historical, biographical, psychoanalytic, and sociological—to demonstrate how Faulkner transformed his personal aviation experiences into lasting art.

However, Zeitlin's study also highlights areas that could benefit from more attention. For example, the roles of gender and race in Faulkner's depiction of pilots deserve closer examination. Zeitlin highlights the presence of "erotic competition" (82) among some pilot characters and notes that "flying was predominantly a white man's activity" (6) in the early 20th century. Future research might explore how Faulkner's aviators reflect or challenge the prevailing gender expectations and racial norms of his time. Additionally, although Zeitlin thoroughly engages with previous research, he unfortunately overlooks one of the "aviation pioneers" (xii) in this field, Nancy Belcher Sederberg, whose doctoral dissertation, *William Faulkner's World War I and Flying Short*

Fiction: An Imaginative Appropriation of History (1977), closely aligns with the book's central themes.

Overall, *Faulkner, Aviation, and Modern War* is carefully researched, convincingly argued, and critically engaged. It will be invaluable to Faulkner scholars and readers interested in modernist literature and the cultural history of aviation. In this regard, Zeitlin's work will soar as a landmark study for years.

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