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*Faulkner's Media Romance* by Julian Murphet (review)

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## BOOK REVIEW

*Faulkner's Media Romance*. Julian Murphet. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. 285 pp. \$74.00 hardcover.

JULIAN MURPHET'S BOOK IS A BRILLIANT CULMINATION OF A REVISIONIST movement—now several decades old—which has overturned the notion of William Faulkner, high modernist, slumming it in Hollywood for badly needed cash, and a writer by and large removed from the contemporary scene, except when he wishes to expose its shortcomings in a novel like *Pylon*. Early Faulkner critics and biographers took their cue from his public statements, interviews, and letters, which suggested a fundamental lack of interest in modern media.

As Murphet's title suggests, Faulkner was not only aware of media—radio, photography, and cinema—he was having an affair with it, although operating in the elaborate disguises of tropological language. Nurtured by a steady diet of southern romanticism and the chivalric code, he sought to reinvigorate and sometimes subvert the heroic credos of his youth and much of the literature that formed his education. Even as he heard the hoofbeats that so mesmerize Gail Hightower, Faulkner was listening to the radio, watching movies, and taking photographs.

This passage, coming near the end of Murphet's long and dense introduction (this is a book that must be read and re-read slowly) reveals the style and reach of his epic study:

Faulkner looked outward to the transformation of his life-world, and borrowed from its transforming media ecology the figures and devices—the disembodied radio voices [exploited in *As I Lay Dying*], the scratchy grooves of a graphophone [see the end of the same novel], the photomechanical reproduction of a moment in time etched onto silver halide crystals [processes that suffuse scenes and images in *Light in August* and *Absalom, Absalom!*], the paving of a town street, or the buzz overhead of a Flying Jenny [the world as organized in *Flags in the Dust* and several short stories]—that might allow him to dissemble his atavisms behind the screen of a mechanical and electronic modernity. (47)

In short, William Faulkner, acutely aware of and attracted to the media transforming his world, wrote himself into it by borrowing its means of transmission. Murphet shows how Faulkner engaged in the “reprocessing

and retrofitting of figures from one exhausted regime” that had been built on the myth of the cavalier figure (48):

It is this florid style of high incident [exemplified in *The White Rose of Memphis*], associated in retrospect with an extinct class of slave-owners, but also animating the narratives of early cinema and the bestseller lists, that the young William Faulkner felt as his gravest threat and dearest temptation. (32)

*Pylon*, in Murphet’s book, becomes a much more central text because even though it is placed beyond the boundaries of Yoknapatawpha, it nevertheless projects Faulkner’s straddle between the old pre-cinema South and its modern Yankee successor. Jiggs, the airplane mechanic, purchases a pair of riding boots in a scene that “will comically suture the regime of aeronautics to the (vanished) equestrian regime of chivalry for the duration of the book” (78). Faulkner’s way of splicing together past and present, as Murphet notes, is itself a cinematic maneuver:

The act of reaching into his pocket to pay for the boots is rendered continuous with cinematic apperception: “When Jiggs put his hand into his pocket they could follow it, fingernail and knuckle, the entire length of the pocket like watching the ostrich in the movie cartoon swallow the alarm clock.” (78)

One of the greatest pleasures of Murphet’s book is in sentences such as the one above that makes one think of Faulkner’s first foray into Hollywood when he said he wanted to work on a Mickey Mouse cartoon. I dare say no one has thought of that anecdote as revealing just how well Faulkner had already absorbed the significance and technique of cinema. But now, après Murphet, we must.

The chapter on *The Sound and the Fury*, especially Murphet’s meticulous examination of how Quentin’s rides on streetcars shape and reflect his devotion to “transport doomed, like himself” (128), is brilliant and is a nice setup for Jason’s gasoline-saturated headaches and his febrile attachment to delayed reports from the commodity market he speculates in. Jason’s racing around in a car, Murphet shows, is but part of a larger pattern of his undoing:

And just as the throb in his head is an internal impedance to the circuitry of consciousness, forcing shut-downs and recurrent blockages in the field of perception, so too Jason’s monetary hoard (the \$7,000 in the locked drawer) is a blockage in the circulatory system “natural” to the capitalist market that he devoutly wishes would finally sweep away the stagnant economy of Yoknapatawpha County. (139)

Similarly, Murphet shows how Faulkner's use of photographs and photographic process exposes how Charles Bon is the negative/positive-undeveloped/developed part of the Sutpen racial identity and inheritance.

Murphet makes few slips. It is not true, as he states, that Faulkner "wrote all of his screen treatments, dialogue patches, and full screenplays directly on his typewriter" (229): Meta Carpenter Wilde writes about the difficulty of deciphering his handwriting (25-26), and the University of Mississippi has a handwritten Faulkner screenplay, "Wooden Crosses." Sometimes the jargon is jarring and wearisome—as in the discussion of chronotypes and "amphibologies of the photogram" (248). But it is hard to read a Murphet sentence without marveling at his intense ingenuity and perceptiveness.

#### Works Cited

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