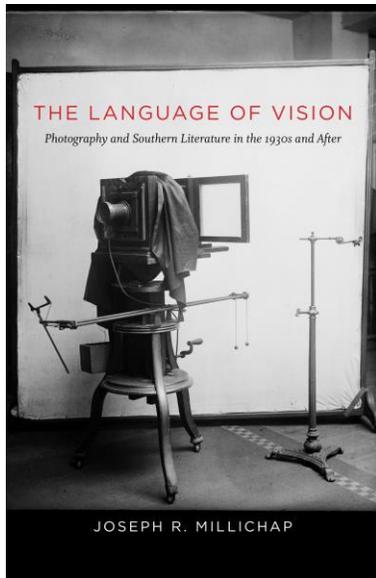


Dr. Joseph Millichap on his New Book *A Language of Vision* and a Few More Thoughts

By Page Harrison



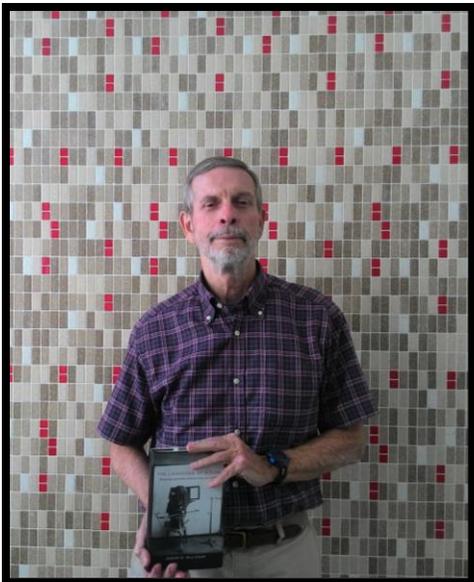
Emeritus Professor **Dr. Joseph Millichap** served as Department Head of English at WKU from 1984-1994, and served as faculty member for ten years more. Dr. Millichap says in his biography on the English department website, “I look back on those years as the center of my career,” though he has been quite a productive writer since retirement. Dr. Millichap has authored eight books, with his latest titled *A Language of Vision: Photography and Southern Literature in the 1930s and After*.

Dr. Millichap first had the thought to incorporate his love of the visual medium into literature upon discovering the heavy influence of family photography in the later works of Robert Penn Warren. He has been working on various parts of the book for years, but currently, he says, there is more attention revolving around the interplay of text and visuals, as evidenced by the growing discussion of the book *Let us Now Praise Famous Men* by writer James Agee and photographer Walker Evans. The book was a project to document the worst parts of the depression leading up to Roosevelt’s New Deal, and portrays the period through a combination of prose and photography.

During the depression, photography became the art of regular citizens, partly in response to the government becoming the time period’s main patron of the arts through the Federal Arts Project. **At the same time, literary modernism was at what is now considered its peak.** Whereas modernism is a literary era of complex, interior-focused work that was often perceived as beyond popular culture and commonality, the Works Progress Administration, or WPA, put the meaning of art back into the hands of common citizens. Dr. Millichap says that modernist artists like William Faulkner became a lot more outgoing during this transition.

The literary and visual tensions of the time revolve around two ideas, according to Dr. Millichap: first, photographs are inherently more realistic than literature in the way they capture a specific space, but they are still fiction in the way artists “package and present them.” Second, literature longs to be “pictorial,”

that is, to present an image and capture something real, while photographs “long to be narrative.” Photographs imply narrative by capturing a moment and a space, “a chunk of time,” and providing some historical context. However, neither medium can really be the other, and this is what allows each medium, literary and graphic, to inspire artists of the other as “**intertextual languages and influential visions.**” Here is a good example of this exchange: Evans was inspired by Faulkner’s writing to go to Faulkner’s stomping grounds and photograph the spaces; Faulkner later saw Evans’ work and became inspired to write characters into those very same settings. In *A Language of Vision*, Dr. Millichap not only discusses Faulkner and Warren’s graphic influences, but also Ralph Ellison, Eudora Welty, and contemporary writer Natasha Trethewey.



At the moment, Dr. Millichap is **happily retired** and working on a new book about Robert Penn Warren’s relationships with other writers. For the book, Millichap is currently exploring the complicated relationship, both personal and professional, between Warren and his first mentor John Crowe Ransom, “the first living poet he ever met.” Dr. Millichap has often followed ideas for books that started with inspiration from Robert Penn Warren’s life and work, particularly the idea that Warren was interested in **good writers who were also, and more importantly, good people.**

In a few words to WKU students and alumni who are aspiring writers, Dr. Millichap mentioned the difficulty of the daunting blank screen. He says, “you aren’t a writer unless you write,” so set a goal to write a few pages per day – even if they are not worthy of staying in the text, write them anyway. Also, “leave a little hook” for yourself to pick up on the next day, and, eventually, “be ruthless in editing.”

Find out more about *A Language of Vision* and Dr. Joseph Millichap at <http://lsupress.org/authors/detail/joseph-r-millichap/>.