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REVIEW ESSAY

A history of modernist literature, by Andrzej Gąsiorek, Chichester, Wiley Blackwell, 2015, 596 pp., £75 (hbk), ISBN 978-1-4051-7716-0

Wyndham Lewis: a critical guide, edited by Andrzej Gąsiorek and Nathan Waddell, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2015, 239 pp., £24.99 (pbk), ISBN 978-0-7486-8568-4

The Cambridge companion to Wyndham Lewis, edited by Tyrus Miller, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2016, 182 pp., £18.99 (pbk), ISBN 978-1-107-64573-8

Andrzej Gąsiorek's *A History of Modernist Literature* offers a critical overview of modernism in England since the 1890s to the Second World War and is the last of six volumes – from Old English to twentieth-century literature – in *Blackwell's Histories of Literature* series. Its volumes, we are told, provide both a plotting of significant literary developments of a period and wider cultural contexts, broadly conceived: politics, society, the arts, ideologies, varieties of literary production and consumption, and dominant genres and modes. To bring so many and such different textual and contextual elements together effectively in one volume, without losing sight of the texts or the period discussed, is a very considerable undertaking. By doing so with authority, unfailing lucidity and a near encyclopaedic range of material, Gąsiorek has produced the most comprehensive, consistently perceptive and detailed history of modernist literature in England to date. In his introduction, he emphasises that he is not writing a general history of twentieth-century English literature but the history of innovative writing which 'enacted an aesthetics of exploration and disruption' (p. 6). Modernist writers, he argues, were those who were 'preoccupied with questions of perception, knowledge, subjectivity and language, investigating these issues in ways that altered the forms and structures of their texts' (p. 6). While acknowledging that their 'disposition to experiment could be traced back to the work of a number of European iconoclasts' (p. 6) in poetry, prose, drama, philosophy and psychology, his focus is on the contribution of 'transplanted Americans', notably Henry James, Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot and Hilda Doolittle, and of other exiles and emigrés from Joseph Conrad to Wyndham Lewis, James Joyce, Ford Madox Ford, D. H. Lawrence, Katherine Mansfield and Jean Rhys. From his analysis of the influence of Filippo Marinetti on the pre-war English avant-garde to his nuanced and knowledgeable discussion of English variants of European surrealism in the work of Humphrey Jennings, Hugh Sykes Davies, Roger Roughton and David Gascoyne in the 1930s, we are made aware throughout of the transnational space of modernist production and consumption.

If Gąsiorek explores the origins of modernism as a response on the level of the text to the crises of subjectivity and of representation, he is equally attentive to its contextual origins in the crises of modernity: the social and cultural transformations brought about by new technologies from the motor car to the telephone and cinema, widespread social and political upheaval, the challenge of feminism, the growth of consumer society, imperialist expansion - 'modernism is unthinkable without the history of colonialism' (p. 21) – and the impact of new publishing in little magazines and reviews. Indeed, one of the notable features of *A History of Modernist Literature* is its awareness of the importance from the 1890s to the 1930s of little magazines, critical journals, enabling groups and cross-fertilising salons – the infrastructure of modernism by which it was embodied in the culture.

From the outset, Gąsiorek emphasises that modernism was not a unitary movement but one made up of multiple modernisms. He provides even-handed presentations of major and often sharply contrasting figures such as Ford, Lewis, Lawrence and Virginia Woolf. Histories of literary modernism are usually marked by a clear preference for one style of modernist writing over another, but for Gąsiorek, their work falls on the subjective or objective side of responses to the crisis of subjectivity. His reluctance to take sides (he is a distinguished scholar of Ford and Lewis) has much to do with the historical and theoretical challenge of writing a history of modernist literature given the fact that 'modernism' is for many an ideological construct, created in its heyday and ever since by definitions indebted to modernist works themselves. In his introduction, he briefly traces the early critical reception of modernism from Edmund Wilson to Cyril Connolly, F. R. Leavis to George Orwell in part to establish the early history of modernist reception, in part to challenge the idea that discussion of modernism only began in universities after the Second World War and in part to provide an alternative reading of modernism as more than a flight into aestheticism and elitism. For Gąsiorek, in one of his most striking and important insights, modernism in England was from its beginning always a socially and culturally engaged enterprise. He does not accept the validity of the distinction made by Peter Bürger between a radically activist avant-garde and an apolitical modernism finding refuge from reality in the realms of the aesthetic or the complex pleasures of word-play. It is for this reason that he begins, for instance, with the fiction of the New Woman, Joseph Conrad's 'critique of capitalist modernisation' (p. 81) and E. M. Forster's class-conscious and anti-imperialist *Howards End*, explores in detail the cultural utopianism of the pre-1914 Vorticists and describes in the 1930s the links between surrealism and the poetry and politics of Humphrey Jennings, Mass Observation and documentary film.

The most celebrated accounts of modernism – from Frank Kermode's *The Sense of an Ending* to Hugh Kenner's *The Pound Era* – take the First World War as the defining, generative moment of high modernism in Anglo-American literature, pre-war utopianism giving way to apocalyptic thinking, the disrupted hopes of a pre-war cultural renaissance fuelling the bitterness and hatreds of Pound, Lawrence and Lewis. Gąsiorek's brisk opening sentence to his chapter on 'Modernism During Wartime' – 'Modernists reacted to the outbreak of the First World War in a variety of ways' (p. 231) – makes clear his intention not

to ascribe any world-transforming power to the First World War, even though the most influential modernists saw it as an unimaginable cataclysm, an epochal break, a crack in the surface of history. To do so would be to reproduce one powerful modernist view, one powerful set of modernist metaphors. By placing the war-time writings of Dorothy Richardson, Mansfield, Rebecca West, Woolf and Mina Loy alongside those of Joyce, Lewis and Ford – portraits of the female artist as a young woman mirroring portraits of the male artist as a young man – he extends and greatly complicates the view of war-time writing. Similarly, in his next chapter, '"A Haughty and Proud Generation": Modernist Literature, 1918–1930', by including writers not usually included in such discussions, from Richardson and West to Dadaists and Surrealists, he is again able to extend and complicate our view of inter-war modernist writing – Eliot's metaphor of the waste land, his 'search for order in myth, continuity in tradition, and transcendent meaning in religion' (p. 337) being only one amongst many responses to the post-war world. His reading of modernist writing in the inter-war period is strengthened by his grasp of its political extremes: in the fascism of Pound and Lewis, the traditionalism of Ford and Eliot and the communist, fellow-travelling sympathies of the Auden generation. Moreover, by writing at length about Ford and Lewis before and after the First World War, he creates a differential history of modernism, one or even two generations of modernists co-existing with, influencing and often outlasting later generations.

Yet even as he writes a history of modernism which avoids reproducing long established versions of modernist writing as aestheticist, elitist, reactionary and apocalyptic, Gąsiorek's history is itself clearly dependent on critical acts that have their own particular histories. Indeed (and it is one reason for the value of his account), *A History of Modernist Literature* is the summation of innovative work in feminist and post-colonial literary readings of modernism since the 1980s, just as it is the summation of innovative work produced since the 1990s on the cultural networks of modernism and on the effects on modernist writing of sound-recording, radio, photography and film. *A History* of *Modernist Literature* provides us with a much wider and more variegated canon of modernist writers than is usual, even in the most recent guides or companions, with substantial readings of May Sinclair, Olive Schreiner, Richardson, Dora Marsden, West, Mansfield, Doolittle, Bryher (Annie Winifred Ellerman), Mina Loy, Hope Mirrlees, Mary Butts, Rhys, Nancy Cunard, Una Marson, Claude McKay and Laura Riding. He does so not simply because a new critical consensus requires it but with obvious appreciation and a sense of the importance of the writing he discusses. His readings are not just expository; they refract complex current theoretical positions in a consistently subtle and multi-layered approach.

Most histories of modernism make fiction or poetry or fiction and poetry their focus. Significantly, Gąsiorek gives equal attention to drama from the 1890s to the 1930s. In his first chapter 'Early Modernism', he explores under the heading 'Early Modernist Drama' the impact of Henrik Ibsen on those wishing to move beyond realist conventions. '[Harley Granville] Barker, [John] Galsworthy, [St John] Hankin and [D.H.] Lawrence all drew on Symbolism in some of their works in an attempt to give a deeper significance to their naturalistic

representations' whilst the work of G. B. Shaw and Elizabeth Robins anticipated agit-prop. (p. 94). The plays written by these dramatists, he notes, 'required theatres willing to stage them' (p. 94) while censorship was always a major problem, often necessitating the use of private performances. But there were always theatre managements – from the Abbey Theatre in Dublin to the Gaiety Theatre in Manchester – willing to take risks with plays which lacked commercial appeal or were likely to cause controversy. Admirers of continental developments in theatre from the Wagnerian ideal of 'the total work of art' to the performances and the stage designs of the Ballets Russes encouraged the view of theatre as 'spiritual stimulus', none more so than Edward Gordon Craig and W. B .Yeats (linked and explored at length) who shared a passion for masks and marionettes and for Symbolist staging.

In retrospect, Gąsiorek argues, 1911 can be seen as an important year for modernist drama in England. Craig published *On the Art of Theatre*; Max Reinhardt's company had a run at the London Coliseum; the Stage Society put on Anton Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*; and the Ballets Russes (under Serge Diaghilev) came to Covent Garden. He usefully reminds us that modernist drama as well as fiction and poetry offered a continuous and intensifying challenge to received forms in the period and he provides the contexts by which to understand the links between pre-war and inter-war drama and the involvement of Eliot, W.H. Auden, Christopher Isherwood, Louis MacNeice and Stephen Spender (as well as Benjamin Britten) in post-1918 modernist theatre. In the penultimate chapter, 'Modernism in the 1930s', we are reminded that modernism had not run out of energy by then. The complex political situation of the 1930s, sketched with a remarkable range of reference, inspired a new generation of modernist writers while it intensified literary and political differences between Ford, Pound, Joyce, Eliot and Lewis. However, Eliot, Pound, Lewis, Doolittle, West, Rhys, David Jones, Auden, Elizabeth Bowen and Samuel Beckett all produced important work well after the post-1945 period and it is surprising that in his final chapter 'Coda: Modernism's Afterlives', Gąsiorek did not continue his differential history into the post-1945 period, even if he does cite modernism's 'extremely resourceful afterlife, with many writers seeing it as the necessary point of departure for their further explorations of the questions it opened up' (p. 565). We surely need a second post-1945 volume of this exceptional *History of Modernist Literature*.

Gąsiorek is co-editor with Nathan Waddell of a collection of essays on Wyndham Lewis, one of two collections published in response to the recent revival of critical interest in Lewis' literary career and in anticipation of a complete scholarly edition of his writings announced by Oxford University Press. They set out the difficulty and the necessity of a return to Lewis:

> Readers of this book may or may not find Lewis a congenial figure, but our goal as editors has been to help students, scholars, and interested general readers alike see that he was at the heart of British modernism, making important contributions to it as a writer, painter and critic, and that his role in the growth of twentieth-century British culture was a significant one. (p. 4)

We have essays covering the full span of Lewis' long career. Louise Kane assesses the writing of the Breton Sketches 1909–11 and early contributions to the little magazines. Julian Hanna and Faith Binckes explore the familiar terrain of Vorticism, *Blast* and *Tarr*. Making a powerful and convincing critique of Lewis' paranoid racism, David Bradshaw dismembers *The Apes of God* (1930) while Ian Patterson takes a gentler approach to *Revenge for Love* (1937), with Lewis' treatment of gender his fruitful focus. Valuably, because they discuss the largely neglected period of Lewis' career from the Second World War until his death in 1957, Miranda Hickman reads *Self Condemned* as an exploration of the tragic consequences, for the central protagonist and his wife, of the detachment required by his philosophical beliefs while Scott W. Klein explores Lewis' engagement with the philosophy of political organisation in his late dystopian novels *Monstre Gai* and *Malign Fiesta*. These texts, Klein reminds us, developed preoccupations first raised in 1920s but with the imprint of a later era: technologies of torture invoke the horrors of the Nazi concentration camps (p. 190). Other essays are thematic: Anne Marie-Einhaus details in a compact but ranging way Lewis' lifelong engagement with the topic of war; Alan Munton contrasts Lewis and Orwell as cultural critics; Jamie Wood clarifies our understanding of Lewis' satire; Ivan Phillips explores the contentious issue of Lewis, race and gender, with the somewhat surprising presentation of Lewis as a feminist, a view shared by a number of contributors to the volume; Nathan Waddell explores Lewis and politics, tracking major changes in Lewis' positions over his life-time and presenting him in the post-1945 period (another somewhat surprising conclusion) as 'one of democracy's staunchest defenders' (p. 140); Gąsiorek considers Lewis and technology, arguing that his engagement shared none of 'Futurism's modernolatry and its worship of the machine' (p. 170); Michael Nath reflects on Lewis and the philosophy of modernism; and Paul Edwards' concluding essay surveys the critical reception of Lewis. Individually and collectively, the essays realise the editors' aim of presenting Lewis as a central figure in modernism and in twentieth-century culture in Britain and Europe.

Edwards suggests that the very range and variety of Lewis' achievement as an artist as well as a writer have made it difficult for a clear and settled view of his importance to form. Work in the 1970s on Lewis as an analyst of 'violence, the machine and the megalopolis' was not taken up: 'academia suddenly noticed that the great modernists were anti-democrats hankering after authoritarian politics, including fascism' (p. 223). Paradoxically, he argues, it was Fredric Jameson's *Fables of Aggression: Wyndham Lewis, the Modernist as Fascist* (2008) which brought Lewis to a new academic audience. This was in part by re-evaluating through the idiom of the new theory the apparent flaws of his fiction, its 'fragmentation of character and subjectivity' (p. 225). It was in part by placing him within an established and contemporary tradition of European theory: 'the European tradition that Lewis engaged with – in a captious, polemical, but nonetheless serious way – is that out of which thinkers such as Lyotard, Deleuze, Barthes, and Derrida later emerged' (p. 226). And, finally, it was in part by making style, and the energies and forces animating it, central to the analysis of his work.

In his introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Wyndham Lewis*, Tyrus Miller also acknowledges the importance of Jameson's revisionary reading of Lewis and follows him by reading Lewis as a philosophical writer and an exceptional stylist. He excelled, he argues, at both 'figurative' composition and discursive ('critical', 'theoretical', 'political') argument, 'often intertwining them in hybrid forms that make it difficult to sort his opus into too-crude categories of fiction and non-fiction or artistic and expository works' (p. 1). Lewis, he continues,

> was philosophically and existentially obsessed with the Cartesian duality of mind and matter, body and soul, and was driven to explore, in work after work, the human eccentricity of being compelled to *think* within a fleshly mechanism traversed by automatisms of motion, action, appetite, and sexual drive. (p. 1, emphasis in the original)

Lewis even divided the cultural world into 'Friend' and 'Enemy'. From this comes the combativeness of his early avant-garde and his subsequent writing and the philosophical quality of Lewis' satire (from the satire of the early avant-garde period to the post-avant-garde period of the 1930s and beyond). Sometimes in sympathy with 'the emancipatory aspirations of communism, socialism, and anarchism', sometimes with far-right, fascist views, any single thing that Lewis posited 'seems to have conjured up its twin and opposite' (p. 2).

As with the collection edited by Gąsiorek and Waddell (both contribute essays to Miller's collection, Gąsiorek on Lewis and his critique of his modernist contemporaries, Waddell on Lewis and fascism), the aim is to see beyond the early revolutionary work and beyond 'Lewis' relation to fascism – both as a novel form of twentieth-century mass politics and, in its Nazi version, as a horrific political organisation of racism' – to assert Lewis' 'value as a major artist and writer, as a contributor to the wealth of twentieth-century art and literature who is worthy of far greater critical attention than he has to date received' (p. 16). Richard Humphreys provides a succinct survey of Lewis' extraordinarily varied work as a painter, his links to European painters deftly made, while Paul Edwards draws upon a life-time's expertise to provide an authoritative and persuasive reading of Lewis' visual work from his early semi-abstract to his later precariously humanist portraits, one of the best essays on Lewis as a painter and as a satirist yet written. Sadly the publisher does not rise to the occasion by providing illustrations in black and white for both essays when Lewis' distinctive palette is such an important element in his visual work. Sascha Bru places Lewis in relation to the European avant-gardes and argues convincingly that throughout his life 'with his sustained critique of art's institutionalization', he was 'to remain an avant-gardist in the classic sense of Peter Bürger' (p. 29); Melania Terrazas analyses Lewis' changing modes of satirical practice; Alan Munton describes Lewis' vacillating relationships to anarchism – 'The Vorticists were perhaps an accidental anarchist collective' (p. 105) – and socialism, with the life-time conflict in Lewis's political thinking between decentralisation and centralisation the key to his political theory and satirical practice (p. 111).

Lara Trubowitz (with *The Apes of God* as her focus) suggests that 'antisemite and racist though he may be (and he is both), Lewis is also a compelling theorist of antisemitism and racism and ought to be read as such' (p. 113) while Erin G. Carlston similarly suggests that misogynist and homophobe though is, Lewis is also a theorist of misogyny and homophobia, her reading (like Trubowitz's) taking its cue from Jameson's claim that Lewis' racism and sexism are 'so extreme as to be virtually beyond' racism and sexism (how much hangs there on 'virtually') as he makes 'himself the impersonal registering apparatus for forces which he means to record, beyond any whitewashing and liberal revisionism, in all their primal ugliness' (quoted p. 125). This, Carlston continues, renders 'these forces more accessible to critique than they would be in a more camouflaged and naturalized form' (p. 125). David Ayers, on Lewis and cultural criticism, by way of sharp contrast finds in Lewis a 'stark vision of the subordination of public reason by the emergent technology of mass society' which anticipates Adorno and Horkheimer but 'there is a darker side to this account', shaped as it is for Ayers by a conspiratorial 'model of a mythical Aryan-Jewish conflict' (p. 146). Erik Bachman explores in Lewis the conflict between philosophical and theological approaches to the idea of value while Julian Murphet on Lewis and the media also gives sustained attention to Lewis' final work and finds there an understanding close to Jameson's vision of postmodernism: 'The world of *The Human Age* is a world without originals, let alone originality, a dystopia of "men without art" stretching infinitely into the posthuman future' (p. 170).

In these two very lively and wide-ranging collections Lewis' work is, with the notable and weighty exceptions of Bradshaw and Ayers, strongly and subtly championed as a major twentieth-century British and European writer. Whether, of course, the revival of interest in Lewis as writer as well as artist endures, only time (or time-flux) will tell. The large-scale retrospective of the paintings of Lewis at the Imperial War Museum North, scheduled for the summer and autumn of 2017, and the high claims made for Lewis' work as a writer and painter in the three volumes under review indicate a significant revaluation of his contribution to modernism and of his place in twentieth-century British culture.

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