English Avant-Garde, 1901-1918

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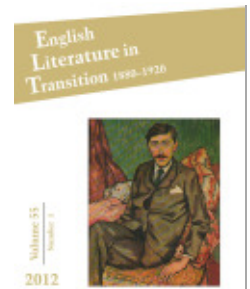
Book Reviews

English Avant-Garde, 1901–1918

Paul Peppis. *Literature, Politics, and the English Avant-Garde: Nation and Empire, 1901–1918*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000. x + 236 pp. $59.95

PAUL PEPPIS proposes a fresh angle on the notoriously controversial topic of modernist politics. He rightly notes in the introduction that the opposing factions in the modernist debate have an unfortunate tendency to oversimplify. Those who denounce the modernists as elitist, racist and fascist often fall prey to a kind of excessive anger and moral indignation that reduces their argument to rhetorical gesturing, whereas the apologists for modernism focus too exclusively on aesthetic issues and are apt to lose sight of the cultural and political context in which modernism arose. Rather than adding his voice to either the choir of condemnation or apology, Peppis builds his argument on the contention that "credible accounting of modernist politics after the Great War must begin with an examination of those the avant-gardists supported before it." In his view, the most fruitful approach is to revisit the original claims made by the avant-gardists regarding their political ambitions, examine these in the light of prevailing influences of nation, empire and nationalism, and place these firmly in the historical context. He quotes with approval Josephine M. Guy's statement in *The British Avant-Garde* that "the achievements of radical and innovative artists and writers" are best "measured in terms of their *own* culture and not ours—in terms, that is, of the specific intellectual, political, or aesthetic orthodoxies to which those artists and writers were opposing themselves."

The first chapter charts the ideological course of the early literary career of Peppis's main protagonist, Wyndham Lewis. A close analysis of a number of comic travel tales published in Ford Madox Ford's *English Review* demonstrates that Lewis shared with Ford a keen sense that culturally, politically and economically England was a nation in decline. However, at the same time he rejected Ford's and the *English Review*'s urbane brand of liberalism and imperialism. Rather than looking to the past to rediscover the untainted civilized values of pre-modern, pre-industrialist Englishness, he sought the remedy for England's waning powers in the unleashing of the vital, aggressive, intuitive forces now

dormant in the nation's heart. In this process, he envisaged an impor-
tant role for foreign influence, so that in the end we find Lewis and many
of his fellow intellectuals holding an agenda that combines fervent na-
tionalism with cosmopolitan leanings. Peppis sees this apparent contra-
diction as a key-concept in the understanding of the rise of the English
avant-garde.

In the second chapter, the author examines English responses to new
French culture and the German Threat on the basis of Alfred Orage's
"Independent Socialist Review of Politics, Literature, and Art," the *New
Age*. The journal's Francophones saw an infusion of French culture as
the only way to revitalize England's flagging creative powers, although
they were worried that the medicine might prove too strong. For their
Francophobe opponents, France represented all that was decadent and
"unmanly" and they loudly proclaimed England's uncontested superior-
ity. Their overcharged patriotism, however, is analyzed by Peppis as
redolent of a deeper sense of national cultural weakness, which ulti-
mately they share with their Francophile opponents. Similarly, he finds
common ground between the anti-German chauvinists and the advo-
cates of German culture in their general agreement on Germany's worst
national characteristics and in their shared sense of British decline.

It is from these ambivalent attitudes, Peppis argues in the third chap-
ter, that in the face of European competition, Vorticism was born, "one of
Europe's most insistently avant-garde groups." The challenge that gave
rise to the founding of Vorticism and its periodical *BLAST* in 1914 did not
come from France or Germany, but from Italy. The Futurist movement,
with its agenda of aggressive cultural expansionism, roused the Vorti-
cists to an equally aggressive nationalist programme intended to place
Britain once again at the forefront of modern European art. Peppis un-
derscores "the engagement and complicity of these two radical art move-
ments with the imperial politics of their respective nation," emphasizing
at the same time the limited success of their respective projects that was
highlighted by the outcome of the Great War.

In his fourth (and arguably strongest) chapter, Peppis offers an inno-
vative reading of *BLAST* II: *War Number* that examines wartime Vorti-
cism from the perspective of contemporary public discourse and popular
culture. He thus challenges the established views of *BLAST* II as either
representing a tragic decline from *BLAST* I in aesthetic terms or as a dis-
turbing anticipation of modernism's later retrograde politics. His analy-
sis of early war poetry demonstrates, for instance, that in both aesthetic

and political terms, the war poetry of *BLAST* II compares favorably with much that was published elsewhere. He further argues that it is more productive to read the Vorticists "celebration of annihilation as the fullest proof of manly life" in the light of their complicity with Government ideology than as foreshadowing fascist modernism.

The book's final chapter is devoted to an analysis of "fictions of national character" in Wyndham Lewis's novel *Tarr.* Peppis stresses the importance of its original appearance in Dora Marsden and Harriet Shaw Weaver's "Individualist Review," *The Egoist*, and points out how Lewis deliberately questioned the movement's central doctrine of the free and autonomous ego, insisting instead on the "chaos and complexity of personal identity, social life, and modern literature." According to Peppis, *Tarr* undermines both the Individualist account of nationality as a non-essential cultural by-product and the determinist view of nationality as the unalterable product of heredity. He proposes a re-valuation of the novel as a "powerfully oppositional work" in ideological terms and an important modern text in terms of its formal achievements.

All in all, *Literature, Politics, and the English Avant-Garde* makes a respectable contribution to the literature on modernist politics. Peppis does not theorize in a historical vacuum but admirably achieves his goal of "complicating" both the established positive and negative readings of the British avant-garde by the careful analysis of the cultural and political context, paying particular attention to public discourse as found in contemporary periodical literature. One criticism of the book might be that it shows signs of having been conceived in terms of separate articles, so that a certain amount of artificial padding is required on the part of the author to turn it into a coherent whole. Also, Peppis's style is not the most economical and he might have put a little more trust in the reader to follow his argument without putting up verbal signposts at every turn. Neither criticism, however, seriously detracts from the book's considerable value.

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Companion to Modernism

Michael Levenson, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999. 246 pp. Paper $19.95

DESPITE the attractive cubistic painting *Homage to Malevich* by the Hungarian artist Bela Kadar on the cover, editor Michael Leven-