

ECLIPSE



new work in modernist studies
special edition | 2014

Neal Alexander & James Moran, eds. *Regional Modernisms*
Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013

Reviewed by Greg Thomas

One significant effect of the ongoing process of reappraisal collectively identified as ‘new modernist studies’ has been a radical qualification of assumptions about modernism’s Occidental, metropolitan character. The most conspicuous aspect of this has been an acknowledgement of the style’s global channels of influence and circulation, and of its post-colonial afterlives, whose relationships to the modernist canon have arguably superseded its segue into ‘post-modernism’ as the preferred process by which to gauge its legacy. The focus of this volume on the regional locations and affiliations of British and Irish modernism is presented by its editors as a harmonious counterpoint, part of the same movement away from the Western state as the primary socio-geographical framework against which to judge the style’s development. The text seems partly concerned with the inward, localising turn in British modernism posited in texts such as Jed Esty’s *A Shrinking Island* (2003) and Alexandra Harris’s *Romantic Moderns* (2010), which has been seen as contingent to the contraction of the British Empire by mid-century. This in turn means that, although many of the figures covered in this book – Joyce, Lawrence, Pound – safely occupy the early-twentieth-century modernist canon, there is also an implicit extension of modernism’s time-frames in Alexander and Moran’s regional reconfigurations: ‘late modernism’ is a central concern.

As regards the definitions of regionalism which emerge across these ten essays, the editors seem less concerned with downplaying modernism’s metropolitan contexts and attributes than with considering interplays

between the urban and the rural, the central and the peripheral – and so on – in its production and content; and with how such conceptual spaces delineate and shape each other. By this account, “regions” are “defined by their interrelations with other places” rather than fixed geographical locations, an idea supported by references to recent insights from geographical theory (12). Perhaps the most significant connotation of regionalism implied by Alexander and Moran’s introduction is the shuffle between these different frames of reference in modernist writing. Regional cultures and locations, that is, could become points on the constellations of locales underpinning modernism’s atomised formal and thematic landscapes, regionalism thus neatly envisaged not as some source of knee-jerk resistance to formal experiment, but one of its enabling factors.

Many of the following essays are loosely oriented around this concept, in that they deal with relationships or movements *between* regions, rather than single bounded locations, although the connotations of these relationships and movements alter. Moreover, other interpretations of regional modernism are implied at various points. Some are related to cultural infrastructure, as in Andrew Thacker’s account of the Leeds-based conception of the modernist journal *The New Age*, and Moran’s own contribution on repertory theatres. Others involve exploring or defining modernist genealogies associable with particular British nations, as in Drew Milne’s analysis of MacDiarmid’s synthetic Scots, and John Goodby and Chris Wigginton’s overview of Welsh modernist poetry. At least two essays, David James’s and Dominic Head’s, seem concerned with the modernism of regional literature more than the regionalism of modernist literature. These overlapping interpretations are not a deficiency: they rather suggest a more multi-faceted set of ideas than their collective presentation might imply.

The collection is loosely chronological, the first few essays dealing with early or canonical modernists and their contemporaries, later ones generally extending focus into the mid-to-late twentieth century. Of these earlier essays, some deal with the most intuitive interpretation of the title-phrase: the representation of regional culture and identity in modernist literature. Andrew Harrison finds an interaction

of foreign and local cultural inflections in Lawrence and Joyce's protagonists, revealed through the "relativising modernist forms which both writers developed across their early careers", manifesting "a shared concern with the metaphysics of 'belonging' and the complexities of internal exile" (61). This is presented as a means of traversing binary distinctions set up between their oeuvres in the wake of the authors' own "mutual antipathy" (44). Patrick Lonergan considers the self-aware construction of "authenticity" in J.M. Synge's depictions of regional Western Ireland – reflecting the same "formal auto-referentiality" that [Fredric] Jameson identifies in the work of the classic modernists" (68) – as involving repeated portrayals of movement "between core and periphery" (79). This essay contains an extended definition of "authenticity" as a quality combining aspects of familiarity and newness accounting for its frequent attribution to regional cultures – often framed by preconception, yet encountered to some extent as alien – which is useful to bear in mind in relation to other essays in the collection.

Other earlier chapters are concerned with regional sites of artistic production or community. Andrew Thacker considers the exploration of regional identity in articles published in the modernist journal *The New Age*, notably by Edwin Muir, in the context of its conception in the artistic milieu of the Leeds Arts Club, "a regional culture [...] that defined itself primarily by its spatial connection to many of the international currents of revolutionary modernist culture" (27). This is offset against the magazine's production in London, an upshot of the early-twentieth-century centralisation of English book and newspaper production, leading Thacker to posit, using ideas from Lefebvre, an overlay of international, national and regional social spaces in the journal. Moran focuses on the formation of the nationalist-oriented Dublin Abbey Theatre by Yeats and others, and the project's influence upon repertory theatres subsequently founded in Ulster, Glasgow, Birmingham and elsewhere, as well as Ezra Pound's dramaturgical career. Pound and the repertory-founders, Moran argues, emulated the dynamism of the Abbey while jettisoning its nationalist concerns, in Pound's case to endorse, via the Syngean caricatures of his little-known play *The Consolations of Matrimony*, a Baudrillard-esque

contention that Ireland existed simply as “a literary trope” (86); in the latter to articulate more regionally-specific cultural concerns.

The different conceptual positions occupied by Dublin in some of these chapters offers an interesting insight into the relativity of “regionalism” as posited by the editors, serving both as the urban centre against which the provinciality of Synge’s *Western-Irelanders* is defined in Lonergan’s essay, and, in Harrison’s, the colonial outpost of Joyce’s fiction, overlaid with the linguistic and cultural customs of the British state.

David James’s survey of the regionally-focused realism of Storm Jameson and Sylvia Townsend Warner forms a neat pairing with Dominic Head’s research on Leo Walmsley, both troubling binary formal distinctions between modernist innovation and regional or realist prose of the 1930s–40s. James traces oscillations between the local and trans-national in the narrative structures and descriptive tropes of two oeuvres produced in the “era of late modernism” rather than as “a direct product of it” (106), problematising easy contrasts between the asserted socio-geographical insularity of realist literature and progressive modernist meta-geographies of the kind assessed in John Heggglund’s *World Views: Metageographies of Modernist Fiction* (2012). Though Head’s subject is a more unequivocal ‘regionalist’, he considers Walmsley’s accounts of life in a Yorkshire fishing village in the novel-trio *Three Fevers* (1932), *Phantom Lobster* (1933) and *Foreigners* (1935) as comparable in their ‘nostalgic’ appraisals of antiquated working communities to the primitivism of contemporary modernist writers and artists: notably Walmsley’s associates Barbara Hepworth and Henry Moore. As well as challenging conceptions of “nostalgia” in art as a necessary source of cultural or sociological myopia, Head’s essay thus finds an (imperfect) solution to the “condescension inherent in modernist primitivism” in regional writers’ attempts to “immerse themselves in their subject - some of them even becoming farmers” (128), though Walmsley’s necessary exclusion from the community with which he engages is also stressed.

These essays, which, as noted, somewhat redefine the text’s aims, suggest further interesting questions about the polarisation of

modernism and its others. One immediate parallel that springs to mind is the often-drawn line between the formally unadventurous Movement poets and the more experimental groupings marginalised by their domination of the critical apparatus around British poetry in the 1950s-60s. The placement of figures such as Charles Tomlinson within this framework might be seen to open up similarly engaging liminal spaces.

With Drew Milne and Goodby and Wigginton's contributions, the connotations of regional modernism shift again to implicate the national modernist genealogies of Scotland and Wales. Milne's account of the tension between lexical experimentation and grammatical convention in MacDiarmid's synthetic Scots poems, framed by engaging comparisons between poems such as "Water Music" and Victorian nonsense verse, posits a question about the post-Burns tradition of Scots formal experiment which MacDiarmid identified and placed himself in, with implications for future innovators such as Ian Hamilton Finlay and Tom Leonard. Goodby and Wigginton collate work by Dylan Thomas – whose significance as formal innovator has also been stressed in Goodby's *The Poetry of Dylan Thomas: Under the Spelling Wall* (2013) – David Jones and Lynette Roberts to define a Welsh modernist style "less cerebral, ironic, and classicist than the Anglo-American norm, with a marked trend towards the mannerist, grotesque, and even gothic" (163).

There is perhaps something problematic in presenting these asserted national traditions, albeit implicitly and editorially, as regional manifestations of British modernism. In Scotland, for example, literary developments from the Scottish Renaissance to Concrete Poetry were motivated as much by a complex set of internal disputes and affiliations as by a centrifugal relationship with some external hub. Moreover, as Thacker's essay notes, an autonomous infrastructure of literary magazines, many exploring "the national question and its relationship to an emergent culture of international modernism" (24) was in place in Scotland during the early twentieth century. This idea of a relatively autonomous, internationally-connected national modernist culture in Scotland has recently been explored in Emma Dymock and

Margery Palmer McCulloch's edited collection *Scottish and International Modernisms: Relationships and Reconfigurations* (2011).

John Brannigan and Neal Alexander's closing essays on McLaverty and Bunting push the time-frame forwards while returning the collection to the initially identified focus on the region as defined by its interaction with other places. Brannigan traces the development of McClaverty's archipelagic aesthetics up until *Call My Brother Back* (1939), by which time an emphasis on islands as "singular, bounded places" had been clearly qualified by an impression of 'between-ness' making them "more, not less, exemplary as a model of archipelagic identities and relations" (196). Alexander's contribution on Bunting, perhaps a too-easily-invoked figure in any account of "regional modernism", is thus directed against accounts of regional space and place – in this case the Northumbria of *Briggflatts* – as sources of static or unilateral identity, focusing on the poem's permeation with overlaid references to myriad locations and epochs.

This fascinating collection, as its editors suggest, does not comprise a "comprehensive overview of Anglophone literary modernism" but a "series of local interventions" (17). It is perhaps therefore inevitable that various "regional modernisms" emerge over its course: the title predicts it, and the ordering of the essays provides a useful route between them. Given that it consists of several individual responses to the title-theme, it might be interesting in conclusion to offer a related area for potential exploration. The 1950s "regionalism" of American modernists such as Olson and Williams, that is – *Paterson* is appositely referenced in the introduction (8) – arguably influenced a still-later wave of regionally-located British modernism exemplified by the poetics of Roy Fisher, Ian Hamilton Finlay and others, indebted to such American models in its 1950s-60s conception. By this point, moreover, a range of social and technological developments had seemingly facilitated the kind of internationally-connected regional literary infrastructure exemplified by Gael Turnbull's Migrant Press, making this period in British poetry a potentially fruitful subject to approach through the multi-faceted concept of regional modernism explored in this book.