Abigail Lang and David Nowell Smith (eds.), *Modernist Legacies: Trends and Faultlines in British Poetry Today.*

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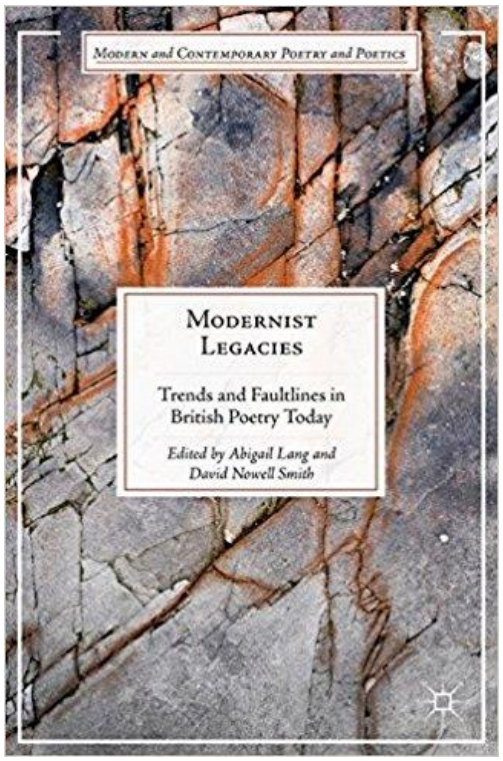

Modernism is back, sort of. *Modernist Legacies* is part of a broader tendency towards the reevaluation of modernism's continuing presence among the current generation of British poets who, looking back to an underground tradition in British experimental writing that has been largely ignored by the publishing industry and prize circuit since the 1950s, are making it new, again. What, then, does it mean for that double movement—going back to go forward—to be also a legacy? The editors of this helpfully wide-ranging collection of critical essays address the exclusionary cultural baggage of the modernist tag, aware of

the “risk of egregious tradition-making” that closes down as well as opens up. The “trends and faultlines” this volume sets out to trace are the “traditions, genealogies, burdens, unresolved questions—in short, the legacies that modernism has cast, in order to take these legacies upon themselves as a spur to future practice.”

The book sets out, therefore, to address some of the power imbalances at work within experimental circles, which remain overwhelmingly well-educated and white, if arguably less male-dominated than in previous generations. In this sense it is in line with current critical tendencies: Andrea Brady’s essay for *The Conversation*, “The White Privilege of British Poetry Is Getting Worse” (October 2015); Sandeep Parmar’s essay in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, “Not a British Subject: Race and Poetry in the UK” (December 2015); and the Race and Poetry and Poetics in the UK (RAPAPUK) symposium in London (February 2016) all attest to a desire to assess and begin to reverse this long-prevailing wind. The argument that an anticolonial politics of dialect and accent is especially pertinent and localized within the British Isles, where class and the politics of voice are hopelessly striated and inextricable, is an important one, made obliquely or explicitly by several essays in this collection.

Part of the justification for using the genetic language of inheritance is that such a tradition is not self-evident or—at least not yet—self-reinforcing. In comparison with the North American experience, Lang and Nowell Smith write, assembling such a legacy is not straightforward; the dots cannot be easily joined between “dozens of strong poets and movements” as in the US. Instead, the connections are those forged between fugitive “outriders” such as Basil Bunting, W. S. Graham, and David Jones and the poets of the 1960s and

70s whose brief stints in charge of the mainstream organs that govern taste—the Poetry Society and *Poetry Review*—ended in a messy coup and decades of subsequent obsolescence. The first section of *Modernist Legacies*goes over this contested historical ground. Allen Fisher and Robert Hampson return to the transatlantic connection that catalyzed much experimental poetic practice in Britain from the early 1960s. Romana Huk, meanwhile, sees lying behind British poetry's continual worrying at lyric's political complicities and efficacies a need to let messy materiality into the form. That impulse, she suggests, comes at an often uncontrollable cost to subjective coherence, so that the lyric "I" is revealed as a fiction constituted all along by those material forces.

Of course, part of the vibrant, samizdat feel of British "innovative" or "Revival" work since the 1960s is owed to its pelagic presence, gliding below mainstream currents that, by and large, regarded modernism as an "historical aberration, thankfully now defunct." In recent years, however, it has been breaking the surface: key figures from the British Poetry Revival, such as J. H. Prynne, Andrew Crozier, Tom Raworth, and Barry MacSweeney, have been published in collected formats by larger presses, and the academy—as this book and the conference that generated it attest—has been catching up. One of the main virtues of *Modernist Legacies* is that it widens the circle considerably beyond those more familiar names, with work (among others) on Jeff Hilson, Caroline Bergvall, Wendy Mulford, Geraldine Monk, Anthony Barnett, Sean Bonney, Peter Manson, Maggie O'Sullivan, and Tom Leonard. It also shines light on such projects as the cassette series Balsam Flex, which Will Montgomery retrieves from the obscurity of archiving procedures that "have never been on a par with those for small press books and little magazines."

In his own contribution Nowell Smith groups Monk, from Lancashire and now based in Sheffield, and the Glaswegian poet Leonard along with Anglophone Caribbean and black vernacular poetry from the UK. This is a powerful intersectional move that brings together the exclusions of class, geography, and race where they meet, in accent and the voice. Nowell Smith asks how "modernism" can be a useful term for thinking about traditions excluded from or peripheral to its central practices. Even those of the North American poets (Williams, Cummings, Moore) whose "distance from the rigidities of the British class system" allowed them to try out prosodic and rhythmic approaches "that might serve to articulate forms of experience incompatible with an iambic rise and fall" were still not really attuned to other marginalities beyond their own status as postcolonial writers. Nowell Smith quotes Caribbean poet Edward Kamau Brathwaite's *History of the Voice*, which sees the pentameter's persistence as a continued instantiation of ruling-class privilege that "carries with it a certain kind of experience" but falls short when called to account for the distinct environmental conditions of Caribbean life: if the pentameter is not attuned to the prosody of North American experience, neither is it "the experience of a hurricane."

In UK black and vernacular poetries, too, *Modernist Legacies* comes up against the problem that, as Sarah R. Greaves puts it in her contribution on "Transcultural Hybridity," the formal and aesthetic inheritance and impulse of modernism—to open the field and inhabit border zones—has mostly been transmitted in an institutional form "relayed by generations of academics" that is "narrow, exclusive, aesthetic." The other side of that coin, as Sandeep Parmar recognized in her *LA Review of Books* essay, is that while

poets such as Grace Nichols, Jean Binta Breeze, Linton Kwesi Johnson, Benjamin Zephaniah, and Patience Agbabi offer a politically necessary and compelling response to a largely white tradition, "their poetry does not usually incorporate language that is complex, difficult, or engaged in deconstructing meaning while communicating it via formal structures that extend beyond the binaries of social and racial identity too easily crystalized by the conventional lyric 'I.'" Parmar's criticism is bivalent: if the lyric "I" seems too bound to identity politics, then the modernist fragmentation of identity itself serves a specific institutional legacy that is usually constituted along lineaments of race and class. Her criticism is complicated, however, by explicitly political poetry that does make use of some elements of lyric voice, in service of Marxist and/or feminist commitments. Why should this recourse be open to some forms of commitment as redress for some exclusions and not others?

Modernist Legacies does not confront this vexed question head-on in terms of contemporary debates. (Indeed, the interventions cited earlier in this review either post-date the book's publication or precede it by only a few months.) But it does offer compelling historical accounts of the development of politicized lyric in British poetry. Samuel Solomon and Luke Roberts both examine the strained political commitments of the 1970s and 80s in the poetry of Wendy Mulford and Barry MacSweeney, respectively. Mulford's commitments to "Marxist-feminist organizing" and the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament provided, Solomon writes, a "setting for her to think through the political relevance of personal experience, and to understand personal politics as part of an effort to transform society collectively," but her writing pulls against and "outpaces" its Leftist

affiliations. Mulford's first full-length collection, *Bravo to Girls and Heroes* (1977), is for Solomon "an experiment with holding such commitments through and across the trials of lyric." It reflects the influence of the contemporary Wages for Housework movement that took Marxism into the home, seeing both production and consumption as "implicated in reproductive politics," while registering the ways "reproductive pleasure always bears the ambivalence of reproductive *work*": "we like to live simply & we like to / eat well. that does not include children. / definitely. they exclude it."

MacSweeney's own relation to the Left was almost the obverse of the kind of careful feminist reworking of the lyric achieved by Mulford and Denise Riley. Roberts's reading of his at times overtly masculine, picket-line work does glancingly address the "unexamined misogyny that would peak in his writings following the election of Thatcher," a tendency partially redeemed by his late poetry, especially *Pearl*, which "shows his capacity for portraying and imagining a female voice and life." Roberts's focus, though, is on MacSweeney's first book, *The Boy from the Green Cabaret Tells of His Mother*, published by Hutchinson in 1968. Roberts traces MacSweeney's romanticizing affection for the Soviet Union and its first generation of Bolshevik revolutionary poets. Russian poetry and politics were useful to MacSweeney, Roberts notes insightfully, as a counterweight to the Olsonian, transatlantic lode of *The English Intelligencer* (1966–1968), a poetry worksheet in which much of the groundwork of the British late modernist poetics covered by this volume was done. MacSweeney revises Olson's emphasis on "SPACE," Roberts writes, substituting instead "Russia, the large LAND," in an easterly gesture of political affiliation. This was a deliberate tack in the

other direction and consciously against the westward movement prevalent among his Revival contemporaries, in a "schismatic attempt by the young poet to claim the exotic Soviets as accessories in a strategy of differentiation." Perhaps Roberts is not entirely fair to see MacSweeney's eastward stance as only strategic, though. His poem "Brother Wolf" suggests that the felt connection with an idea of "LAND" was as much topographical as political:

There is so much land in Northumberland. The sea
Taught me to sing
the river to hold my nose. When
it rains it rains glue.

In *The Prelude* the river Derwent gave Wordsworth a gentler schooling, having "blend[ed] his murmurs with my nurse's song" and "flowed along my dreams." MacSweeney's rougher treatment, on the other side of the Pennines, is part of the nonacademic, nonstandard English trajectory of North-East modernism, its languages and landscapes. In this light it would have been a boon for *Modernist Legacies* to have included a full-length essay on Bill Griffiths, whose "first encounters with North Eastern vernacular," Nowell Smith comments, "were filtered through the poetry of Basil Bunting and studies in Anglo-Saxon," but shifted from an "ethnographical and philological" interest in the region to a political solidarity with the marginalized industrial North East.

And if the pentameter is not the experience of a hurricane, neither is it even the experience of the Pennine Hills, the spinal column running from North Derbyshire to Scotland that links together Northern poets such as MacSweeney and Griffiths in a continuity of harsh fells and moorland. Also

among these Northern poets is the Yorkshire-based Maggie O'Sullivan, whose poem "Another Weather System," Peter Middleton observes, contains "wild soundscapes" that occur in an "unnatural world of wild birds and animals, a world made strange and phantasmagoric, where words fail and bodies break only to re-form themselves," very far from the acculturated worlds of meter and measure, whether the pentameter is broken or intact. O'Sullivan's singular deployments of "verbal energy" insist that "however much an object language might be, its state is changeable from solid to fluid to gas." In this ambience of mutability, the modernist preoccupation with the ideology of "form" seems like such an *indoor* thing to worry about. For O'Sullivan "language is an ecology, a habitat of lake, the air, or earth. The outside, living as well as inanimate, gentle and violent, enters language."

Indeed, the nonhuman is the last of the exclusions *Modernist Legacies*redresses, and the one that receives the least critical attention. Another version of this book might read many of the poets discussed in these terms, with less focus on the social geography of urban centers and more on the signifying practices of world-making. Critical attention would then land on the linguistic porosity of reference and world, avoiding what Drew Milne calls so much concentration on "the fallacy of constitutive subjectivity" in "pre-theoretical and post-theoretical modalities of innocence and complicity." In other words, worrying less about who you are and your complicity in how you came to be, and more about your language's relation-making with the ineluctable signifying practices of nonhuman animals and the material world. Would that still be modernist? Not as a legacy, perhaps, but rather, as the epigraph of the 2015 edition of Prynne's *Poems* directs us, "for the future," and towards a sustainable relation with the

nonhuman world. For such a poetics neither “modernist” nor “legacy” quite suffices.

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