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Daniel Albright. Putting Modernism Together. Literature, Music, and Painting, 1872–1927. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 2015.

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Abstract

Review of Daniel Albright. *Putting Modernism Together. Literature, Music, and Painting, 1872–1927*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 2015.

Daniel Albright. *Putting Modernism Together. Literature, Music, and Painting, 1872–1927*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 2015. 328 pp.

“Putting Modernism Together” was the title of a popular undergraduate course in aesthetic and interpretative understanding offered by Daniel Albright at Harvard College, where he taught from 2003 until his sudden death in January 2015. In this extremely informative, engaging, and entertaining book, Albright presents the wealth of his many years thinking about and teaching on modernism. The book consists of two parts. The first, much shorter, serves to introduce the reader to two foundational texts of modernism: Charles Baudelaire’s poem “Correspondences” (1857) and Friedrich Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music* (1872). The second part, consisting of fourteen chapters, presents Albright’s masterly exploration of modernism’s multiple isms—from Impressionism and Expressionism through to Dadaism, Surrealism, Aestheticism, and Corporealism.

Perhaps with the exception of the longer chapter on Eliot, Pound, and Joyce (“Totalizing Art”), Albright privileges a colloquial style, a remnant of the book’s initial iteration as an undergraduate lecture series. Quotations from Nietzsche’s *Birth of Tragedy* include brief glosses in brackets, as if Albright the teacher were commenting the quotation as he read it, such that the reader who encounters Nietzsche’s “spiteful dwarfs” will know that later they are explicitly identified as Christian priests (27). There are catchy formulations—“Impressionism as a binge, and Cubism as a hangover” (117)—that would stir even the most recalcitrant of students to take note. Albright frequently draws on features of contemporary popular culture. Nimrod’s gibberish in Canto 31 of Dante’s *Divine Comedy* is likened to one contemporary singer’s “GaGa / Oh la la” (287) to suggest that things that drift into interesting meaning often begin as something like nonsense. I wonder, though, if a contemporary student would now pick up on those moments where Albright riffs on Lewis Carroll’s “Jabberwocky” (1872) such as when Ezra Pound’s *Three Cantos* are said to lead not only to self-insistence and gigantism but “general uffishness and whiffing” (260).

Albright is especially good at drawing the reader’s attention to the ways that the arts of modernism interpenetrate, often as a function of an individual creator’s exploration of different media. We see Arnold Schoenberg’s illustrations for the staging of his musical piece *Erwartung*. Besides being a poet, Pound was a composer, who wrote an opera to texts by the medieval French poet François Villon, which in turn leads Albright to invite us to enjoy the music of Pound’s verse. Oskar Kokoschka and Wassily Kandinsky are cited not only for their painting but also for their plays. D. H. Lawrence’s writing is juxtaposed with his paintings. As Albright notes, in modernism “the artist is not at all bounded by the medium of his first mastery” (131).

The most curious feature of the book is perhaps the way Albright negotiates the less edifying aspects of modernism. We are left to make what we will of Kokoschka's misogyny, of Marinetti's celebration of war as "the world's only hygiene" (99), of Pound's fascism, of T. S. Eliot's anti-Semitism. When Albright says of Wyndham Lewis's painting *Alcibiades* that: "the extraordinary power of these images to drop deep into the picture plane is like nothing I know by Picasso or Braque: there's a sort of vertigo here, as if the planes at the edge are near the surface and a very slow whirlwind is pushing the central figures inward" (149-50), there is no mention of what is now recognizable as its nascent fascist aesthetic. In his book *Hitler*, Lewis would go on to describe his subject as "a Man of Peace" and "a sort of inspired and eloquent Everyman" (Chatto & Windus, 1931 33). And yet Albright sees no need to mention these sympathies here. It is only towards the very end of the book—in a chapter that refuses the "ism" suffix of all other chapter titles in the second part to opt instead for "Totalizing Art"—that Albright focuses on the political implications of modernism. He notes that "the earlier Modernists often found themselves distinctly attracted to fascism" (295) with the notable exception of André Gide, that Eliot published a review in *Criterion* expressing skepticism that the Nazis were herding Jews into concentration camps, that Pound made radio broadcasts urging American soldiers to defect to fascism and was tried for treason in 1946, and that William Butler Yeats wrote poems to glorify Ireland and Celtic racial stock. As Albright says in an online trailer for his course—still available on Youtube—"the modernists were an aggressive lot." I wonder if these qualifications could not have been incorporated into the parts of the book where these authors were treated in such depth and detail, rather than in a concluding chapter, which only those who read the book exhaustively will get to.

There are some small indications that the book remains partly unfinished. The first section on Baudelaire and symbolism is short and dwarfed by the piece that accompanies it on Nietzsche, Richard Wagner, and Thomas Mann. There are a few structural non-sequiturs, such as the opening of chapter three, in which discussion turns from Gerard Manley Hopkins's "Pied Beauty" to Auguste Renoir's "Moulin de la Galette" without any indication of which painting is being described until four pages later (50-54). The book contains black and white reproductions of forty-seven images, which usefully supplement the discussions of visual works of art, although for several of the pictures, there is no indication of where the image can currently be seen. Given that the structure of the book is based on a series of short studies of individual works, an index would make the book more accessible for students of modernist culture. Finally, there is the question of the book's title, which is too modest. In his letter to Paul Demeny on 15 May 1871, Arthur Rimbaud—also on the verge of modernism—writes: "I draw a bow across a string: a symphony stirs in the depths, or surges onto the stage" (*Complete Works*, trans. Paul Schmidt, Harper Perennial, 2000 115). Here, Albright does not so much "put"

modernism together, as draw it together in a vast orchestration, with outrageous skill and verve, such that, for any reader of this book, a delightful music will stir in the depths, or surge onto the stage.

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