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Abstract

Review of Andrew Hodgson. *The Post-War Experimental Novel: British and French Fiction, 1945-75*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2020. xi + 208 pp.

Keywords

post-war, experimental novel, Perec

Andrew Hodgson. *The Post-War Experimental Novel: British and French Fiction, 1945-75*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2020. xi + 208 pp.

Andrew Hodgson's *The Post-War Experimental Novel* brings much-needed visibility to a body of work too often historicized as a literary dead zone between the monoliths of modernism and postmodernism. Among this study's many virtues is its methodical tracing of the post-war experimental novel's reception history, from the resistance the genre faced in the 1950s to its ongoing literary-historical marginalization, particularly in the Western academy. Indeed, it is rare to find Georges Perec or B. S. Johnson on undergraduate curricula or discussed beyond the academy. Hodgson makes the provocative claim that this occlusion is symptomatic of our ongoing refusal, almost eighty years after the Second World War, to acknowledge what Marshall Berman calls "the deepest social and psychic wounds of modernity [that] may be repeatedly sealed without ever being really healed" (qtd. in Hodgson 6). Hodgson hopes to reclaim the experimental novel as well as the traumatic history overwritten by a dominant, insular, and violently consolidating postwar narrative. To its credit, *The Post-War Experimental Novel* makes no claim of restoring an obscured, empirical real; rather, it offers an account of the socio-economic processes whereby the ostensibly engaged project of social realism came to be opposed to the "merely eccentric" (32)—hence socially irresponsible—experimental novels published between 1945 and 1975.

While Hodgson's book is grounded in archival work and formal analysis of its focal texts, its explicit ambition is startlingly utopian: to demonstrate the therapeutic potential of the experimental novel as a reflexive tool with a "revelatory, or confrontational curative effect on society's self-imaging" (24). Echoing Émile Zola's scientific conception in *Le Roman expérimental* (1880) (*The Experimental Novel*), Hodgson sees the experimental novel as an "experiential synecdoche" (20) of human-culture interactions writ large. As such, he argues, it might serve to diagnose and partially treat the "'bourgeois' 'normalizing' programmes" and "sickly delusion" (25) of the postwar quotidian.

In the Trump era, narrative has the power of inciting violence, though it also feels shockingly irrelevant in the face of a global pandemic, catastrophic climate change, and the increasingly "sickly delusions" of capitalist democracies. In this context, the claim that literature might cure us feels either nostalgic or radical (perhaps both). For Hodgson, the reductive simplicity of dominant postwar narratives—whereby civilization has triumphed over barbarism and the specter of nuclear annihilation is contained—might continue to alienate us from the unbearable reality of lived experience were it not for the "process of sublaxation" (169) performed by experimental texts. In medicine, "sublaxation" is a partial dislocation, and Hodgson's interesting claim is that not only is the experimental

text self-dislocating, but reading it dislocates something in the reader. This dislocation is curative to the extent that it forces our awareness of text-as-construct, as that which can never do more than approach the void of collective trauma asymptotically, a “verbal *trompe-l’oeil*” at best (113). The exclusion of experimental fiction from received history is thus a kind of “auto-immune disorder” (64) in a society that seeks to neutralize these radically destabilizing texts rather than allowing them to wake us from our stupor.

What the study leaves mostly unexplained is the mechanism by which the reader’s consciousness of the violence or insufficiency of narrative becomes “a chance to open our eyes,” in the words of Jean-Yves Pouilloux (qtd. in Hodgson 170). Clearly, a book-in-a-box such as Marc Saporta’s *Composition no. 1* (1963), which the reader shuffles like a deck of cards, or Perec’s 1978 *Je me souviens (I Remember)*, which invites the reader to write on blank pages, asks the reader to participate self-consciously in structuring the narrative, highlighting the contingency of all textual meaning. But it is less clear how rending the veil of realist narrative in this way produces a “contagious potential of realization of collective trauma, of guilt, of reduction and effacement” (170) with regard, for example, to the Holocaust. Does a short-circuiting narrative cause analogous short-circuiting in the body of the reader? Is that short-circuiting like or unlike a psychotic break? Is Perec’s reader more likely to notice or produce breaks in the social fabric, generating possibilities for extra-textual praxis? Certainly, Hodgson makes the compelling and sometimes poignant case that this body of literature is symptomatic of a violent history violently effaced. And teachers of literature will be drawn to the idea that having to make these texts make sense will produce just enough dissonance in the reader to open a fresh space for witnessing, if not quite for healing. But by investing so much in the “socio-functionality” (x) of postwar experimental literature, this book risks over-instrumentalizing a body of work that deserves attention whether or not it fixes anything.

Finally, while Hodgson is at pains to anchor the genre’s cultural identity in the unprecedented and largely unexamined traumas of the Second World War and its aftermath, by contrast citing Virginia Woolf, Franz Kafka, and James Joyce (among other modernists) as engaged in a qualitatively different sort of experimentation, he has perhaps missed an opportunity to connect literary movements that are, in his own account, still problematically compartmentalized. After all, writers such as Woolf and Kafka also sought to “offer some concrete documentation of fleeting human experience in the process of disappearing” (171), as Hodgson writes of Perec. And in the first years of the twentieth century, Gertrude Stein was already exposing the seams of an often violently reductive, anaesthetizing realism. Perhaps the stakes of this project intensified following the Second World War, but Hodgson’s insights about the fiction of that era might be productively applied to a much wider range of texts. Nevertheless, this study

offers a welcome framework for reading the postwar experimental novel as a complex artifact of a cultural history that remains difficult to touch. It will be of interest to historians of the postwar period and to scholars of trauma studies, as well as to anyone who studies the social and psychodynamic dimensions of experimental art.

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