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Stephen Ross, editor. *Modernism, Theory, and Responsible Reading: A Critical Conversation*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2022.

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Abstract

Review of Stephen Ross, editor. *Modernism, Theory, and Responsible Reading: A Critical Conversation*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2022. 239 pp

Keywords

Modernism, affect theory, literary criticism, weak theory

Stephen Ross, editor. *Modernism, Theory, and Responsible Reading: A Critical Conversation*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2022. 239 pp.

Stephen Ross's introduction made me laugh out loud—by his own admittance, he asks the reader, do we *really* need another theoretical approach to analyzing literature? As he points out, we are in an age of a superabundance of critical lenses; Ross begins by listing not only a few, but a nearly endless number of literary and theoretical mainstays: “close reading, distant reading, middle reading, mere reading, micro-sociological reading, reparative reading, paranoid reading [...] feminist reading, critical race reading, historicist reading [...] post-structuralist reading, psychoanalytic reading” the list goes on (1). Given this overflow—or rather, blatant overload—of critical modalities, Ross both humorously and bravely intervenes with what he and the fellow authors in this collection have deemed “responsible reading” (1). The concept of responsible reading as developed by these modernist scholars draws heavily from the work of Bruno Latour and Rita Felski—both Latour and Felski gesture beyond the binary dialectical critique to create a third space, a space that deals with “matters of concern” (2). Responsible reading, then, emerges from these scholars' desires to create a more nuanced, noncorrosive form of critique that goes beyond critique, toward a just approach of reading and theorizing; they advocate this third space in order to generate more useful uncoverings of ideological maneuvers of cultural production. The merit in responsible reading lies in two important points: first, a dual articulation of this middle space that exists between critique and post critique, and second, a principle upon which to proceed with critique, regardless of one's critical orientation. Responsible reading redeems the humanities by pointing out what literary texts can do and how interpretation can matter without being binary and stark, without being finalistic and stagnant. Responsible reading calls for a fuzzier, exploratory, frankly different plane of critique: to be irresponsible, in an ethical way, it turns out, is the way forward.

This collection of essays appeals to academics interested in any field of literary and cultural studies as the concept of responsible reading entails a wide and varied approach, and it does not rely on one's specialty. And yet, these essays demonstrate the special relationship between modernist studies and the concept of responsible reading. The book is demarcated into three sections: Part I: Theory, Part II: Method, and Part III: Practice. Paul K. Saint-Amour's final essay “Afterward: Necessary—Impossible and Responsible—Irresponsible Reading” I recommend reading first, despite its position of last in the book. Amour's initial skepticism at the term “responsible reading” is understandable. At first glance, it entails a kind of didactic finger-wagging admonishment that is contrary to the desire to expand beyond the conventional modernist critical canon. Amour goes on to tie in weak theory and mentions his previous work on weak modernisms to

consolidate his understanding of and contribution towards theorizing responsible irresponsible reading. He also draws heavily on Felski and Latour to make claims for a middle ground of critique that departs heavily from the “ethical turn” of post-structuralists in the 90s and early 2000s. As Amour drives his irresponsible readings home, responsibility in his sense is configured as an obligation that is limitless toward cultural objects rather than subjects; this attendance to cultural production in turn leads us back to modernism, for what is more modernist than “high” modernist artwork that asserts its own alterity? This is not to suggest that responsible reading does not attend to human subjects, but rather makes space for this elusive, much needed middle ground, and therefore enables a more diverse, ethical practice. While Amour references earlier influential critics of affect, race, gender and feminist studies such as Sara Ahmed, Lauren Berlant, Heather Love, and Judith Butler, just to name a few, this reader wished he focused briefly on more prescriptive examples of how his responsible irresponsible reading attends to any of those important categories of critique and subject positions. He ends with the question of how to invoke responsible irresponsibility as critical praxis.

Yan Tang’s “Modernism, Critical Theory, and Affect Theory *Avant La Lettre*” in the theory section is a nice counterpart to Amour. Yang presents snapshots and contextualization of how modernism and Critical Theory are both self-critical and unsettle disciplinary boundaries, without depoliticizing their respective historical moments. Importantly, Yang discusses affect theory and its resonance with modernism’s relationship to ideology, presenting an urgent ask to consider modernist studies’ critical engagement with the question of affect. Detailed and informative, Yang also takes on how modernists have long iterated formulations of affect theory before it was a critical lens—thus showing how ideology is always embedded in aesthetic form’s production of affect. Taking on a wide array of modernist authors, critics, and affect theorists, from William Butler Yeats to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Yang presents a strong case for the theoretical roots and contemporary benefits of invoking responsible reading, especially when it comes to modernist works that unsettle and provoke us, at times confuse and repel us—this unsettling is in fact a mode of reading that is both acknowledgement and critique, both a taking apart and building of a new critical practice.

Masumi Sugimori’s “Weak Theory, ‘Responsible’ Reading, and Literary Criticism” in the method section is a valuable essay to the collection as it thoroughly explains and provides an overview of recent modernist theorists’ contributions to responsible reading, and also engages with Felski’s concepts. All of the writers are entwined with each other’s thoughts and theoretical cores; each essay in the collection compliments the next. Any reader of affect, cultural, feminist, and queer studies will find this book enlightening, and it should be praised for its critical move forward; modernist scholars in particular will want to read this book as it pushes modernist studies in a new direction.

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