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Review of Edward P. Comentale, *Modernism, Cultural Production, and the British Avant-Garde*.

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Edward P. Comentale, Modernism, Cultural Production, and the British Avant-Garde. New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. 261 pp. (+x) ISBN 0521835895.

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How does Marxist theory understand literary modernism? From modernism's beginnings, the question has famously provoked debate. Lukács rejected modernism as a decadent replication of the social atomization caused by capitalism, while Brecht upheld it as a critique of that atomization capable of mobilizing critical judgment. Some eighty years later, this question of whether modernism challenges or supports the existing order still sparks debate both within Marxist theory and without. Fueled by the notoriously illiberal politics of Pound, Eliot and Company, stoked by provocative titles and subtitles (John Harrison's *The Reactionaries*, Fredric Jameson's *The Modernist as Fascist*), it continues to generate heat within the current renaissance of modernist studies. And while Edward P. Comentale's forcefully argued *Modernism, Cultural Production, and the British Avant-Garde* may not answer the question once and for all, it will surely render discussion of the topic more complex and intelligent.

Combining high-flying theory with carefully grounded historicism, Comentale offers fresh and surprising readings of major modernist figures at every dialectical turn. As part of a still vigorous trend toward thick description of the social background to modernist aesthetics, Comentale's book assembles details of Edwardian liberalism, wartime labor, and suffragist activism to portray an early twentieth-century Britain caught in a whirl of ceaseless and meaningless creating, selling, buying, and consuming. This hyperproductive and repetitive economic system was buttressed, Comentale argues, by a bourgeois ideology that (expressing its internal contradictions) monotonously demanded newness. Yet despite this oppressive order, it remained possible for experimental writers, thinkers and artists to apprehend, analyze and even denounce such an ideology, even if they by no means did so consistently. In the end, then, Comentale offers neither a blanket apology for, nor a wholesale condemnation of, the British avant-garde, discovering within it both radical and reactionary tendencies. Or perhaps it's better to say that he offers *both* apology *and* condemnation, for he minces no words: he extends enthusiastic praise for those artists in whose work he finds progressive potential (Lewis, Gaudier-Brzeska, H.D.) and sharp-tongued scorn for those whom he sees as covert champions of the *status quo* (Eliot, Woolf, Owen).

Comentale frames his reading of the British avant-garde within an old opposition, that of romanticism versus classicism, but he transforms this dichotomy into something beyond the familiar textbook debate. Although he has little interest in rehabilitating the romantic version of modernism (which he sees as aggrandizing the ego and separating the artist from the material world), he gives classicism a thorough critical refurbishing. By and large, literary scholars, following Pound's distinction between hard and soft, or Eliot's between tradition and individual talent, have understood classicism as objective and disciplined, and romanticism as subjective and decadent. But Comentale, reading dialectically, sees both poles as symptomatic of a single bourgeois ideology, and seeks to recover a "living classicism" that can mediate between and ultimately supercede them. As realized by certain members of the avant-garde, this living classicism "exposes the necessary tensions within an always changing and somewhat hostile environment" (19). It ceaselessly negotiates between subject and object, artist and material, and makes visible the (non-alienated) labor necessary to artistic creation.

The prime exemplar of such classicism for Comentale is Wyndham Lewis, who occupies pride of place in his introduction. (Indeed, the centrality of Lewis not only to this work, but to recent studies by Douglas Mao, Tyrus Miller, and Paul Peppis, among others, indicates that it may be time to rechristen this period of literary history "The Lewis Era.") Lewis offers a theory of art that "both resists and incorporates its opposite, life," that "neither fully escapes nor fully reproduces the ideological forces of its making, but always signals those forces and their potential transformation" (11). In Comentale's reading, moreover, Lewis puts his theory into practice in the drama, *Enemy of the Stars*, whose very syntax unravels the construction of a heroic, artistic subjectivity. For Comentale, it is the dynamic quality of Lewis's vorticism, rather than merely its oft-discussed static objectivity, that offers a model for an attack on the bourgeois valorization of individual selfhood.

If the book as a whole gives the aesthetics of classicism an extreme makeover, so the first half of the book, called "Critique," presents familiar modernist figures in striking new garb. For example, when standing in the company of F.T. Marinetti, Roger Fry looks very different from the forward-looking champion of European post-impressionism we thought we knew; the violent fascism of the Futurists and the genteel liberalism of Bloomsbury are alike for Comentale in that they offer only the empty gestures of rebellion: "Like Marinetti, Fry does little more than adapt the principles of bourgeois aestheticism to the productive imperative of bourgeois culture" (55). A made-over Virginia Woolf will also turn heads with her new look; although Comentale judges her a better materialist than Fry, he argues that her work is shot through with "class fears and bourgeois values" (57), and that it fully attends only to the suffering of upper-class women. And old, reliable T.S. Eliot, although still the Christian conservative we met in college, is regarded

anew through the lens of Max Weber's Protestant work ethic, a lens with which Comentale adeptly brings into focus seemingly disparate elements of the life and work: Eliot's New England Protestant heritage, his career as a banker, his ironic and masochistic self-scrutiny, his fondness for metaphors of profit and loss. One startling result is a reading of *The Waste Land* as an example of a Marcusean affirmative culture that valorizes sacrifice, redeems suffering, and offers the reader no critical tools by which she might mediate "between an acute particularity and an incoherent totality" (94). Who knew that what the thunder really said was, "Don't Worry, Be Happy?"

If these re-readings tend toward the Lukácsian in their critique, the second half of the book, "Construction," might be called Brechtian in its emphasis on the positive side of modernist experiment. A short chapter on T.E. Hulme -- who is here valued as a poet in his own right and not simply a guru for Pound and Eliot -- decouples his classicism from his religious conservatism, thus freeing classicist aesthetics for more progressive ends. A particularly impressive chapter on the Great War combines readings of letters from British soldiers in the trenches, an acute application of Freud to the narcissistic masochism of Wilfred Owen's war poetry, and interpretation of Gaudier-Brzeska's sculptural practice that relates it to his own experience on the front. Throughout this chapter, Comentale does exactly the kind of mediation between the particular and general that he asks modernist art to do: the liberally quoted letters from infantrymen speak with enormous affective power, yet he never forgets to use such testimony to theorize the relation between wartime experience and the socioeconomic system of the era. In his careful reading, not only did the meaningless digging, building and hauling of trench warfare seem, for the working class, only to extend the drudgery of home-front labor, but the random violence of the war encouraged a resigned surrender to the cruelties of an existing order. The war thus brought about no promised or hoped-for release, but rather effected "both at home and at the front, a greater conformity of man to machine, a more complete proletarianization of society as a whole" (160). At the end of the chapter Gaudier-Brzeska (partly as rendered through Ezra Pound's memoir) emerges as one of the book's true heroes: respectful of the resistance that his material provides, open and polymorphous in his sexual desire, intellectually critical of Rodin's bogus affectivity, and temperamentally immune to the stodgy morals and prejudices of the British bourgeoisie.

Comentale concludes with a reading of various feminisms of the era, which in his view partake of classicism's critique of the market economy. As in the previous chapter, Comentale begins not with literary texts but with the ground-level details of lived experience -- in this case the militant wing of the suffragist movement. Refusing to be co-opted by reformism, the militant suffragists enacted political protests (breaking shop windows, paralyzing traffic, hunger-striking) that were at once both words and deeds, articulations

of ideas and performances of rituals. They sought not to modify the capitalist system but to reimagine it, and Comentale suggests that the movement's greatest achievement was not the expansion of the franchise but the creation of new discursive models of femaleness. Comentale next turns to the anthropologist Jane Ellen Harrison, in whose scholarship on ancient Greece he finds strong parallels to the pre-war political moment. Harrison, like other radical suffragettes, valued ritual, performance, and restraint, and reconstructed a model pre-Homeric culture in which intellect and emotion, male and female, the individual and the social, had not yet been torn apart. Finally, Comentale's extensive reading of H.D.'s work challenges a trend in modernist studies to valorize feminist modernism for pure "otherness." He argues that true resistance comes not through otherness -- which "can only reinforce the very logic upon which modernity's [...] oppression is founded" (220) -- but through a negotiation between self and other. As in the pages on Eliot, Hulme, and Owen, Comentale brings a sensitive ear for tone to his readings of poetry, mapping for the reader the often elusive currents of desire, deferral and disappointment in H.D.'s spare lyrics. She, like the other feminists of the chapter, emerges (despite mystical or romantic tendencies) as a poet who fuses word and deed through ritual. She thus maintains a tension between clarifying stasis and productive dynamism, critical reflection and passionate engagement.

It should be noted that while Comentale, as might be clear by now, adheres to Marxist principles, he also makes use of non-Marxist thinkers such as Arendt and Merleau-Ponty. Moreover, his dialectical method generally functions as a tactic for pushing forward critical analysis rather than a Procrustean grand narrative that provides answers in advance. To cite only one example, in his reading of fascism, Comentale hits upon two widespread but seemingly contradictory theses: first, that "[i]ts emphasis on order, hygiene, and efficiency serves to counter the decadent flux of the modern world," and second, that "[i]ts anarchic will to power breaks down the gridlock of modern rationalism, protective tariffs, and political reformism" (38). Rather than choosing only one formulation to explain the appeal of fascism, Comentale interprets these opposites as two sides of a single coin, and finds the fascist ideology to be "itself a contradictory order that serves to objectify flow and thus mimics the organized chaos of the marketplace" (38). With arguments such as this, Comentale consistently integrates, rather than ignoring or belittling, positions that superficially seem to contradict or complicate his own. His Marxism may be a fairly orthodox one, but it is also supple and canny.

Thus it is that my lone, perhaps obligatory, complaint about the book -- that it tends to lump the avant-gardistes into good guys and bad guys, reminding us a bit too often how beastly the bourgeois is -- seems a problem that might easily have been avoided. For surely this very critical polarization of the British modernist scene (replicated in the theoretical split between Lukács

and Brecht), might, to the dialectician, indicate some larger contradiction. Indeed, the proximity of Hulme's poetics to Eliot's, or Lewis's postures to Marinetti's, or the activism of the militant suffragettes to an unchecked romanticization of violence, suggests how tightly these "good" and "bad" strands of modernism were intertwined. Although we surely must account for important but subtle differences in poetics and politics among different modernisms, we can also begin to recognize how necessary these different modernisms were to one another's creation. That said, it is only fair to acknowledge that this insight itself is of the sort that Comentale's fine book helps us to see. For Comentale not only reminds us that we should relentlessly question the categories through which we have interpreted modernism, he also, even more valuably, provides us with a working model of how such a questioning might proceed.