

## Book Reviews: Type, Mics, and Cameras

*Modernism on Fleet Street*. Patrick Collier. Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2006. 257 pp. \$99.95 cloth.

Patrick Collier's *Modernism on Fleet Street* provides a highly intelligent, multi-faceted, and useful account of the relationship between a handful of modernist writers and the institutions of journalism that had expanded so powerfully at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. Collier provides a brief historical overview of changes in print media during that era, but is more interested in detailing the myriad reactions against journalism as a debased sphere of popular culture among "serious" writers of the time. Each of the subsequent five chapters provides a thoughtful and nuanced analysis of a writer in relation to a specific issue alive in the debate about journalism during the modernist period. Collier rightly claims that this volume provides "case studies in modernism's confrontations with the broad debate about journalism," its chapters functioning as bits of a mosaic more than as pieces of an extended argument (3). Collier's volume serves as an important addition to the burgeoning studies of journalism and modernism including Laurel Brake's *Subjugated Knowledges: Journalism, Gender and Literature in the Nineteenth Century* (1994), Kate Campbell's collection *Journalism, Literature and Modernity* (2000), and Michelle Tusan's *Women Making News: Gender and Journalism in Modern Britain* (2005). Collier's particular contribution is in keeping an eye on both the importance of journalism to the careers of the writers in question and the debates about the public sphere to which these writers contributed.

Interestingly, Collier joins sections dealing with "high modernists" Eliot, Woolf, and Joyce to chapters on less acknowledged but important figures of the period, Rose Macaulay and Rebecca West, who made their living largely through journalism, in order to explore a spectrum of positions on the press held by writers of the modernist era. Collier treats five key issues in the debates about journalism at the time, probing each in the work of a particular writer. He investigates "newspapers' effect on the *language* as spoken and written" (7) in a chapter treating T.S. Eliot and his perceptions that the popular press had accelerated the decline of the English language and by extension the decline of Western civilization. Collier shows persuasively how Eliot understood his own project as a poet and critic to be an antidote to such debasement of language in the popular media. Eliot crusaded for a poetry that would reinvigorate the language,

and paradoxically used journalistic media for that crusade. But Collier demonstrates that Eliot advocated “a *minority* public sphere” in which the few, the elite critics, would set the standard for language and culture, and resist engagement with “the larger, debased society” (61).

In his chapter on Woolf, Collier takes up his second theme, “the role of newspapers in *book reviewing*” (7). Despite Woolf’s work as a book reviewer throughout much of her career, she remained ambivalent about the reviewing function of journalism. Woolf understood that under the conditions of the popular press, reviewers were asked to review a flood of books within very few column inches. Woolf was concerned with the misprisions that occurred as a result of the reviewing process, and yet she still desired that readers be given “guidance” in the face of an oversaturated market. Collier cleverly provides an analysis of Woolf’s shifting positions on book reviewing juxtaposed with her often contradictory statements about “the reader” or “the audience,” and shows how this writer’s confidence in both press and public declined toward the end of her career. (Surprisingly, Collier does not cite here Leila Brosnan’s *Reading Virginia Woolf’s Essays and Journalism* (1997), a work that investigates some of these issues).

Chapter Four on Joyce is unusual in this study in that it necessarily treats very few journalistic texts or statements about journalism—because Joyce wrote very few—and instead considers several scenes from *Dubliners* and *Ulysses* to reveal this writer’s anxieties in regard to Collier’s third theme of this volume, the invasion of privacy by the press. Collier explains that in early 20th-century Ireland newspapers were important in forging and fostering a sense of national identity, while maintaining community ethics partly through detailing crime, divorce and other proceedings. In the most famous example, the widely reported case of Parnell’s affair with Katherine O’Shea led to the politician’s ignominious downfall. In an ingenious reading of several scenes in *Ulysses*, Collier elucidates Leopold Bloom’s fears that his wife’s adultery will be publicized in the press and his private shame broadcast to the reading public. Collier emphasizes that Joyce chose not to write in journalistic forms, and comes close to faulting him for it; his abstruse experimental modernism was one method by which Joyce sought to remove his art from the debased public sphere, the common inhabitants of which, Collier stresses, would find *Ulysses* “indecipherable” (134).

The last two chapters of the book more directly address questions about the public sphere. Collier’s section on Macaulay takes up the fourth theme of the volume, “what newspaper content indicated about the *public*” (7). The chapter does not look much at newspaper content, however, but uses Macaulay’s satirical novels and several of her essays to argue that she envisioned a “public sphere consisting of multiple, local publics that may or may not be capable of aggregating into a vital sphere of intellectual, aesthetic and political debate” (140). As a self-conscious practitioner of

different types of journalism and fiction, Macaulay had a highly developed understanding of the multiple publics whom she addressed in different generic forms. The significance for Collier is that Macaulay satirizes the editors and publishers who pretend to focus on “what the public wants” when really projecting caricatured readers as justifications for the drivel they use to fill the pages of daily newspapers. Macaulay understood that the public was more varied and intelligent than the imagined reader for a column such as “Why I Would Not Marry a Curate” (155).

Rebecca West is the subject of Collier’s final chapter, in which he takes up his fifth topic: “the role newspapers can or should play in a *democracy*” (7). Like Macaulay, West earned much of her income through writing journalism and thought much more highly of the public than did writers like Eliot. Collier provides a fine reading of the interweavings in West’s writing of the necessity for art and the necessity for public debate about significant political issues. He demonstrates that throughout the first half of West’s career she remained committed to “journalism as a force for social advancement and reform” (172) that could help bring about “a more empowered, politically engaged citizenry” (178). Collier describes well how West championed experimental modernism while remaining immersed in a journalistic career; she was unusual in this era for refusing to acquiesce to a split between “high” and “low” culture, as she saw a function for both in the dialectical progress of human society. Collier ends his study with West, for she is a representative of those in the modernist period who continued to have faith in a vibrant public sphere, who saw both modernism and Fleet Street as part of the large human endeavor of explaining the universe to ourselves and communicating to each other about it.

This review summarizes Collier’s chapters partly to give a sense of the disparate issues the study addresses, and the multiple modes it uses to get at the question of the relationship between modernist writers and journalism. Ultimately this study is meta-critical, focusing primarily on the statements writers made *about* journalism in works ranging from poems in Eliot’s case, to novels in Joyce’s and Macaulay’s, to public speeches in West’s. Collier provides a very helpful map of key issues in the debates about “the great divide” between high and mass culture, and about the possibilities for the public sphere in the modernist era. He shrewdly points out that Habermas grounds his conception of the public sphere in the 17th-century “world of letters” as practiced by critics, reviewers, and satirists; this literary realm functioned as a prelude to the “rational critical debate” about directly political issues that theoretically constitutes the public sphere of democratic societies (201). But Collier’s study does not much attend to distinctions among types of journalism: daily newspapers, political weeklies, fashion magazines, the *Times Literary Supplement* and other critical reviews are very different venues with different functions, authors, editors, audiences.

Collier does acknowledge such distinctions, particularly in his nuanced reading of Macaulay's "publics," his chapter on her complex thinking about audience. And Collier's study is very alive to the ways in which public spheres operate, through multiple perspectives, voices, and opportunities. However, by focusing on writers such as Woolf whose journalism was almost exclusively book reviews, Collier and other critics paint a portrait of modernist writers as participating in the public "world of letters" but not necessarily in the "public sphere" of directly political debate.

Collier's inclusion of a chapter on Rebecca West, though, moves modernist studies toward an understanding of the roles journalism played within crucial public debates. Writers like West addressed in their journalism many of the major political topics of the era including the fight for women's suffrage, equal pay for equal work, the Russian Revolution, the Spanish Civil War, the rise of fascism, and atomic espionage. Collier's important work sets the stage for other studies that consider how writers of the modernist era *contributed to* the public sphere through their journalism—beyond their reflections about doing so. There are of course methodological hazards with this question; it is notoriously difficult to trace the effects of a piece of writing, whether journalism or poetry, into the world. But perhaps it is time for scholars of modernism to build on the work of Collier and other critics and try.

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