

The Curious Case of the British Avant-Garde

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Mitchell, Kaye, and Nonia Williams, eds. *British Avant-Garde Fiction of the 1960s*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2019. 272 pages. ISBN 978147443619 9. Hb. £80.00.

“Appreciation of avant-garde movements has never been [Britain’s] strong suit,” noted a *TLS* editorial in 1964 (qtd. in 11). This excellent collection of academic essays is fuelled by the desire to counter that tendency and celebrates a variety of British experimental authors who published some of their key works in the 1960s. Although several of them—Muriel Spark, J. G. Ballard, and B. S. Johnson—have received a fair amount of academic attention, Kaye Mitchell points out that the central aim of the book is to “rectify . . . a kind of critical lacuna in the history of British writing in the twentieth century” (14). The 1960s, she explains, has often been neglected in critical accounts as a kind of aesthetic interregnum—an indeterminate decade in between the demise of modernism and the arrival of postmodernism. When mentioned at all, the avant-garde works of the time were “dismissed . . . as a temporary aberration or, worse, a literary embarrassment” (14). The recent resurgence of interest in the 1960s experimentalists—evidenced by the publication of such works as Francis Booth’s *Amongst Those Left: The British Experimental Novel 1940-1980* (2012), Martin Ryle and Julia Jordan’s *B. S. Johnson and Post-War Literature: Possibilities of the Avant-Garde* (2014), and Sebastian Groes’s *British Fictions of the Sixties: The Making of the Swinging Decade* (2016)—proves the rightness of John Lanchester’s insight that with “good writers,” especially the avant-garde ones, we might add, “it can take some time for us to become their contemporaries” (qtd. in 250).

British Avant-Garde Fiction of the 1960s offers incisive readings of thirteen representatives of the movement. Besides chapters on Spark, Ballard, and Johnson, the volume discusses the most important contributions by Giles Gordon, Brigid Brophy, Alexander Trocchi, Anna Kavan, Ann Quin, Alan Burns, Eva Figes, Christine Brooke-Rose, Rayner Heppenstall, and Maureen Duffy. The selection of authors is, in most cases, predictable; as many as ten of them have been the focal points of Booth’s monumental *Amongst Those Left*, which misses chapters only on Brophy, Duffy, and Spark. The resulting make-up is predominantly female (seven women to six men) and richly diverse. As Mitchell emphasizes, the 1960s avant-garde “was not a ‘school’ in any clearly defined, coherent sense” (2). Its representatives differed on many accounts: in

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their artistic aspirations (Johnson argued for the replacement of fiction by truth), aesthetic principles (Burns initially adhered to radical collage), political opinions (Heppenstall became a Tory supporter), and gender politics (Brophy and Duffy were feminist activists while “entrenched forms of chauvinism” can be found in texts by Johnson and Trocchi) (2). Finding a common denominator for such a varied group is not an easy task. In the introduction, Mitchell lists the following shared qualities: “a concern with authenticity and truth” (often accompanied by self-reflexivity), an “acute awareness” of their times and an ambition to challenge the received notions about the novel as a literary form—“its shape, its purpose, its political remit, its future” (1). All those characteristics can, indeed, be subsumed under the notion of “avant-garde” literature, with its strong political connotations. Despite the general preference for that label, some contributors find “experimental” more suitable for their purposes, as is the case with Nonia Williams’s discussion of Ann Quin (144).

What becomes apparent in Mitchell and Williams’s collection is the highly international character of the British avant-garde. Several authors (including Brooke-Rose and Kavan) had foreign origins, while most of the other examined writers forged close ties with other cultures. France emerges as the most fertile source of artistic influence, largely thanks to the *nouveau roman* movement, which was particularly important to Brooke-Rose, Brophy, Heppenstall, Spark, Quin, and Trocchi (many of whom were friends of Alain Robbe-Grillet and Nathalie Sarraute). The United States is another major source of inspiration, with jazz, pop art, the Beats, and the Black Mountain poets. Apart from the *nouveau romanciers*, the key figures for the British avant-garde were the towering modernists (Joyce, Woolf, Pound) and Beckett (who even championed some of their work). Despite their evident debt to modernism, particularly noticeable in the writings of Gordon, Heppenstall, Kavan, and Quin, British avant-gardists are occasionally regarded as forerunners of postmodernism (a yet unavailable critical label throughout the 1960s). In the afterword, Glyn White describes that perception as erroneous: “Since they did not know what postmodernism was, their works were not intended as proto-postmodern texts, and have never convincingly been pressed into service as precursors of high postmodernism” (253). Although, admittedly, none of those authors produced any examples of historiographic metafiction *avant la lettre*, the radical self-reflexivity of Johnson’s *Albert Angelo* (1964) could definitely be said to prefigure such quintessentially postmodernist texts as John Barth’s *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968).

One of the running themes in the collection is the question of the accessibility of literary experimentalism. “Avant-garde writing,” argues White,

“is about the willingness to take the risk that there is no reader” (254). He concludes that most of the heroes of Mitchell and Williams’s collection repeatedly challenged conventional expectations, always ready to make a rude gesture to the “general reader” (254-55). Alan Burns is an interesting case in point: as Kieran Devaney argues, his 1960s works—plotless, collage-like, and cacophonous—were so alienating that Burns decided to abandon his original style as an obstacle to communicating his political message. Speaking with hindsight, Burns explained, “I had driven myself into a certain corner in relation to the readers who were interested enough in my work to buy the books. There were not enough of them!” (qtd. in 172). Ann Quin’s oeuvre also poses a challenge to the reader in ways catalogued by Nonia Williams, who describes the effect of Quin’s works on the reader as “dysphoric” and occasionally “infuriating” (145). As noted by Marina McKay, “experimental” is a tag that triggers associations with “the unsellable and the unreadable” (20). Yet some authors, most notably Muriel Spark, have managed to evade that “stigmatising label” (20). Her success in securing a wide readership for her “formally tricky, anti-realist, metafictional novels” was a rare achievement (21). Another author whose work has finally gained a greater recognition is B. S. Johnson. In his case, however, that achievement happened not despite his lack of concern for the reader but *because* of the reader’s centrality to his work. As Joseph Darlington argues, Johnson conceived his works as “potential narrative experiences” and designed them “with the reader’s interaction in mind” (40-41). The recent rediscovery of the author of *The Unfortunates* (1969) is, according to Darlington, connected with the rising currency of interactivity (51).

What is unique about *British Avant-Garde Fiction of the 1960s* is the consistently high level of its fifteen contributions, which is proof that Mitchell and Williams have put in a great deal of editorial work. (As mentioned in the Acknowledgements, the editors organized a work-in-progress conference for the contributors to ensure the volume’s coherence and to encourage cross-chapter conversations.) Among the yet unreferenced chapters are David Hucklesby’s discussion of Giles Gordon’s fiction and criticism (particularly in relation to the work of Brooke-Rose and Johnson), Len Gutkin’s reassessment of Brigid Brophy’s legacy as “the great camp experimentalist of postwar British fiction” (73) (and an attempt to determine the reasons for her current critical neglect), and Hannah Van Hove’s reading of Anna Kavan’s output as an aesthetic bridge between modernism and the 1960s avant-garde. Natalie Ferris’s contribution argues that J. G. Ballard’s most important works of the decade drew heavily on the visual arts and were influenced by the famous “This is Tomorrow” show at the Whitechapel Gallery in 1956, whereas Chris

Clarke's article considers Eva Figes's output through the lens of the rhetoric of failure and emphasizes her engagement with the ethical questions formulated by Emmanuel Levinas. Stephanie Jones and Philip Tew survey the experimental qualities of the key novels of the 1960s by Christine Brooke-Rose and Rayner Heppenstall, respectively. Finally, Eveline Kilian presents Maureen Duffy as an author of novels that were "radical for their time, in terms of both literary experiment and sexual politics" (243), and could be viewed as a rarely acknowledged inspiration for Judith Butler's notion of gender performativity and Jeanette Winterson's use of a genderless narrator in *Written on the Body* (1992). For me, the most interesting discoveries were Marina McKay's reading of Spark's early novels and Christopher Webb's assessment of Alexander Trocchi's intriguing life and literary career. McKay traces in Spark, who is not a usual suspect when the British avant-gardists are routinely rounded up, a consistent reliance on cliché (such as *crème de la crème*), borrowed phrases, "bad style," and "automated speech" in an effort to suggest how little most people "are really in control of what they are saying" (23). Webb's compelling account of Trocchi's narrative-defying life and gradually waning artistic output reads like material for an exciting biopic—set in Glasgow, London, Paris, and New York, with a literary-prodigy-turned-junky protagonist, and peppered with cameos by the likes of Jean-Paul Sartre, Guy Debord, and Norman Mailer. Webb manages to show how Trocchi's life and work informed each other and how his failed career could be regarded as a choice rather than a sad consequence of his drug addiction. Believing strongly that "man should be able to waste time without being seized with anxiety" (Trocchi qtd. in 93), the most important British Beat author was preoccupied with questions that Webb sees as no less relevant today than five decades ago: "how to be and how to employ or unemploy oneself within a relentlessly restless society geared towards industry and productivity" (103).

Mitchell and Williams's volume—an important and timely book for all scholars of twentieth-century British fiction, particularly those interested in formal innovation—is the best proof that the received critical narrative about post-war British literature, in which realism reigns supreme and the avant-garde is reduced to a mere footnote, is false. "The 1960s," as Mitchell announces, "is a much livelier period of literary experimentation in Britain than might previously have been supposed" (2).

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