

## REVIEWS

### **Fame at Last! Belated Experimentalist Revisited**

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**Jordan, Julia. *Late Modernism and the Avant-Garde British Novel: Oblique Strategies*. Oxford UP, 2020. 256 pages. ISBN 9780198857280. Hb. \$80.00.**

Julia Jordan's new book is another testimony to the resurgence of critical interest in the British avant-garde of the 1960s and 70s. Among the most important recent book-length studies of British experimentalists have been Francis Booth's *Amongst Those Left: The British Experimental Novel 1940–1980* (2012), B. S. Johnson and *Post-War Literature: Possibilities of the Avant-Garde* (2014), edited by Martin Ryle and Jordan herself, and *British Avant-Garde Fiction of the 1960s* (2019), edited by Kaye Mitchell and Nonia Williams. Jordan has been one of the most incisive critics and champions of this previously overlooked strand of British post-war fiction. Besides the already mentioned works, she has co-edited an anthology of B. S. Johnson's oeuvre *Well Done God! The Uncollected B.S. Johnson* (2013), contributed a chapter on the avant-gardists in *The Cambridge Companion to British Fiction Since 1945* (2015), and written articles on Johnson and Christine Brooke-Rose.

In *Late Modernism and the Avant-Garde British Novel*, Jordan rounds up some of the usual suspects, including Johnson, Brooke-Rose, Ann Quin, Alan Burns, Alexander Trocchi, several lesser-known authors, such as Zulfikar Ghose and Denis Williams, and a few acclaimed writers not customarily associated with experimentalism, with Muriel Spark, and Doris Lessing in their midst, to put forward an argument about the central role of

“obliqueness” in the British literary avant-garde. In her own words, “this book seeks to take some of the things we tend to say about experimental fiction—how it is non-linear, elliptical, errant, plotless—and reimagine these descriptors as historically inscribed ‘oblique strategies’ that express above all the period’s domination by the idea of the accidental” (6). This claim aligns the volume with Jordan’s first monograph *Chance and the Modern British Novel: From Henry Green to Iris Murdoch* (2010), which traces the role of chance as a theme and formal principle in the works of authors including Samuel Beckett and B. S. Johnson. The notion of “accident” is also crucial to the first part of the new study, which is composed of chapters devoted to accident as “event,” as “form,” and as “critique.” In each of them, Jordan considers texts by a variety of authors associated with the avant-garde, such as Burns, J.G. Ballard, and Gabriel Josipovici. The second part, titled “Errancy, Uncertainty, Indeterminacy,” contains readings of works by Johnson, Quin, and Brooke-Rose as embodying the respective notions indicated in the section title. The final part, which consists of a single chapter, considers Trocchi’s *Young Adam* (1954) and *Cain’s Book* (1960) as the epitome of late-modernist obliqueness and points to the most important British representative of the Beat movement as the bridge between the 1960s and 70s avant-gardists and the contemporary experimentalists such as Tom McCarthy.

While there is no doubt that Jordan’s critical readings are of the highest quality, and her subject matter is decidedly worthy of analysis, I am not entirely convinced that her current volume proposes a new angle from which we should begin to view the British avant-garde. The idea of obliqueness is too vague to function as a binder for the variety of concerns and formal techniques examined in the book. Also, I feel that Jordan spends too much time considering the vexed question of the group’s attitude and relationship to realism. In the introduction, she proclaims that her volume “sets out to establish a distinctive category of post-war fiction writing that expresses dissatisfaction or ambivalence toward the—

perceived—prevailing notions of realist literary form” (30). It is understood that any avant-garde movement needs to show at least “dissatisfaction” with conventional realism; therefore, it is not a claim that would require an entire book to defend. The conclusion of the monograph argues for a “model of reading” that is “happy dwelling in the indeterminate realm of not-knowing” and capable of accommodating “contradictory possibilities” (225). While this approach is certainly well-suited to analyze the elusive and disorienting novels by Burns, Quin, or Brooke-Rose, the proposition is not altogether novel but rather a manifestation of the poststructuralist politics of reading and the postmodernist principle of undecidability.

Among the many fresh and convincing arguments is the assertion of the experimentalists’ belatedness, hinted at in the categorization of their output as “late modernism.” She views them through the lens of Ben Hutchinson’s notion of “the anxiety of lateness” (“the fear there is nothing new to say”) (3) and reflects on their paradox of “being both late and modern, wanting to remain in the past at the same time as being axiomatically forward-looking” (6). Despite her evident fascination with the writers in question, Jordan concedes that “the ‘aren’t-we-embattled’ tone of mingled self-pity and arrogance” was adopted by many experimentalists, and that resorting to the metaphors of the “dead end” the “cul-de-sac” in critical analyses of their works is in some cases justified (11-12). Another original claim put forward in the book is the inapplicability of John Barth’s famous diagnosis of avant-garde American literature of the 1960s as the “literature of exhaustion” to the British experimental literature of the time. Jordan argues that the defining “weariness” of American metafictionists was replaced in Britain with “a nihilistic attraction to accident and dissolution” and “an eloquent sense of occupying the still point in a moment of disaster, where what is happening cannot be articulated” (64).

In an excellent chapter devoted to collage novels by Burns, Ballard, Quin, and Tom Phillips (a brilliant artist who too rarely features in critical accounts of the British avant-

garde), Jordan considers the principle of collage as “perhaps the clearest manifestation” of “oblique” avant-garde writing (68). Besides pointing out the literary merits of works, such as *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1970), she asserts their vulnerability to “the pitfalls of the dead end” (88). Collage, Jordan claims, inevitably runs the risk of being “boring” and “recalcitrant to the reader,” who may not be inclined to do the interpretive work necessary to make anything out of a disorienting jumble of fragments (72). “Boring” is not a common word in academic analyses, which tend to shy away from straightforward assessments of literary merit, so it is refreshing to come across it in Jordan’s book. I was particularly amused by her remark about Ballard’s *Crash* (1973), which she says “is famously a novel about the erotic potential of car crashes, where part of the joke is that a novel so outwardly obscene and shocking is also—self-consciously and ironically, but still intensely—boring” (70).

Another excellent chapter is the one devoted to B. S. Johnson, which covers similar ground to Jordan’s illuminating 2014 article titled “‘For recuperation’: Form and the Aleatory in B. S. Johnson’s *The Unfortunates*.” The most fascinating part of the chapter is the analysis of the unique tone adopted by Johnson in such works as his celebrated novel-in-a-box. Jordan attributes it to several factors: “an excess of intimacy between author and reader; an almost sensual or abject presence; a corporeal proximity that scrambles the distance between subject and object” (119). The last chapter, which focuses on Trocchi and McCarthy, is equally compelling. Casting Trocchi—an artist “always . . . at the edge of something” (205)—as the embodiment of the 1960s and 70s avant-garde appears to be a harbinger of his probable inclusion in the canon. Interestingly, Jordan indicates that McCarthy, rather than, say, Ali Smith, Adam Thirlwell, or Isabella Waidner, is the most likely heir to the British post-war avant-garde. Her assessment of McCarthy’s experimentalism, manifesting itself primarily in his thematic and formal interest in “accident,” “failure,” and “discontinuity” (208), clashes

with Gary Hall's fervent questioning of McCarthy's avant-garde credentials in the forthcoming monograph, *A Stubborn Fury: How Writing Works in Elitist Britain*.

Reading *Late Modernism and the Avant-Garde British Novel* enabled me to realize the broader significance of several individuals: the Scottish psychiatrist R. D. Laing, a crucial influence on the worldview of many of the discussed authors; the Scottish-Canadian publisher John Calder, who dreamed of rebranding the experimentalists as the British *nouveaux romanciers*, creating a wider social interest in their works; and Frank Kermode, the most famous critic of the time, whose consistent undermining of the literary merits of the avant-gardists contributed greatly to their sustained marginalization. It is thanks to critics like Jordan, Francis Booth, Philip Tew, Kaye Mitchell, Nonia Williams, Adam Guy, Andrew and Jennifer Hodgson, and Joe Darlington—to name but a few—that Johnson, Brooke-Rose, Quin, and others have recently gained their much-deserved and long-overdue recognition.

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