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# *The Literary London Journal*

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**Sarah Davison, *Modernist Literatures: A Reader's Guide to Essential Criticism*, paperback, 248 pages, Palgrave, 2015.  
ISBN: 978-0230284012; £17.99**

Reviewed by

Michael Perfect  
(Bilkent University, Turkey)

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Sarah Davison's *Modernist Literatures* is an accessible, stimulating and thoroughly-researched guide to critical writing related to the wide range of literatures in English that have been described as 'modernist'. Focusing as it does on critical engagements with Anglophone literature written during the period 1890–1939, Davison's book certainly does not encompass critical work on *all* literatures that have been referred to as modernist; however, in exploring and making links between (for example) 'high modernism', innovations in theatre, and the Harlem Renaissance, it offers a more comprehensive survey than do a number of comparable (and often longer) studies. Indeed, wide-ranging in scope and yet also very concise, it is likely to prove particularly useful to those who are beginning to think seriously for the first time about the explosion of creative and critical energies that reshaped the literary landscape in the first decades of the twentieth century. It is easy to imagine Davison's book being used as a set text on undergraduate and postgraduate courses, perhaps paired with one of the numerous anthologies or readers already available of the critical writings that this guide surveys.

Davison's book claims in its introduction to be 'unique' (1). Given that it positions itself as a 'guide' to a field of study that is so extensively studied and written on, this is quite some claim. However, it is one that this guide arguably succeeds in fulfilling, even if only in its latter stages. Wisely taking the words of its series title '*essential criticism*' as 'not unproblematic', Davison seeks to 'respond to th[e] challenge' of telling the story of critical engagements with modernist literatures by 'providing multiple, overlapping narratives and emphasising differences of opinion' (9, italics in original). The guide is divided into two parts, and in the first—entitled 'Critical Declarations and Contemporary Responses'—Davison 'provides an overview of key critical statements by modernist writers and contemporary commentators in the years

before English literature was institutionalised as an academic discipline' (8–9). This involves surveying 'the criticism written by the most innovative novelists, poets, playwrights and directors, who busily issued manifestos and aesthetic pronouncements, composed essays, book-length studies, letters, prefaces, introductions and reviews, compiled anthologies, staged live performances and held debates in magazines and national newspapers, with a view to readjusting literary taste and creating informed, appreciative audiences for difficult or daring works' (9). The three chapters which make up this first half of the book focus on 'Modernist Beginnings', 'High Modernism', and 'Modernism after 1922' (vii–viii). In Part II, 'Literary Criticism from 1930-present', Davison 'provides a critical survey of modernist studies as an academic discipline' (9), with chapters entitled 'The Making of Modernist Canons', 'Gender and Sexuality in Modernist Literature', 'Modernist Geographies and Time Frames' and 'Modernist Literatures and Mass Culture' (viii–ix).

Given that the first half of this book surveys four decades' worth of critical work that both influenced and responded to some truly colossal changes—in the ways in which literature was written, read, understood and discussed—in less than one hundred pages, it does well to cover so diverse a range of writing and thought. Having said that, on occasion its concision does rather verge on brevity (one reason for which this book would work particularly well when partnered with an anthology of the writings which its first half describes). While the predominantly chronological structure that Davison adopts generally succeeds in presenting its material in a coherent and engaging way, at times the shifts back and forth between writers, genres, countries and continents does make the structure feel rather fragmentary. At one point, for example, we move from Eliot's praise for *Ulysses* (64–5) to New York Avant-Garde theatre (66–7), then to Mina Loy, Marianne Moore and Wallace Stevens (67–71), and then—confusingly—back to Eliot's critical work with a short section on 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (71–2). One could argue that—given the importance of fragmentation to so much modernist writing—this is only appropriate; on occasion, however, the material in Part I does feel like it could be slightly better organised.

Davison certainly makes some insightful connections between different writers, works, places and ideas, yet on occasion such connections could be made more explicitly and explored in more depth. For example, Davison quotes Wyndham Lewis's self-aggrandising lament for what he perceived to be the failings of literary writing after World War I. Writing in 1937, Lewis referred to himself, Eliot, Pound and Joyce as 'the men of 1914'. He stated that they represented the '*first men of a Future that has not materialized*', and claimed that 'as a result of the War [...] artistic expression has slipped back again into political propaganda and romance, which go together' (82, italics in original). Just thirteen pages later, giving an account of 'the Auden group'—who, she points out, 'were established as Britain's foremost literary coterie' (95) by the late 1930s—Davison quotes Cecil Day-Lewis, a key member of that group. Writing in 1938—that is, one year after Lewis's lament over artistic expression 'slipp[ing] back again into political propaganda'—Day-Lewis defined 'a good poem' as 'one that enters deep into the stronghold of our emotions', and then added 'if it is written by a good revolutionary, it is bound to have a revolutionary effect on our emotions, and therefore to be essentially—though not formally—propaganda' (95). Davison does draw contrasts between 'the men of 1914' and 'the Auden group', and yet the

strikingly different accounts of the notion of literature as 'propaganda' that we encounter in these quotes from Lewis and Day-Lewis—quotes which are from virtually the same historical moment—surely merit further comment. While it may seem a little churlish to ask a book that does so much in its first ninety-nine pages to do a little more, this kind of detail would seem to offer an open goal in terms of drawing contrasts between the ways in which two enormously influential literary 'groups' understood the social and political functions of literature. This is one of a handful of opportunities to 'emphasis[e] differences of opinion' (9)—this guide's stated approach—that are not taken up.

In its second part, Davison's book comes into its own. In the sense that it offers a wide-ranging, up-to-date, thought-provoking account of the relationships between modernism and a number of discourses, movements and fields of study that have emerged since 1930, this is where this guide may just fulfil its claim to being 'unique'. As well as giving an account of the emergence of critical schools which sought, in the first half of the twentieth century, to respond to the challenges of modernist literature (such as New Criticism), Davison also explores critical reconfigurations of modernism by, and in, more recently developed fields such as poststructuralism, postcolonial studies and gender studies. The penultimate chapter—on 'space, place and race' (viii)—is particularly good. One disappointment is the rather brief consideration given to postmodernism. In its introduction, this guide states that it 'looks forward to postmodernism', yet in fact very little room is ultimately given over to 'the cultural formation that comes after, reacts to, goes beyond and is yet contiguous with modernism' (6). Something else conspicuous by its absence is some consideration of the emergent body of literary writing that has been referred to as 'neo-modernist'. In recent years, a number of works have emerged which could accurately be described as embracing a modernist (rather than postmodernist) aesthetic. Examples would include Will Self's *Umbrella* (2012)—which was recently followed by *Shark* (2014), and will apparently be followed by a final instalment in what is to be a trilogy—and Eimear McBride's *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* (2013). Such works have received a great deal of critical acclaim. Surely one of the most interesting things about writing a guide to critical engagements with modernist literatures in 2015 is the *resurgence* of those literatures, and critical responses to that resurgence. It is a shame that this does not receive attention here.

Davison's book covers and does a great deal in relatively few pages, and the fact that in some ways it leaves one wanting more is to its credit. Accessible and engaging, wide-ranging yet succinct, it would be no surprise to see it become a common fixture on academic syllabi. Paired with an anthology of the critical writings which its first part surveys, it will undoubtedly fulfil its aim—stated on its back cover—of 'furnishing readers with the requisite knowledge and insight to make their own interventions in critical debates on Anglophone modernist literatures'.

### **Note on Contributor**

**Michael Perfect** is Assistant Professor of English Literature at Bilkent University in Ankara, Turkey. He has also taught at the University of Cambridge, where he earned his PhD in 2011, and in London. His book *Contemporary Fictions of Multiculturalism:*

*Diversity and the Millennial London Novel* was published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2014.

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