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Patrick Collier. *Modernism on Fleet Street.* Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006. viii + 257 pp. $99.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7546-5308-0.

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British Modernism and Newspapers

The troubled relationship between modern newspapers and the reading public is an old chicken-and-egg problem, part of our historical conversation since the last decades of the nineteenth century. Pundits and critics are almost always sure that newspapers have deteriorated, that they are less serious and less able or willing to orient readers in a rapidly changing world. But where should the blame be laid? Do readers get the news they want–that is, does the public's appetite for the fast, grotesque, and sexy distort and cheapen the "news"? Or, worse, does the news readers get shape them–do publishers manipulate the reading public, coaxing them to shift their attention to the bright and shiny objects of popular culture, ignoring events and information of lasting value or civic importance and substituting simplified language for elevated discourse? What kind of reading public is really out there, in the end? How is it constituted? What do its reading habits mean–for its voting habits, its language, and other civic issues? And if it has been degraded, can anyone save it?

In this deftly argued book, Patrick Collier examines concerns about newspapers among British modernist writers between the Great War and World War II. Literary modernism might seem to be newspaper journalism's obverse: it was pointedly difficult and abstruse, using language in unconventional ways, constantly shifting perspectives and refusing any kind of simple or predictable narrative resolution. But those same literary modernist authors often paid the bills with newspaper and magazine journalism, which also provided them with a pulpit from which to declaim about the press itself. Collier focuses on T. S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, Rose Macaulay, and Rebecca West, highlighting their relationship to Fleet Street and their commentary on newspapers and their readers. These writers depended on the press even as they (sometimes) demonized it, distanced themselves from it, or despaired of it.

The modernists did not worry alone. Early-twentieth-century Britons expressed widespread concern about newspapers, language, literature, and the public. Mass-circulation newspapers were blamed for cracking the supposed former unity of literature and journalism, rendering considered critical judgment impossible and distracting the reader from important matters with an endless parade of folderol like women's sections, sports pages, and gossip columns, all in oversimplified language. Commentators also worried about the concentration of newspaper ownership in the hands of three press conglomerates. The "headline habit" described by Arthur Baumann in 1920 was seen as an assault on the reader's attention that would leave the reader susceptible to other forms of manipulation–most dangerously, political manipulation (p. 14). An easily distracted newspaper reader, in this apocalyptic vision, was part of tomorrow's angry mob, under-informed citizenry, or apathetic consumers. Such readers also might pass on to the upper classes, presumably the last bastion of serious thought, an appetite for the temptations of the gutter press. Thus questions of class contamination were at work. The notion of a declining public sphere was accompanied by a myth of an undifferentiated "public" that ignored the diverse reading appetites and publications available in this new media era. The newspaper was thus a symbol *par excellence*: "the newspaper's historical and mythologized role in liberal democracy, its development into a popular commodity, the rise of the press combines, journalism's apparent decline from 'literary' or professional status–all made the newspaper liable, from various political and aesthetic positions, to attack as a loaded, multivalent signifier for urban modernity" (p. 27).

Collier's book analyzes the journalism and *belles-lettres* of five modernist authors: T. S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, the middlebrow writer Rose Macaulay, and Rebecca West. Each took greatly different

positions regarding the press: whether it was degraded or a source of optimism, whether the literary author would be tainted by journalistic engagement, whether modernism might rescue British society from the "degraded" English language and stultifying bourgeois conventions of thought represented in the press. Despite their concerns about journalistic work, the modernists were bound closely to the press, even in some of the questions they posed. Literary modernists and newspapers alike invaded traditional public-private distinctions, for example, and both were pilloried for that stance. Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) was accused of baring private concerns better left out of the public eye; Woolf's desire to write about internal quandaries and thoughts generally left unexpressed in literature was not dissimilar. Meanwhile, newspapers were criticized–sometimes by the modernists themselves–for publishing information about divorces, odd medical cases, salacious or horrible crimes, and the intimate details of the lives of celebrities.

Eliot and West represent seemingly opposite ends of the continuum representing the modernists' attitudes toward the press. Eliot's famed insistence on the primacy of tradition and the decadence of contemporary culture stood opposed to Rebecca West's insistence that just as the public might be relied upon to choose serious analysis over fluff, so might newspapers rescue journalism, reorient the public, and renew society. Eliot made a living and a reputation from journalism (writing for the *Times Literary Supplement* and as editor of the *Criterion*) even as he denigrated newspapers for representing feminized, feeble bourgeois convention, and calling on the courageous male poet's intellect to distill and refine the language journalism rendered barbaric. West, meanwhile, insisted that journalism, art, and literature were more alike than they were different, and she resisted aesthetic hierarchies as she did the demonization of the modern reading public. West sought to understand the public's failures without blaming them, hoping to draw the lower classes up into an idealized bourgeois public sphere of reason and educated taste. While paternalistic, Collier notes, West's vision is significantly less despairing than Eliot's diagnosis of widespread cultural decay.

The book's great strength lies in this neatly argued understanding of each author, and the rich intellectual environment it creates for each writer. Collier treats journalism and literature as the complementary pursuits they in fact were, and carefully explains the role of journalism in each writer's career as well as its influence on the writer's literature. His analyses of Joyce and Eliot are particularly welcome in this regard and extremely well done. Similarly, his introductory chapter on contemporary views of Fleet Street is extremely thoughtful, written with verve and energy. I learned a great deal from this book.

I would have asked Collier to expand his analysis somewhat. First, he does not seem to have sought comparative examples. He might have profitably examined–even if only for a paragraph or three–the American case, with a similarly complex relationship between literature and journalism, as explained in excellent recent studies such as John Hartsock's *A History of American Literary Journalism* (2000) or Karen Roggenkamp's *Narrating the News: New Journalism and Literary Genre in Late Nineteenth-Century Newspaper and Fiction* (2005). Another relevant issue, unexamined in this text, is interwar anxiety over propaganda, a reaction to its widespread use during the Great War. American and British politicians and thinkers bemoaned propaganda's power, and both countries viewed themselves as propaganda's victim, lured into the conflict by clever atrocity stories and news censorship, even as other belligerents interpreted them as its foremost users. Here, too, the real concern was the public and the prospect of good governance, given propaganda's seeming power to derail civic discourse. Recent texts on Great War atrocity stories, like John N. Horne and Alan Kramer's *German Atrocity Stories, 1914: A History of Denial* (2001), or histories of the reaction to propaganda, such as Brett Gary's *The Nervous Liberals: Propaganda Anxieties from WWI to the Cold War* (1999), would have usefully framed the concerns about the British public that Collier describes here, and perhaps allowed him to speak more directly to fears about the public and the fate of political liberalism in the interwar era.

A last concern: Collier quotes extensively, from interwar writers and today's academics. At times the reader is hard pressed to distinguish them from one another; at other moments the text is densely packed with allusions to other academic works, and Collier's own intriguing arguments lose pride of place.

Criticisms aside, this book is a fascinating read. It is densely researched but crafted in intelligent, accessible prose, and his readings of the modernist authors' work and journalism are carefully contextualized while also allowing for the magic of their artistry to penetrate to readers. This is an intriguing and worthwhile addition to the growing scholarship on literature and journalism, and those writers who engage in both while blurring the lines between the two.

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