

## INTERMODERNISM: LITERARY CULTURE IN MID-TWENTIETH- CENTURY BRITAIN

*Ed. Kristin Bluemel*

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This is a welcome addition to the critical canon, not least for its introduction of ‘intermodernism’ which is less a label for the shelves holding the twentieth-century texts which do not match the modernist template than an ‘analytical tool . . . for finding and valuing vital figures and cultural forms that disappear in a discussion of modernism or postmodernism’, as Kristin Bluemel explains in her brief but admirably lucid Introduction (p.6).

As the term itself suggests, intermodernism both contains and is at least partly defined against modernism, and Bluemel suggests that one major point of distinction is that of the writers’ responsibilities: modernists saw those in terms of their responsibilities to the language, while intermodernists felt them in relation to the people (p.1). She then identifies three defining features of those responsibilities as cultural (usually working-class or working middle-class cultures); political (often politically radical) and literary (intermodernist writers being non-canonical and exploring middlebrow or mass genres, such as detective fiction

The book itself is clearly structured, with the essays grouped under four headings – Work, Community, War and Documents – but far from being watertight divisions these categories should be considered in relation to each other, just as the essays within each section should be read in terms of the others. Storm Jameson's writing in relation to the international situation, for example, is considered in the section on 'work' (Elizabeth Maslen, 'A Cassandra with Clout: Storm Jameson, Little Englander and Good European') but she also comes to the fore within the section 'Documents', this time with reference to realism and documentary film-making (Laura Marcus, 'The Creative Treatment of Actuality: John Grierson, Documentary Cinema and "Fact" in the 1930s'). This organisation thus creates structure without stasis, allowing different patterns to emerge from a consideration of twentieth-century literature.

The 'Work' section also includes Janet Montefiore's essay, 'Englands Ancient and Modern: Sylvia Townsend Warner, T.H. White and the Fictions of Medieval Englishness' which suggests that in *The Once and Future King*<sup>1</sup> and *The Corner That Held Them* White and Warner are creating a 'sustained imaginative alternative to a dreary civilian present' (p.39) which was experienced during the second world war. Such a suggestion implies a degree of escapism and slides both these works towards reassuring 'middlebrow' fiction, but Montefiore immediately flips this over by the arguing that the unconventional ways in which these authors fictionalised history – Warner through Marxism and an emphasis on money and White through psychoanalysis – question the 'patriotic fantasy of an ideally unchanging England' (p.39). This, together with the non-canonical status of both these authors, brings them within the remit of intermodernism.

Montefiore identifies White's main moral as being that war is wicked which he explores through King Arthur's attempts to use chivalry to reconcile might with right – a reconciliation which must always breakdown because of

the aggression within chivalry itself: fire fought with fire still burns.

In her consideration of *The Corner That Held Them* Montefiore links Warner's evocation of the medieval England the nuns experience with her other writings about rural England which, swinging against mid-twentieth-century nostalgia for traditional England, draw attention to the 'fracturing effects of modernity and of pervasive social injustice' (p.41). This of course recalls Warner's political radicalism and suggests that although she is an outstanding stylist, she did indeed see her responsibilities as a writer as being towards people and not language.

There is a tendency for this essay to fall into two sections, and if the really excellent summary at its close doesn't quite overcome this tendency, it comes very close to doing so. In any case, this is a very minor quibble about a richly rewarding essay which will send the reader back to the original texts with new thoughts and new questions.

Intermodernism as a critical concept has the advantage of valuing genres that are currently devalued or ignored, such as detective fiction, spy or adventure fiction, and travel writing. It can also be stretched to include mass media, such as documentary film and radio, both of which receive some attention in this volume which surely is an excellent first step towards intermodernism's goal of teaching 'in a coherent and sustained way the literature of the interwar and war years that otherwise makes only superficial appearances in course on British and Irish modernism' (p.vii). As such it is very welcome.

#### NOTES

1. Not published until 1958, but I am using this title for convenience to cover its constituent parts: *The Sword in the Stone* (1938), *The Witch in the Wood* (1940) and *The Ill-Made Knight* (1941).

*Helen Sutherland*