

THE ENGLISH MODERNIST NOVEL. Lázaro, Luis Alberto. *El modernismo en la novela inglesa*. Madrid: Síntesis, 2005.

A critical analysis of Modernism raises more questions than it can possibly answer, as the term remains to be elusive and the texts and writers that it allegedly encompasses are heterogeneous and of enormous complexity. This difficulty has not deterred Luis Alberto Lázaro, who has accepted the challenge to present, to the Spanish readers, a conscientious introduction to the English Modernist novel along with a complete survey of the main writers and their literary production. His study is well structured, with sections that are carefully balanced, and is written with a fluent and accessible style, features all of these which render the Modernist movement more tractable than it might look at first sight.

El modernismo en la novela inglesa starts with an indispensable discussion of the social and cultural context of Modernism. That this movement takes place in a period of crisis is by now a topical assertion, but Lázaro provides, in more depth than is usual for literary analyses, a detailed account of the social conflicts in the first four decades of the twentieth century: the decline of the British Empire, World War I, the Irish question, the Russian revolution, the political tensions that lead to World War II, the economic crisis, the proletarian unrest, the feminist movement, etc. This political and economic background is essential to understand the interests that are at stake, the writers' ideological allegiances and the different representations of these conflicts in their novels. The excessive emphasis on the formal experimentation of these novelists, which we find in most traditional approaches to Modernism, has drawn attention away from these writers' involvement in the ideological struggles of the period and has unfortunately constructed Modernism as an artistic movement that failed to connect with the society that surrounded it. Lázaro takes issue with this false perception of the Modernist novelists' supposed lack of social commitment and, on several occasions throughout his book, reminds us of the way the war, women's rights, double moral standards, oppressive institutions, etc. determine the characters' course of life.

After his introduction to the historical context, Lázaro attempts to define the always elusive term of Modernism, its geographical area of influence and the temporal frame in which it takes place. What is Modernism? A period of time? A literary movement? Lázaro opts for the second possibility although this choice entails almost as many risks as the former one. He discards the definition of Modernism as a period, which would cover the first half of the twentieth century, because of the heterogeneity of writers that published their work in these years. However, Lázaro admits that the consideration of Modernism as a literary movement must also acknowledge an enormous diversity among its practitioners (27). As B. Elliott & J. Wallace remark, "there is no innate or unproblematic modernism" (2). These critics maintain that we should not think of Modernism as an empirical object whose truth we can discover through careful analysis. They rather suggest that we think of Modernism as a discursive field, and one that is constructed differently depending on the writer's or critic's values, gender, class, race, etc. Some of these discourses managed to become dominant thanks to their closeness to the centres of cultural power —publishers, editors, patrons, etc.— and they produced a type of hegemonic Modernism, predominantly formalist, which was perpetuated, for at least four decades, due to the establishment of English Studies at the universities with a formalist, New Critical approach to literary analysis.

A frequent point of debate in the study of Modernism is that of the difference between Modernism and the *avant-garde* (Bürger; Poggioli), the latter actually resulting from movements like Dadaism, Surrealism and the Russian *avant-gardes*, which challenged art as an institution and attempted to reintegrate it in the praxis of life. Lázaro does not dwell on this aspect, probably because the writers he discusses do not belong, properly speaking, to these historical *avant-gardes*, no matter how radically experimental they can get in some of their texts. When analysing British Modernism in a European context, we feel the need to differentiate it from other *fin-de-siècle* trends like the Aesthetic Movement, Art for Art's Sake, Art Nouveau, etc.

However, I concur with those who do not find in British novelists the subversive stance of, for instance, Dadaists concerning the role of art in society.

Once Modernism is defined and framed, Lázaro continues to present three broad stages in it, with a first set of forerunners (H. James, J. Conrad, F.M. Ford, S. Grand, and M. Caird), a second set with hegemonic writers (Lawrence, Joyce, and Woolf), women novelists (D. Richardson, M. Sinclair and J. Rhys) and writers with a political and social priority (E.M. Forster, W. Lewis, L.G. Gibbon). Finally, a third set deals with writers of later generations who were deeply influenced by Modernist aesthetics (S. Beckett, M. Lowry, and L. Durrell). This selection of writers is comprehensive and responds to recent debates about Modernism and the need to include neglected and peripheral writers for a more balanced evaluation of this artistic phenomenon. One may easily find analyses of the work by James Joyce or Virginia Woolf, but it is not so common to run into discussions of Ford Madox Ford, Lewis Grassic Gibbon, or May Sinclair in surveys of Modernist literary production. Lázaro is also especially attentive to recent critical work that has recuperated the novels by women writers like Sarah Grand, Mona Caird, Dorothy Richardson, May Sinclair and Jean Rhys. One must say that feminist configurations of Modernism (Hanscombe & Smyers; Benstock; Gilbert & Gubar; Clark; DeKoven; among others) have been extremely active critical approaches in the challenge of the formulations of hegemonic Modernism. One might be tempted to include in Lázaro's survey other women writers of this period, like Agatha Christie or Elizabeth Bowen, and question their idealization of the landowning class (Thompson).

An additional merit, and not a negligible one at all, in Lázaro's study is his detailed record of the various publication dates of the Modernist novels he discusses, the subsequent editions, the delays caused by censorship and the translations available in Spanish. With regard to this last aspect, one is favourably surprised with the meticulous registration of data regarding the Spanish translators and publishers in his quotations of fragments from several novels, which

constitutes an important contribution to research on British Modernism as it traces its reception in Spain. Another important piece of evidence of the thoroughness of this study is the final addition of several appendices of interest for the common reader, with a selection of fragments from key texts of Modernism, an index of proper names of writers and main characters of their fiction, a glossary with definitions of artistic movements and critical terms, a chronology of historical and cultural events and, finally, a bibliography. The fact that this is the first book in Spain on the English Modernist novel is a clear indication of the lack of general surveys of English Modernism in Spanish. For this reason, the bibliography included by Lázaro contains mostly references in English. However, for the benefit of those who cannot read English, I would suggest the addition of the studies on particular modernist writers in the *Letras Universales* series by the Spanish publisher Cátedra (Woolf, *Dalloway*, *Olas*; Joyce; Lawrence).

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