



Journal of European Periodical Studies

an online journal by ESPRit, European Society for Periodical Research

Review of Birgit Van Puymbroeck, *Modernist Literature and European Identity*

Catherine Clay

Journal of European Periodical Studies, 7.1 (Summer 2022)

ISSN 2506-6587

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The *Journal of European Periodical Studies* is hosted by Ghent University

Website: ojs.ugent.be/jeps

To cite this article: Catherine Clay, 'Review of Birgit Van Puymbroeck, *Modernist Literature and European Identity*', *Journal of European Periodical Studies*, 7.1 (Summer 2022), 71–72

Reviews

Birgit Van Puymbroeck, *Modernist Literature and European Identity* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020). 174 pp. ISBN 9780367516383

Modernist Literature and European Identity sets out to do two things: 'to read modernism through the current debate on European identity (and vice versa) and to use insights from transnational modernism, formulated against a Eurocentric narrative, to renew the study of early-twentieth-century Europe' (p. 153). These aims are admirably achieved through four case studies and an epilogue focused on five modernist authors and their networks: Ford Madox Ford, T. S. Eliot, Gertrude Stein, Aimé Césaire, and Nancy Cunard. The book's deliberate focus on 'modernist Europe, rather than European modernism' (p. 5) makes it an exciting contribution to both modernist and European studies; some of its case studies contain rich pickings for periodicals scholarship too.

The book's methodological approach is one of its most exciting features. Building on recent transnational approaches in modernist studies it regards both 'modernism' and 'Europe' as 'dynamic sites of cultural interaction' (p. 5). It also makes compelling use of Paul K. Saint-Amour's concept of 'weak modernism' to think about the idea of Europe as a 'weak' construct, one that is not fixed, definite, and monolithic, but 'a collection of loosely related attitudes, practices, and views' (p. 7).¹ Steering clear of any attempt to neatly define European identity in the modernist period, Van Puymbroeck aims instead to describe 'various instances of it' through an examination of how modernist authors 'imagined "Europe" in their works' (p. 10). The book focuses on Anglo-American-French relations as 'one of the many potential contact zones between different views and traditions' that shaped ideas of

Europe in modernist literature (p. 10). Within this scope it reveals widely different views about Europe, illuminating the ways in which European identity was shaped and reconfigured in the early twentieth century.

In the opening chapter on 'Ford Madox Ford and the Anglo-French Tradition' Van Puymbroeck shows how Ford regarded Europe as 'an extension of Britain, marked by a variety of people of diverse backgrounds' (p. 12). Looking back to a medieval past of individual nations connected by extensive trade routes he 'imagined Europe as a loose network of small, interconnected communities' (p. 13), a vision that propelled his commitment to Anglo-French collaboration in his work. Gertrude Stein, in contrast, 'critiqued the idea of Europe in her work' (p. 13). In a chapter that reads Stein's compositional methods alongside her interwar French networks, Van Puymbroeck shows that Stein rejected Europe's association with nineteenth-century expansionism and Enlightenment ideals of progress, arguing that for her Europe was 'finished' (p. 94). The chapters on T. S. Eliot and Aimé Césaire similarly explore different poles of modernist thinking about Europe; these case studies also have the most to offer for scholars interested in the role of periodicals in transnational connections and exchange.

Eliot's idea of a united Europe, shaped by a shared Classical and Christian tradition, is well established in scholarship. In Chapter Two, Van Puymbroeck extends our knowledge of the periodical networks Eliot operated within and which underpinned his idea of a unified and specifically Western Europe by examining his relations with two French periodicals: *Nouvelle Revue Française* (1909–present) and *Commerce* (1924–32). As foreign

¹ Paul K. Saint-Amour, 'Weak Theory, Weak Modernism', *Modernism/Modernity*, 25.3 (2018), 437–59.

correspondent of the former, a monthly magazine of literature and criticism, and unofficial advisor to the latter, a quarterly magazine publishing only poetry and prose, Eliot pursued his programme — elaborated in his own magazine, the *Criterion* (1922–39) — for establishing critical standards which should be shaped internationally. The *Criterion* and *Nouvelle Revue Française* frequently commented on foreign literature and periodicals, and all three magazines published European authors in translation. This cultural work, Van Puymbroeck observes, ‘advanced the goal of a European network of letters from which the work of true European significance would emerge, although [it] arguably also created this significance’ (p. 53).

In Chapter Four, on Césaire, Van Puymbroeck extends the book’s focus to the Caribbean in a discussion of how this French Martinican poet both opposed a European tradition identified with colonial violence and oppression and sought to intervene in it. The chapter traces Césaire’s literary network in- and outside Europe, paying special attention to his friendship with André Breton, who introduced his work to an international avant-garde through Surrealist journals including the New York-based *VVV* (1942–44), and to his connection with a larger circle of African and Caribbean writers in Paris through three Francophone magazines. These were: *La Revue du monde noir / The Review of the Black World* (1931–32), a bilingual monthly magazine that was born of the Parisian Nardal salon grouped around sisters Paulette, Jane, and Andrée Nardal, originally from Martinique; *Légitime défense*, a short-lived journal highlighting Surrealism founded in 1932

by a group of Francophone students at the Sorbonne; and *L’Étudiant noir* founded in 1935 by another group of Francophone students who studied at the *École normale supérieure* and which called for Marxist social revolution. Discussing the importance of these groups and magazines in the development of black awareness alongside Césaire’s later contributions to the Caribbean magazine he founded, *Tropiques* (1941–45), Van Puymbroeck discusses how Césaire ‘felt both part of and distinct from Europe’ (p. 115), actively drawing on a Western tradition but also intervening in it.

The book’s epilogue focuses on another transnational figure who critiqued the idea of Europe and sought to reconfigure it from within: Nancy Cunard. This short discussion left me wanting to know more about the periodical publications ‘across Europe and the West Indies’ in which Cunard’s late poetry appeared (p. 148). As Van Puymbroeck notes, Cunard is still a relatively neglected figure in modernist scholarship which, with some important exceptions, has paid more attention to her positioning in relation to other modernist figures than to her own significance as a modernist poet. Van Puymbroeck’s analysis of such poems as ‘Psalm for Trinidad’ (1941) and *Man=Ship=Tank=Gun=Plane* (1944) which shine light on the violence of imperialism and the horrors of war provide a fitting conclusion to this book. Today, as new historical forces place pressure upon our ideas of Europe and European identity, Cunard’s emphasis on transnational solidarity remains as vital and relevant as it was during the modernist era.

Catherine Clay
Nottingham Trent University