Elizabeth Pender. *The New Modernist Novel: Criticism and the Task of Reading*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2024.

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In October 1971, Hugh Kenner wrote to Guy Davenport asking him whether John Rodker and Mina Loy, notable names back in the days of early modernism, were still alive. The information was required for the index of a Penguin critical anthology on William Carlos Williams. Unfortunately, Davenport did not know the answer but suggested that an acquaintance of his (Jonathan Williams) well might.

That's a moment which chimes well with Elizabeth Pender's concerns in this interesting and instructive book. Here she makes the case that key novels by Rodker and Loy (Rodker's *Adolphe, 1920* [1929] and Loy's *Insel* [written ca. 1936–1940s, published 1991]), along with Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood* (1936), fell by the wayside in the period in which the academic study of literary modernism was establishing itself. Her book is at least as much interested in why this neglect/failure happened as it is in Rodker, Loy, and Barnes and in their novels themselves.

One straightforward and obvious answer to the question "why were these novels neglected?" might be that they were simply not as good as their more famous counterparts. Who would put ssuch texts in front of students in preference to, say, those by James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, or Virginia Woolf? But as Pender points out, things are not as simple as that, because judgments about quality are themselves articulated within particular cultural assumptions, assumptions which also engage with particular reading practices.

Pender's argument begins from the fact that the pedagogy and study of literary modernism in the academy came late to the novel form. Literary criticism in the mode that became most prestigious in the mid-century Anglophone English department was developed first by attending to poetry, and in particular the poetry of Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot, and then under the sway of a "new criticism" which deployed critical practices and values also first adumbrated by Pound and Eliot (along with I. A. Richards). And this criticism was insufficiently attuned to the kind of fictional writing we find in Rodker's, Loy's, and Barnes's novels.

Pender also reminds us that, although the modernist novel first received critical recognition in Edmund Wilson's influential *Axel's Castle* (1931), it had to wait until after the war to become academicized, and (leaving aside Joseph Frank's important 1945 essay on "spatial form") that was only fully achieved around 1960 in a suite of studies by, in particular, Kenner, Graham Hough, Harry Levin, and Wayne Booth. In the process (and especially under Kenner's sway) academic literary criticism and teaching of the modernist novel became primarily interested in close reading and, as a result, in producing new interpretations or readings of a restricted set of preferred texts. Pender's case is that this set did not include Rodker, Loy, or Barnes because their writing works on different terms than the novels of now canonized novelists such as Gustave Flaubert, Henry James, Joyce, and Beckett. These writers were less interested in irony, more interested in feel and style, as well as in what Pender thinks of as writing as performance, than were the novelists who were mainly taught and written about.

It is a broadly persuasive, as well as a suggestive, thesis. What I especially like about it is the recognition it offers to the power—and limits—of academic English in its heyday. In the first half of the twentieth century, the power to canonize texts and writers came to lie primarily in the hands of English professors, and in this case in the hands of English professors who were grouping themselves around a new disciplinary formation—the sub-field of "modernism."

It's a thesis which suggests that, these days, to study modernist novelists (but not *just* modernist novelists) is to come at them through the history of their academization or non-academization, and I think that Pender is right in taking that route. Thus—to give another instance—in her trade-book account of Gertrude Stein (who, a bit puzzlingly, is absent from Pender's analysis), Francesca Wade describes in some detail the process through which Yale established and developed a Stein archive. That home of hers in the academy is now part of who Stein is.

When I say that Pender's account is suggestive I mean that, by virtue of its ambition and reach, it invites further research, elaboration, and correction. Of course this is not the place to begin that work here. But let me just make some supplementary comments first about the relation between academic literary criticism and the modernist novel and second about what style meant to early

literary criticism in the Eliotic mode. That last is relevant because, as I say, Pender argues that style was central to Loy's, Rodker's, and Barnes's works in a way that eluded the academic critics' then emphasis on form and tone.

The question of how and when the modernist novel was absorbed into academic literary criticism depends a bit on what counts as a "modernist novel." It is worth mentioning that it is usually supposed that the new critical mode first entered the academy in I. A. Richards's classes at Cambridge in 1925. There Richards taught one class on poetry—those were the classes that would lead to his pathbreaking book, *Practical Criticism* (1929)— and another on "The Modern Novel," in which he taught James, Joseph Conrad, D. H. Lawrence, and Joyce among other novelists, and which was explicitly directed against the kind of realism which James had also targeted.[1] It was out of the Cambridge circle drawn together by these classes that what may well be the first academic monograph (or really pamphlet) on a modernist novelist in the new critical mode was published, F. R. Leavis's *D. H. Lawrence* (1930). It was republished three years later in Leavis's essay collection, *For Continuity*, alongside an essay on Joyce's "Work in Progress" (i.e., *Finnegans Wake* in its serial form) under the title "Joyce and the Revolution of the Word," which positions itself against Joyce's aim of "developing the medium to its fullest," and which can be said to start one path along which academic criticism would distance itself from modernist experiments in prose. It would be rewarding to think about how this moment (and the reception of Lawrence more generally) connects to Pender's argument.

Of course Leavisite criticism, with its intense interest in James, Conrad, and Lawrence, failed to make much of an impression in the States, leaving the field of the "modernist novel" open for Kenner and Levin in particular. Kenner's criticism, which placed the novel within a particular technology (i.e., print) and then pictured that technology as nurturing particular values and literary modes, opened the way precisely to Joyce and Beckett being canonized as Pender has shown. Kenner's approach may well have been implicitly directed against Leavis, but whether or not that's the case, Leavis as well as Kenner belongs to the history of the new critical reception of the modernist novel.

[1] John Paul Russo, *I. A. Richards: His Life and Work* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 66.

As to style: famously Rémy de Gourmont's *Le Problem du style* (1914) played an important role in triggering Pound's and Eliot's critical approaches as well as leading to the lectures that John Middleton Murry delivered at Cambridge in 1922, which played a part in encouraging Manfred Forbes to invite Richards back to Cambridge and there to deliver those famous formative lectures. Murry's earlier lectures presented a detailed analysis of how (or whether) poetry and prose make different demands on style, and forthrightly appealed for fictional prose to receive the literary respect and attention it deserves.

This is not the place to say too much about de Gourmont's book, upon which Murry's lectures are loosely based, but William Marx is surely correct when he contends that it provided an impetus for criticism to turn to language, style, and form away from content, genre, and rhetoric.[2] The point to insist on here is that Gourmont's and Murry's attention to style formed a basis of modern literary criticism by providing it with a rationale for breaking with rhetoric and mere *exposition du texte*. (And in the English-speaking academy, books like Herbert Read's once widely taught *English Prose Style* [1928] reconciled the new literary criticism to the older protocols of "rhetoric.") If, as Pender rightly suggests, style was of less interest to the "new critics," as well as critics like Kenner and Booth, who focussed more on interpretation and narrative form (and thus neglected Loy, Rodker, and Barnes), there must be a story there whose stake her book helps us see more clearly.

[2] William Marx, *Naissance de la critique modern: la littérature selon Eliot et Valéry* (Arras: Artois Presses Université, 2002), p. 40.