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Review of Matthew Chambers, *Modernism, Periodicals, and Cultural Poetics* (2015)

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Reviews

Matthew Chambers, *Modernism, Periodicals, and Cultural Poetics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015). 205 pp. ISBN 978-1-137-54135-2

Matthew Chambers's (University of Lodz) *Modernism, Periodicals, and Cultural Poetics* offers a substantial contribution to increasing scholarship on the late modernist period. It follows a tendency in recent scholarship that argues for a new delineation of modernism, including a transitional period after 1939 when modernist work shifted from a predominantly aesthetic preoccupation, to a decidedly culturalist perspective. Chambers's book adds to this tendency by examining the culturalist shift as it transpired in literary periodicals with a specific focus on the role that poetry played in solidifying a coherent sense of English identity. The book underscores the importance of periodicals in understanding cultural shifts and the effect of such shifts in and on modernist literature. It is an important contribution to our understanding of periodical publications as harbingers, perpetuators, and challengers of tradition.

The concept of 'periodical formations' serves as the methodological foundation of the book. The introduction provides a thorough explanation of the term, which Chambers explains is inspired by Raymond Williams's concept of 'cultural formations' and refers to 'networks of exchange within and between different literary periodicals that condition the types of poetry published and the kinds of poetic discourse that come to cohere and predominate' (p. 2). In further defining the concept of a formation as a periodical formation, Chambers adds a level of specificity that suggests the decisive role periodicals played in this period of culturalist expression.

In addition to the introduction and conclusion, the book comprises four chapters. The chapters are arranged

semi-chronologically with some overlap in the time frame covered. Each chapter zooms in on a specific case study that traces the development of culturalist expression within the pages of literary periodicals. The first chapter, titled 'Standards of Criticism', focuses on the influence of I. A. Richards's *Principles of Literary Criticism* on the *Calendar of Modern Letters* (1926–29) and then, later, on *Scrutiny* (1932–53). The argument takes Edgell Rickword's review of Richards's work, in which a specific discourse around tradition, standards, and culture was introduced, as its starting point. Chambers interprets the development of such standards as evidence of 'reductive universalism', denoting the assumption of a homogeneous readership: 'the ability to apply these standards requires constructing the notion of a singular audience, and thus the *Calendar's* use of the term 'reader' becomes culturally coded to mean an English one' (p. 15). The chapter goes on to consider *Scrutiny* as the legacy of the *Calendar* and as a perpetuator of the same basic critical principles. While the relationship between these two publications is widely acknowledged, Chambers adds emphasis on the crucial role poetry played in *Scrutiny's* initial editorial practice, an aspect that is often overlooked and that speaks to the agency of poetry in constructing a sense of cohesive national identity.

The second chapter, titled 'The English in English Surrealism', moves into the 1930s and seeks to reconsider the notion of surrealism in Britain. Chambers emphasizes the effect that the belatedness of surrealism's arrival had, elucidating how the shift from an aesthetically-concerned modernism to a late modernist culturalism that was already in progress at the time inflected the movement. The case studies,

which focus on the periodicals *New Verse* (1932–39), *Left Review* (1934–38), and *Contemporary Poetry and Prose* (1936–37), stress the importance of the periodical formation as a concept that encompasses the instability and indefinite nature of ideas in process. By focusing on each periodical's specific engagement with surrealism, Chambers demonstrates how selective elements of surrealism were imported based on their potential to effect political or cultural change. In this way, the distinct character of Surrealism in Britain is underlined: it was not merely an import of the continental movement, but a selective form of Surrealism influenced by the transition towards a more nationalist-culturalist literary environment.

The third chapter, 'Popular Poetry and Mass-Observation', focuses on the Mass-Observation project, which aimed to collect everyday observations of the British people in order to identify a 'collective image'. Chambers focuses on an aspect of Mass-Observation that is often overlooked, namely the centrality of poetry for the observations. Two aspects are crucial to Chambers's revisionist approach in this chapter: the influence of I. A. Richards's writings, and the link between Coleridge's concept 'imagination' and Mass-Observation's key terms 'image' and 'coincidences'. From this perspective, Chambers exposes how Mass-Observation, a movement commonly thought of as exclusively anthropologically-focused, was initially engaged in poetic discourse, thus giving more cultural and political weight to the concept of poetry and the poetic. Periodicals provide the missing link in the Mass-Observation narrative as Chambers shows through his examination of the *New Statesman* (1913–), *New Verse*, *Left Review*, *New Writing* (1936–46), and *Life and Letters Today* (1928–50).

The fourth and final chapter, titled 'The Politics of Reception', adds a counterweight to the three preceding chapters by demonstrating how *Poetry*

(*London*) (1939–51), in contrast to the previously examined periodicals, resisted the idea of a homogeneous English readership. Much of the focus is on the role of Meary James Tambimuttu as editor of the publication. His 'Letters' section, which opened most of the issues, served as a space to denounce what Tambimuttu described as 'objective reporter' poetry; or, as Chambers explains, poetry produced under the influence of the culturalist turn (pp. 109–10). Like other research on *Poetry (London)*, Chambers stresses the importance of Welsh writing to the periodical's program. But rather than see *Poetry (London)* predominantly as an outlet for the rise of Anglo-Welsh literature, Chambers reads the periodical as a challenge to insular Englishness in a universal sense. Anglo-Welsh poetry was simply an important tool employed by Tambimuttu to pose this challenge. According to Chambers, Tambimuttu's project ultimately failed because of its catholicity. And because this formation opposed the dominant culturalist tendency, it was never able to establish itself with any permanence.

The wealth of information covered in Chambers's book is ambitious: each chapter zeroes in on case studies featuring a complex periodical formation, both bringing home the centrality of periodicals in facilitating cultural change, and illustrating why periodical publications are quintessential resources for examining how cultural, political, and societal changes occur. The book's strength lies in its ability to trace cultural and political tendencies diachronically. While Chambers's book makes a valuable contribution to the growing mass of late-modernist research, it also signals that there is more to be done in this area while also confirming that periodical studies offers a fruitful approach to this period of transition.

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