Re-Covering Modernism: Pulps, Paperbacks, and the Prejudice of Form (review)

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books to review or for new resources to highlight are welcome. Please contact Barbara Green at green.15@nd.edu.

David M. Earle, *Re-Covering Modernism: Pulps, Paperbacks, and the Prejudice of Form*. Burlington: Ashgate, 2009. Pp. vii, 246. $99.95 (cloth).

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Adding his voice to the chorus of critics in the last two decades who have sought to debunk the notion that high modernism's relation to popular culture was exclusively antagonistic, Earle documents the existence of what he calls "a popular avant-garde" in mass print culture from the 1920s through the 1960s. Poking through the "literary trash" of the first half of the twentieth century, he examines fiction and reprint magazines of the teens and twenties, interwar pulp magazines, and paperbacks from the 1950s and 1960s—texts that have, as a general rule, been preserved only by pop-culture collectors, not libraries (6–7). Earle insists on the significance of material print culture itself, attending carefully to dust jackets and advertisements as well as to narratives themselves. His goal is to suggest a populist history of modernism, which he finds "on the newsstand, in the drugstore, over the counter" (5).

Earle is at his best when he writes as a pop-culture archivist. He traces the dimensions of a vibrant and influential print culture that embodied capitalism in some of the worst possible ways—in its disposability, its relentless commercialism, its reliance on stereotypes of race and gender—yet he also showcases the creative energy, stylistic innovation, trenchant humor, and cultural critique that can be found in these mass-produced texts. The book's thirty-five black and white illustrations are striking and, I suspect, will prove useful in the classroom for instructors seeking new ways to contextualize modernism. They effortlessly make Earle's point about the interpenetration of the pulps and high modernism; simply seeing the tawdry covers designed for novels by Faulkner and Lawrence, or the Nazi butcher glaring from the cover of the magazine in which a Joyce story appeared,

forces us to reconsider some of our assumptions about the province and venues of modernism.

In the introduction and throughout, Earle takes modernist critics to task for focusing too single-mindedly on "the little magazine, manuscripts, and first editions, rather than reprint magazines and literary digests, reprint and circulating library hardback editions, pulp magazines, and paperbacks" (3). He chides literary historians interested in mass culture for turning so often to non-print forms, such as film, while virtually ignoring the cheap print market. Earle contends that with the exception of hardboiled fiction, which has received some attention because it shares more obvious similarities with traditional modernist texts, pulp modernism has been ignored at least in part because it undermines the standard understanding of modernist work "based upon difficulty and rarefied forms" (15). His book, packed with examples of how modernist authors appeared in and profited from the pulps, combines telling details about the publishing industry and its impact on authorial careers with sweeping claims about the pulps' significance to modernism. Earle finds modernist themes (bodies in tension with the forces of mechanization and industrialization, women resisting restrictive gender norms, challenges to traditional moral codes, fascination with and horror of war) and even expressive strategies (futurist catch phrases, fragmented narrative elements, preoccupation with visuality) in popular narratives. He also chronicles several instances of highly regarded modernist writers who were published and sometimes even aggressively marketed in mass print culture forms. This modernism, overall, was more friendly to the masses, Earle contends, than the experimental writings of the modernists whose inscrutability became central to their value, particularly as the new profession of literary criticism took shape around them. (That doesn't stop him, however, from celebrating the pulp superstar Harry Stephen Keeler, whose absurdist, coincidence-driven, and shifting point-of-view narratives are paralleled here to Joyce's methodology in *Finnegan's Wake* [141–49].)

After the introduction, the book is divided into three long chapters. The first considers a neglected venue for modernism as it recounts the history of *The Smart Set*, a periodical that Earle views as an influential hybrid of realism, elite modernism, and popular literature. Under George Jean Nathan and H. L. Mencken's editorship from the mid-teens through the early 1920s, *The Smart Set* sought a mainstream readership, publishing work by modernists such as Joyce, Ezra Pound, Djuna Barnes, Eugene O'Neill, and Joseph Conrad, as well as fiction by popular

authors who wrote for the pulps (28–29). Earle's account is sensitive to Mencken's influential role as a promoter of a specific version of modernist writing—less stylistically challenging, more focused on home-grown realism—a version that writers like Hemingway rejected in order to establish their own reputations as part of a more European movement associated with the expatriates in Paris (29–36). He compares the exclusive tone of the well-known modernist little magazine *The Little Review*, which at one point included "Making No Compromise With Public Taste" on its masthead, to the *Smart Set*'s more flippant tag line, "One Civilized Reader is Worth a Thousand Boneheads" (38–39). *The Smart Set*, Earle says, paved the way for the "peppy pulp mags" that followed in its wake and thus merits a place in literary history as "a progenitor of popular modernism" (58–59). Earle also shows the interdependence of various elements of the publishing market; *The Smart Set* depended for revenue on *The Parisienne*, a racy magazine that Mencken and Nathan started to support the floundering (but more serious) *Smart Set*.

The second chapter argues that pulp magazines should be viewed as a popular form of modernism. Earle points out that the rise of the pulps—sensational all-fiction magazines, published on cheap pulpwood paper, produced for a popular audience, often sporting lurid, hypersexualized cover art—paralleled the rise of modernism: they were perfected right before World War I and peaked in popularity in the interwar period. Reliant on newsstand sales rather than advertising, the pulps sought to grab readers' attention in the most aggressive ways possible. At their most unrestrained, Earle writes, they were "misogynistic, xenophobic, violent, yet stylistically exuberant" (72). He describes the specialization of the pulp market: although detective fiction is the most familiar, magazines also specialized in football, railroads, romance, adventure, gangsters, and so on. In a section titled "Pulp Feminism," Earle shows that pulps had many female readers, writers, and editors, despite what is generally viewed as the masculine bias of the genre. In part because of the stigma of reading pulps—they often appear as a symbol of degeneration in modernist literature—it is difficult to pinpoint readership exactly, and the race and gender of writers is also challenging to ascertain, since most writers wrote under pseudonyms. Still, Earle makes a strong case for women's underacknowledged participation in the industry. His overview of the pulps also includes a thoughtful discussion of black-authored pulp fiction published in the Pittsburgh *Courier*, and he makes an interesting point about Richard

Wright's fiction as a form that "stands between the populist pulps and elite modernism" (125).

The third chapter takes up what Earle calls "the innate sensationalism of high-modernism as an entry point for a popular audience" (15) by examining the marketing of modernist authors in the paperback industry of 1940s and 1950s. He argues for the significance of visuality in paperback modernism, and he calls our attention to several telling moments in the history of modernist publishing, offering yet more evidence that modernism was not as exclusive (in its production or its consumption) as the academics who initially enshrined it made it seem. Those moments include a 1937 pulp magazine's enthusiastic recommendation for readers to check out the mid-air sex scene in Faulkner's *Pylon* (196); T. S. Eliot writing a preface to the 1957 edition of Charles-Louis Phillippe's *Bubu of Montparnasse*, which promised to give readers graphic details about a young woman's life as a prostitute (151–54); and James Joyce's story "The Gallants" being promoted in a 1961 *Men's Magazine* with the tagline, "She made love willingly, but he—and his pal—wanted more" (1). In a not fully satisfying analysis of the gender politics of such incidents, Earle suggests that pulp modernism's reliance on the objectification of women parallels the androcentrism of elite modernism. There is more to be said here; the marketing of female sexuality and its visual representation on many of the cover illustrations reprinted here merit closer study. Yet, given the ambitious sweep of the book, it's clear that Earle has not set out to do such analysis; he is trying to argue for the value of a print form that has been so wholly dismissed that he spends much of the book defending its basic value to studies of modernism, rather than developing highly nuanced analyses of complex issues like the status of female embodiment in the pulps. This chapter also includes an incisive analysis of Conrad's use of the popular form of the adventure story and a discussion of Lawrence's vexed relationship with the pulp paperback market. Earle concludes with thoughtful case studies of the role of pulps in the careers of Faulkner and Hemingway, noting that in the 1940s, before his work became canonical, Faulkner was read mostly in popular paperback form (202), and pointing out Hemingway's status as a sort of pin-up figure for men's magazines (216).

The chapters themselves are rather baggy; the book would have benefited from a tighter organization, as well as better editing, which could have reduced the spelling and grammatical errors that mar the book's prose. This reader regrets to observe that these minor errors give the book,

in small measure, some of the slapdash production values associated with the pulps themselves. Yet, overall, *Re-Covering Modernism* is a significant achievement: it opens the door to the study of a print form that, as Earle convincingly demonstrates, has much to tell us about twentieth-century reading practices, the impact and circulation of modernist narratives, and the possibilities for invention within the fiction factories of capitalism.

Matthew Rubery, *The Novelty of Newspapers: Victorian Fiction After the Invention of the News*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. Pp. 248. $65.00 (hardcover).

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In this short but rich study, Matthew Rubery charts the rise in popularity of the newspaper in nineteenth-century British culture. He is particularly interested in the newspaper's influence on the Victorian novel. Throughout, Rubery "challenges the assumed divide between the period's literature and journalism" (4). His discussion of the newspaper's influence is structured by a clever, two-part division. The first half of the book talks about the newspaper's front-page stories, including the shipping news and the personal advertisements. The second half of the book looks at the inner pages, including the leading article, personal interview, and the foreign correspondence. Both book parts focus on the newspaper's powerful ability to draw the private and public spheres closer together. The Victorian novel, Rubery adds, recognized the newspaper's influence upon the private and public lives of readers: "What all novelistic representations recorded by this book share is an interest in capturing how the supposedly impersonal news can directly affect the emotional lives of its readers" (13). And the newspaper, in turn, gave readers an opportunity to publicize their private thoughts and selves, be it through emotional responses to the shipwreck column or the public display of the personal interview. By the end of the nineteenth century, Rubery concludes, "there is no getting beyond the reach of the press" (168), and there is no clear-cut separation between the Victorian novel and the newspaper.