

12-1-2023

Rebecca Beasley, *Russomania: Russian Culture and the Creation of British Modernism, 1881–1922*

Francesca Mancino

Follow this and additional works at: <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/jwls>

Recommended Citation

Mancino, Francesca (2023) "Rebecca Beasley, *Russomania: Russian Culture and the Creation of British Modernism, 1881–1922*," *The Journal of Wyndham Lewis Studies*: Vol. 11, Article 13.

Available at: <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/jwls/vol11/iss1/13>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by TigerPrints. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Journal of Wyndham Lewis Studies by an authorized editor of TigerPrints. For more information, please contact kokeefe@clemson.edu.

Russomania:
Russian Culture and the Creation of
British Modernism, 1881–1922

BY REBECCA BEASLEY

Reviewed by Francesca Mancino

Published by Oxford University Press in 2020, Rebecca Beasley's *Russomania: Russian Culture and the Creation of British Modernism, 1881–1922*¹ is a necessary, definitive study of Russian literature's permeation into British literary culture. *Russomania* is a sustained balance of cultural biography, criticism, and literary genealogy that does not overwhelm the reader in spite of its breadth. Beasley weaves British high modernists—namely Katherine Mansfield, Virginia Woolf, and Dorothy Richardson—with figures who straddle the Edwardian and modernist periods, like Joseph Conrad, H. G. Wells, Ford Madox Ford, and D. H. Lawrence. Others such as H. D., Ezra Pound, and Wyndham Lewis remain mostly peripheral to the text, as Beasley's principal aspiration is to highlight the several Russophile strands of modernism. For H. D., Pound, and Lewis, the strand of the "simple life" tended to remain on the outliers of their writings as opposed to the forefront (93–94).

We can better understand "the simple life" if we turn to fin de siècle print culture, where "aspects of a simple life literary culture" serve as just one aspect of the Russophile strand of modernism (111). Beasley is adamant in maintaining caution, here, since she does not propose that Russian literature entirely or directly influenced "simple life literature" (112). Instead, she underlines how the "simple life" manifested in modernist literature in several ways, including in an "explicit Tolstoyism to a socialism that criticizes Russian autocracy," a tempered fascination with "rural life and folk art" that may be traced to "British sources" echoing Tolstoyism, and "Northern European peasant arts, fables, and folklore" (112). Lewis's early travel narratives are one example that Beasley cites. While it is unclear whether those writings are suggested as depicting "an emphatically English narrator confronted by a Dostoevskian world" or "a Chekhovian narrator confronted by a Dostoevskian world," the possibility of this influence in Lewis's work is nonetheless captivating (425). Indeed, the ramifications of modernist Dostoevskian worlds highlight a "distance between the narrator and the world they encounter [that] results in authorial comment on an early modernist worldview, a comment that can be tragic or, more often, satiric" (425). Given the highly satirical nature of many of Lewis's works (i.e. as

he stated overtly in *Satire and Fiction* [1930]), Beasley misses a key opportunity to sharpen her argument in regard to the linkage between Lewisian satire and Russophile literature.

The majority of Lewisian discussion in *Russomania* concerns Lewis's relationship to Ford and *The English Review*. His and Pound's writings in *The English Review* left Ford hopeful that his periodical would sustain cultural significance. Their presence in the review was a shift away from the "Edwardian" conception of English national identity" (181). Beasley asserts that instead of viewing *The English Review* in terms of "canonical modernism," or the emergence of the "younger future modernists," we should assess Lawrence, Pound, and Lewis's involvement in terms of their writing styles (183). Ford then categorized writers into two categories: artists and propagandists (36). Where Pound falls within the former, Lewis embodies the latter. Beasley argues how "Lewis's work should be seen as belonging to what Ford described as the school of 'factual literature,' written by 'propagandists,' which I suggested were also represented by Bennett, Chekhov, Dostoevsky, Lawrence, Tolstoy, and Wells, and placed in the *Review* against the school Ford favoured, that of 'imaginative literature' written by 'artists,' represented by Conrad, Ford, France, Hudson, Hunt, James, and Lee" (430). Further, "the canon Pound presents in the *Little Review* in 1917, eight years later, is more recognizably the canon of high modernism and, at this time, Lewis appears to be central to the favoured group" (430). Notably, Beasley advises that *Russomania* is not primarily a study of influence in spite of Turgenev, Chekhov, Dostoyevsky, and Tolstoy's reception among the aforementioned writers. Additionally, though she maintains that Russian modernism precedes British modernism, her study does not provide a Russian response to Russian modernism, as the British reception is focalized. Because her study instead addresses the Britain's synthesis of Russophile literature, *Russomania* leaves room for how Russian authors who wrote at the same time as Lewis and Pound—such as Andrey Bely and Marina Tsvetaeva—received and/or responded to the same works.

While we may associate Lewis in terms of Vorticism, *The English Review* held his travel stories, presenting an "avant-garde project to reform English culture and literature" in the May, June, and August 1909 issues of the periodical (181). Considered by Ford to be a propagandist, Lewis appeared as a sort of savior to him when they met for the first time. This meeting is chronicled as having occurred after Ford prayed to St. Anthony for "a good contribution" to appear for publication in his review (182). Upon this prayer, Lewis appeared. Yet, Ford mistakenly viewed Lewis as Russian. Because of this, Ford initially said to Lewis, "I don't want any Tsar's diaries. I don't want any Russian revelations. I don't want to hear or smell any Slavs" (182). Subsequently,

Beasley describes Lewis as having “save[d]” Ford by “providing good writing for the *Review*, rather than a new (avant-garde or modernist) kind of writing that will ‘put English culture and Britain at the forefront of Europe’” (183). This point remains arguable given that Beasley refers to Lewis as a young modernist as if to distinguish him from Ford’s generation in terms of literary style. Thus, a discussion, albeit brief, on Lewis’s authorial maturation would be apt here in order to illustrate this quasi-contradiction in *Russomania*, if Beasley suggests that Lewis’s writings in *The English Review* reveal few qualities we now consider to be characteristically “modernist.”

Ford, however, did not view Lewis as a grand tour de force: “though [he] respected the quality of Lewis’s writing, he did not see it as ‘imaginative literature,’ the type of writing that he thought would improve British culture, like James’s” (183). Rather, Lewis’s own thoughts of his writing reinforce Ford’s categorization of him as a propagandist rather than an imaginative writer. Lewis voiced, “‘What people want is me, not you. They want to see me. A Vortex. To liven them up. You and Conrad had the idea of concealing yourself when you wrote. I display myself all over the page. In every word’” (183). We see Vorticism again when Beasley makes an astute observation that dovetails with Tyrus Miller’s assessment of “pure corporeal automatism” in modernist literature (426). Such “obsessive depictions” include Lewis’s “puppets,” Djuna Barnes’s “performers,” and Samuel Beckett’s “mirthless laughter” (426). This concerns a recurring metaphor of “life as theatrical performance” in late modernism, which is seen through the vision of “depersonalization and [the] deauthentication of life in society” (426). Lewis’s *The Art of Being Ruled* (1926) is used as an example to support her argument, as “his sources include Mikhail Farbman’s *After Lenin* and Huntly Carter’s *The New Theatre and Cinema of Soviet Russia*” (427). In tracing how Lewis exercises this metaphor throughout his corpus, Beasley notes that he had

first used that metaphor to describe Russia nine years earlier. . . . Lewis never visited Russia, but between May 1917 and May 1918, while in France with the 330th Siege Battery of the Royal Garrison Artillery, he and Pound collaborated on a series of what Lewis entitled “Letters from Petrograd,” published as “Imaginary Letters” in the New York-based *Little Review*, where Pound was foreign editor. Lewis took on the persona of a British soldier and Russophile, William Bland Burn, stationed in Petrograd during the first months of 1917.

Further, we can first see how Lewis “introduced the characterization of Russia as a stage” in a late draft of Burn’s first letter (427). Here, he writes, “Much occurs here of the strangest. The Russian factor is quite curious in this game. It

is really, much more than other countries, a theatre to itself, carrying on a play of quite a different description” (427).

Beasley then briefly details Lewis’s much-discussed political history before reinforcing the notion that “Lewis valued Russian literature highly, particularly the work of Dostoyevsky, and in the first issue of *Blast* (1914) Russia had been presented to British artists as an example of a great ‘Northern Art,’ whose climate and landscape produced ‘extraordinary acuity of feeling and intelligence’” (429). Burn (i.e., Lewis) writes of how “living in Russia ‘is not like living among their books. Nor are the people around you as prepossessing as the fictitious nation. But where would art be if they were? . . . it is only the books that matter’” (429). In turn, Beasley leaves room to delve further into the Russophile influences in Lewis’s work—since other writings aside from “Imaginary Letters” are fruitful in Russian references. In his fictional piece *Self Condemned* (1954), the words “Russia” and “Russian” appear almost fifty times, but this title—that mentions Tolstoy and holds a character referred to as “the Russian”—is not mentioned in *Russomania*.

Since Beasley’s study is not about Lewis—or Ford or Pound, for that matter—it would be unfair to say any unexplored Lewisian paths are weaknesses of *Russomania*. Rather, the aforementioned places in *Russomania* that could be expanded in terms of Lewis’s writing supports how there is space in Lewisian studies to further explore his portrayal of Russia throughout his corpus.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Rebecca Beasley, *Russomania: Russian Culture and the Creation of British Modernism, 1881-1922* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 560 pages.