

David LeHardy Sweet, *Avant-Garde Orientalism: The Eastern 'Other' in Twentieth-Century Travel Narrative and Poetry* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 318 pp.

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Scholars normally treat travel writing as a nonexperimental genre. As a result, there is little overlap between scholarship on travel writing and studies of avant-garde writers. David Sweet usefully joins these topics in the first book to focus on avant-garde travel writing by Western authors about what used to be called the "Orient." In doing so, Sweet goes against received wisdom about avant-garde Orientalism, declaring that there has been too much "invective and abuse" from "the outraged academic" about the "negative ideological functions" of avant-garde writing about Asia and North Africa. "Such an attitude," Sweet continues, "has resulted in the neglect of literary works that actually present a more constructive engagement with the inter-cultural relations between East and West" (7). Sweet draws attention to these overlooked texts, arguing that the aesthetic experimentations of the avant-garde can profoundly challenge Orientalist ideas about travel. His study is a valuable contribution to postcolonial studies, comparative literature, and, more generally, transnational literary studies and the ethics of cross-cultural engagements.

Sweet approaches his subject with care and nuance; he is not a polemicist and does not simply set out to exonerate writers wrongfully smeared. He makes it clear that the avant-garde is fragmented, prone to contradictions, and ideologically hard to pin down. Consequently, "avant-gardists . . . are just as likely to self-destruct as to undermine their opponents" (74). Sweet recognizes that "avant-garde principles of formal innovation . . . reinforce traditional orientalist discursive practice while also, at crucial moments, radically altering it" (2). Thus, Sweet is not trying to replace critical readings with positive ones but rather to recuperate visions of radical acceptance within moments that also reassert stereotypes.

Sweet grounds his argument in detailed discussions of specific writers' experimental literary techniques. His close readings show how writers convey the experience of being radically open to differences across cultures through a number of experimental techniques, including incongruous juxtaposition, fragmentation, valorization of the absurd, surreal visions, ironic exaggeration and excess, and flouted expectations. Overall, Sweet concludes, "Through avant-garde practice, an aesthetic of diversity becomes an aesthetic of simultaneous contrasts" (282). A majority of the writers who Sweet studies are midcentury, at the height of their activity roughly between 1930 and 1970. Sweet gives appropriate historical context for the anticolonial movements that were gaining steam at the time of many of these writers' reflections on them. He features such canonical writers

as Allen Ginsberg, Octavio Paz, and André Gide, as well as lesser-known ones like Frederic Prokosch and Henri Michaux. Sweet's wide-ranging setup and genealogy of avant-garde Orientalism also includes writers not typically thought of as directly related to Orientalism, like Kafka. His reading of "In the Penal Colony" as taking place in an implicitly "Oriental" setting is especially impressive, fresh, and insightful.

Intriguingly, Sweet boldly seeks to enact avant-garde practices in his own scholarship. He says that his book "should not be construed as an irrevocable unity but a series of contrasts or revelatory accidents" (20). In keeping with this avant-garde premise, Sweet's goal is to engage in a playful "free-form hermeneutic investigation, not to prove a particular ideological point" (17), thus allowing him to pursue "multiple itineraries" rather than fixating on a specific argument (20). Such a disclaimer makes the reviewer's task difficult because it implicitly preempts assessments based on traditional scholarly criteria like focus, clarity, and internal consistency. Sweet's disavowal notwithstanding, he does maintain his thesis; in his conclusion, he again declares that "despite the apparent aggressiveness of its gaze and its interpretive strategies, the Avant-garde welcomes Otherness with a rough grace, a kind of brusque, accidental integrity" (272).

Most of Sweet's examples strongly support his argument for the overlooked emancipatory dimensions of avant-garde Orientalist travel writing. The chapter on writing about India is especially well-done and persuasive. Sweet shows how sudden reversals of perspective unsettle the writer's subjectivity by having the gaze of the native being returned. The Western writer's feeling of being scrutinized disrupts the imperialist gaze, even though the writers admittedly still rely on colonialist privileges of being a high-status foreign traveler. Furthermore, this reversal transfers the "inscrutability attributed to the Oriental [to] that of an entirely modern, artificial situation attaching itself, parasitically, to an Asian setting" (217). Here Sweet's examination of Prokosch is especially well done, valuably explicating the depth and craft of an overlooked author.

Sweet's chapter on writing about Egypt and Palestine is uneven by comparison. Of the six writers he covers, three come out looking like misfits in his argument by being found to be irredeemably racist (Jean Cocteau), pro-imperialist (Lawrence Durrell), or not truly avant-garde or hailing from a Western power (Amitav Ghosh). Although Sweet's methodology emphasizes freedom and ambiguity, these particular assessments do not leave much room for the sympathetic reading of disruptive aesthetics the book purports to be doing. Given that this chapter already has more sections than any other, it would have been defensible to leave out those writers who are less relevant to the argument. (Alternatively, Sweet could have regrouped such examples into a separate chapter or section on avant-garde writers who explicitly contrast from the main line of his argument.)

Although Sweet's thesis is clear, his open-ended pursuit of "multiple itineraries" leads to diffuse summations of his object of study. He describes the avant-garde as promoting a vision of a "mystic harmony of cultures" (115) but says on the next page that in avant-garde practice, "all values are simultaneously expressed and canceled through locally inflected refractions of meaning . . . sensing their own disconnectedness even as they seek interpretive plausibility" (116). Elsewhere, Sweet writes of an "avant-garde hermeneutics of difference . . . whereby difference is both affirmed and overcome" (199). Since he views the avant-garde "not as a unified movement or agenda but as a historical tendency toward formal experimentation" (75), the gaps between these divergent generalizations are perhaps understandable. Still, the paradoxical definitiveness of each of these different takeaways leaves one wondering: do avant-garde representations tend toward a synthesis of disparate cultures, a recognition of differences that are never absorbed, both at once, or one or the other at different times? Along these lines, it would have been worthwhile for Sweet to offer more sustained theorizing about how avant-garde travel writing tends to configure cultural difference.

Also, it is hard to tell how Sweet views the avant-garde's relationship to modernism. Sweet calls "[t]he postcolonial tendency to equate the Avant-garde . . . with high Modernism" a "mistake" (54), contending that the avant-garde owes more to Romantic effusiveness than modernist discipline. But elsewhere, Sweet says, "I am arguing that avant-garde strategies constitute a modernist anticipation of postmodern practice" (96). Additionally, in his Introduction, Sweet creates exigence by saying, "insufficient attention has been paid to the role of experimental Modernism in representing the East to the West" in a context that implies that "experimental Modernism" is the same as the avant-garde (7). It would have been helpful for Sweet either to clarify these points or simply to note how the avant-garde is modernist or not modernist without staking a claim as to whether the avant-garde is a part of modernism or not.

Readers should prepare themselves for dense writing. Six-line sentences are not uncommon, threatening to lose even patient readers in a maze of subordinate clauses and promiscuous punctuation. And the vocabulary is overwrought; one wonders, for instance, why Sweet calls groundbreaking practices "innovatory" when "innovative" would do. But Sweet's verbal excess could, again, be a deliberate enactment of avant-garde techniques in his own study of them.

Sweet's provocative choice to participate in the avant-garde strategies he studies is his way of paying homage to them. Most of these writers would probably not want to be analyzed to death by academics eager to categorize them. In this sense, Sweet's study

succeeds on its own terms. Overall, it gives us a lot of deeply thoughtful, well-done close readings that successfully cast avant-garde Orientalism in a new, more sympathetic light.