

MODERNIST HERESIES

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Damon Franke. *Modernist Heresies: British Literary History, 1883–1924*. Columbus: Ohio State U. P., 2008. Pp. xx, 258. ISBN 978-0-8142-1074-1 (hb). US\$47.95.

The editor of the Russell journal summed up *Modernist Heresies: British Literary History, 1883–1924* with his usual brevity during a recent conversation: “The first part is about Russell and the rest of it isn’t.” In fact the first two chapters are only somewhat concerned with Russell, since he figures as part of the Heretical Cambridge scene with which Damon Franke opens this study, but,

after a fleeting appearance of both Russells, Bertie and Dora, in the opening pages of Chapter 3, Bertie is not heard from again.

Franke, who teaches English at the University of Southern Mississippi, has set himself an ambitious task, the scope of which is not fully captured in this book's title. The selection of no fewer than ten subject headings in the cataloguing data for this study—headings ranging from “Modernism (Literature)” through “English Literature”, “Religion and Literature”, “Heresies, Christian”, and “Paganism in Literature”—provides the wary reader with some forewarning of its breadth. The author's focus is on nothing less than the emergence and development of modernism in England, using the rise and demise of what Franke terms “heresy” as his barometer. Nor does the ascribed date range, 1883–1924, prove much more accurate; in one of the most persuasive segments of the book, the *After Words*, Franke extends his examination, first into the 1930s and then as far as 1949, the year that Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was published.

Selecting as his starting point the 1883 blasphemy trial of G. W. Foote, the editor of *The Freethinker*, at which the right to attack “even the fundamentals of religion” was enshrined in English law, providing that “the decencies of controversy” are observed (p. 10), Franke argues that this decision made possible “intellectual and literary forms of heresy which questioned the principles of religion” (*ibid.*). His use of the term “heresy” for his wide ranging survey of philosophical and linguistic as well as literary opinion, provoked pause in this reader. The *Oxford English Dictionary*, the first edition of which appeared the year after Foote's heresy trial, provides a primary definition of heresy as follows:

Theological or religious opinion or doctrine maintained in opposition, or held to be contrary, to the “catholic” or orthodox doctrine of the Christian Church, or, by extension, to that of any church, creed, or religious system, considered as orthodox.

It is only through an extended definition of heresy that the door opens to allow Franke's highly variable use of the term: “Opinion or doctrine in philosophy, politics, science, art, etc., at variance with those generally accepted as authoritative” (*OED Online*, 2008). As will be demonstrated, aspects of thought which the less adventurous might prefer to call agnosticism, paganism or even atheism, are subsumed into the wide-ranging scope of this provocative study.

The Cambridge Heretics, the group of which Russell was an Honorary Member, provides Franke with both his heretical cornerstone and his book's opening chapters. In a skilfully contextualized examination, Franke documents the group's Michaelmas 1909 genesis in the shadow, or perhaps in the intellectual light, of the Chawner Affair—the Master of Emmanuel's public expression of his personal loss of religious faith. Its first chairman was C. M. Picciotto, but it was its first secretary, C. K. Ogden, a newly arrived Magdalene College under-

graduate, who was to prove the group's guiding genius.

Franke argues convincingly that the group, which included Bernard Shaw, J. M. Keynes, I. A. Richards and G. E. Moore, as well as Russell, in its membership roster, has suffered puzzling scholarly neglect, particularly when compared with the Apostles, its closest counterpart. Although Franke's claim that the Heretics "effectively dominated the intellectual climate in Britain from the end of the Edwardian period through the height of the modernist era" (p. 25) might seem somewhat inflated, his careful research into its origins and early years provides some compelling evidence to support it. These Heretics, in true agnostic fashion, proclaimed that "the object of the society be to promote discussion on problems of religion, philosophy and art". More heretically, their laws dictated that "the Members consist of those who reject traditional a priori methods of approaching religious questions." Associate membership was extended to the women of Newnham and Girton Colleges. Early meetings were held in Ogden's rooms and, circumventing the required chaperone, Dora Black would leave Girton and "bicycle off there ... with a most agreeable feeling of defiance and liberation" (p. 48).

By 1911 Ogden had succeeded Picciotto as the President of the Heretics, his predecessor having resigned following his abandonment of heresy in favour of a mystical form of Roman Catholicism. The rationalists, under Ogden's leadership and with the mentoring of such honorary members as Francis Cornford and G. M. Trevelyan, escaped Picciotto's fate. In his address to the first of the group's 1911–12 meetings (p. 47), Cornford presented his own definition of a heretic as "one who thinks that theology can be remodelled" and reminded his faithful that should they be successful, their heresy will become "the orthodoxy of the next generation" (p. 60). Following addresses by both Chesterton and Shaw in 1911, Russell appeared on the same 1911–12 list of meetings (p. 47), observing to Ottoline Morrell prior to speaking on Bergson in March 1912, "the whole world seems to be coming tonight" (p. 66). In another address to the society, just before war, Russell expounded on "Mysticism and Logic" (p. 63), recognizing the presence of these contrary impulses in the lives and works of the world's greatest philosophers and thereby suggesting their existence in his own. Franke recognizes and documents Ogden's organizational genius (p. 70) which manifested itself in securing for the Heretics some of the best-known intellectuals in England as speakers and honorary members; his reach extended to the Apostles and London's Bloomsburyites. G. E. Moore addressed the society five times between 1914 and 1925 (p. 70); Lytton Strachey, Clive Bell and Virginia Woolf all made their way to Cambridge. During World War I Ogden also became an influential editor, transforming *The Cambridge Magazine* from a narrow and predictable "house organ" into a source of uncensored information, both about foreign opinion concerning the war and on controversial topics first raised at meetings of the Heretics. Dora Black served as the Society's secretary

between 1917 and 1919 (p. 77), and Bertie and Dora jointly addressed the group on “Industrialism and Religion” in 1922. Franke argues that Ogden’s relocation to Bloomsbury in 1925 was a central cause of the Society’s demise; by 1932, following a decline into “vague humanism” (p. 92), it was formally dissolved. Ogden had not only distanced himself physically—his intellectual focus had shifted from the “fictions” of established religion to the creation and dissemination of Basic English. Franke summarizes Ogden’s transition: “As many of the modernists did in refining a school of thought, he eventually created his own orthodoxy and tried to control the ‘fictions’ inherent in the psychological dimension of language” (p. 83).

Part II of this study moves its focus to the “Modernist *Literary Heresies*” promised in its title. In his chapter on “Canonical Transformations”, Franke returns to the Shaw/Chesterton debate which had been played out, in part, at meetings of the Cambridge Heretics, using Shaw’s address as a springboard for the examination of heresy in his play, *Saint Joan* (1924). It was this play, with its “strangest possible compound of the modern and medieval”, which, Franke argues (p. 130), succeeded in “collapsing the opposition between heresy and saintliness”. In the same chapter Franke links James Joyce’s story “Clay” (c. 1904) with the recuperation of another burnt heretic, the sixteenth-century Italian philosopher, Giordano Bruno. In his chapter on “Literary Paganism” Franke examines both “heretical modernist” Walter Pater’s work on Renaissance paganism (*Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, 1873) and Thomas Hardy’s use of pagan ritual in *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* (1891), with more than sidelong glances at James Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* (1890). Despite the author’s confident command of his material and some vivid writing, this is the point at which the attention of the non-literary specialist may well start to wander. The intricate Hardy analysis, in particular, reveals its origins as an essay imported from a literary journal; carefully documented citations from the Druidic alphabet take us rather far from the heretical fields of Cambridge, if not from Tess’s heath.

The final section of Part II returns to more familiar territory: in “Fictions, Figurative Heresy, and the Roots of English” Franke links Pater and Hardy with the widespread contemporary interest in etymology, further connecting the study of the origins Indo-European languages with interest in comparative religion, as revealed in T. S. Eliot’s *The Wasteland* (1922) and E. M. Forster’s *A Passage to India* (1924). As well as weaving in discussion of the heretical in D. H. Lawrence’s *The Rainbow* (1915), Franke explores the central contribution of I. A. Richards, fellow Heretic and co-author with Ogden of *The Meaning of Meaning* (1923), to both the establishment of Cambridge’s new School of English and the study of literature during this period. Arguing that the Great War “dealt a death blow to faith in nonbelievers’ minds” (p. 175), Franke fails to mention the popularity of spiritualism and interest in the occult evident in England in the immediate post-war period. However, for Richards it was literature, rather than

faith or its spiritualist variants, which was “capable of saving us” since it is “a perfectly possible means of overcoming chaos” (p. 175).

The effort to overcome chaos, as Franke observes in his “After Words”, brings the author full circle back to Ogden. In the first part of this final chapter the author’s focus is on Ogden’s formulation of Basic English in the 1920s, an initiative which Franke links, in its “centripetal desire to impose order on language”, with Saussure’s earlier work on semiotics. In an illuminating and sure-footed discussion, based on extensive archival research in the Ogden papers at McMaster University, Franke traces the development of Basic and examines Ogden’s translations of passages from Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*, before he turns to the “betrayal of heresy” in the Newspeak of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Despite the gloom cast by the contradiction of the heretical impulse in the authoritarian “doublethink” of Orwell’s novel, Franke acknowledges the importance of Basic, with its emphasis on paraphrase, in exposing the workings of propaganda (p. 216). The Heretics, he suggests, had it right after all, and Franke is optimistic that even if the impulse is reinvented or subsumed in terms like “progressive politics”, “radical theology” or “deep ecology”, that heresy will survive.

Ogden casts a long shadow over this book, peering out at the reader from every chapter, wearing a variety of masks. Perhaps a more critical editor could have suggested making this study more cohesive by structuring it more explicitly around Ogden, tracing his intellectual evolution and career from the agnostic Cambridge Heretics to the ultimately disastrous consequences of Winston Churchill’s plan to include Basic English in development of “the empires of the mind”.¹ Such a shift would have probably entailed a more overtly philosophical/linguistic emphasis and required a more accurate subtitle, more precisely identifying the work as a study of British *cultural* rather than exclusively *literary* history. Franke would also have been well served by more sharp-eyed copy-editing; a work of this substance from a distinguished university press should be free of the frequent typographical errors evident here (examples: p. 26, “dab a little in heresy” for dabble; p. 59, “sought consul” for counsel; p. 92, “cache” for caché; p. 211, election of “1946” for 1945; index, Ogden for Ogden). However, such cavils aside, this is a stimulating and learned work which deserves to be read by all who are interested in the cultural context of the early twentieth century. Franke has convincingly identified some of the primary roots of modernism in the heretical thinkers of early twentieth-century England.

¹ Speech at Harvard in 1943, cited on p. 211.
