



## Children's Literature and the Avant-Garde

### Book review of Elina Druker and Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer, eds. *Children's Literature and the Avant-Garde*

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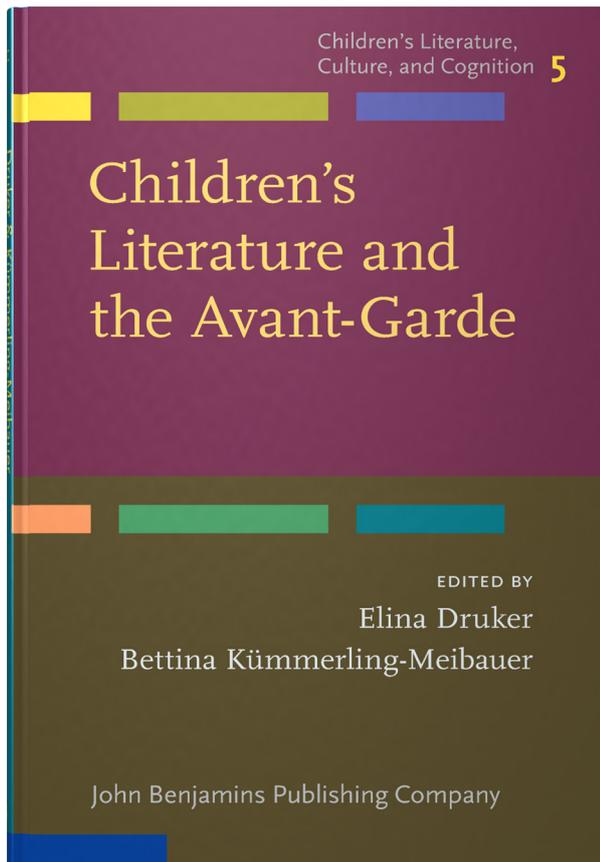
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## Children's Literature and the Avant-Garde

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Compared with books for adults, almost any children's book seems experimental: Children's books include pictures that have almost disappeared from modern adult literature, and the relation between text and images is often sophisticated and unconventional. Children's books show awareness of the materiality of the book format, especially books for small children often play with the size of pages, different kinds of paper and typography, and the sequence from one page to the next. And also in terms of content, the point of view and general approach is often unconventional, if not anarchic and anti-authoritarian. No wonder many artists enjoy creating children's

books, either on their own or in the kind of inter-media collaboration that is one of the hallmarks of the avant-garde movements of the twentieth century.

In this light, the relation between children's literature and the avant-garde seems evident, indeed curiously underexplored by scholars of children's literature. So the anthology on *Children's Literature and the Avant-Garde* edited by Elina Druker and Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer is to be welcomed.

The volume is a result of an international conference on this subject in 2012. This origin is still noticeable in a certain heterogeneity of approach and terminology among the contributors, some of whom seem somewhat unfamiliar with the concept of the avant-garde. And the selection of examples hardly amounts to a total view of the field, but is rather an initial mapping of a very rich subject.

The anthology is chronologically organised. The first part, "Vanguard tendencies since the beginning of the twentieth century", starts out with an article by Marilyn S. Olson on John Ruskin and the mutual relation between children's literature and the avant-garde prior to the twentieth century. As Jerome J. McGann has demonstrated in *Black Riders: The Visible Language of Modernism* (1993), the British Arts and Crafts Movement, headed by William Morris and strongly influenced by the art critic John Ruskin, is a good starting point from which to trace experimental book art of the twentieth century, since they pioneered what is now called artists' books: books that are not *about* art, but are themselves intermedial works of art. McGann's pioneering work—curiously not referred to by Olson—has the further merit of pointing out not only the pictorial side of the Arts and Crafts books, but the entire interrelation between layout, pictures, text, and typographical design: the "black riders" of his title are the printed letters

on the page. From this perspective, the textual and linguistic experiments of the avant-garde can be traced all the way to, for instance, the children's books by Gertrude Stein and other twentieth-century avant-garde writers such as the post-war concrete poets. The present anthology considers primarily the pictorial dimension, while the textual experiments carried out by Stein and others are rarely included.

Olson's article takes a more art and cultural historical view of Ruskin and children's literature, pointing out how notions of "primitivism" and the "innocent eye" of the child have influenced children's books and been central to modernist and avant-garde artists in their overthrow of academic standards in painting and search for fresh means of expression. It is an exaggeration to claim that "Ruskin paved the way for the intersection of children's literature with future avant-garde movements", as the editors do in their introduction (9), since modern artists' interest in children's art and other kinds of "primitivism" had many other sources of inspiration. But Olson's perspective is highly relevant, as demonstrated by the later articles in the anthology on the "infantilism" of the Russian avant-garde.

Olson's introductory essay is followed by two case studies. The first one, by Elina Druker, looks at the Swedish artist Einar Nerman who was a pioneer in Swedish picturebooks for children, a commercial designer and a stage designer and dancer for the important Swedish avant-garde dance company *Les Ballets Suédois* in Paris in the 1920s. The second case study by Samuel D. Albert examines different versions of a children's book by the Hungarian artist Sándor Bortnyik, who was a member of Lajos Kassák's important avant-garde *MA* group and participated in activities at Bauhaus and in the Congress of Constructivists and Dadaists organised by van Doesburg during his stay in Weimar 1922–1925, but later turned to graphic design after his return to Hungary. Both case studies deal with works and artists seen as marginal or completely omitted from international histories of the interwar period, but who need to be included in order to gain a full picture of the period. And both cases demonstrate the cultural and historical context necessary to understand the transnational and cross-aesthetic character of avant-garde artists who often worked across genres, art forms, and conventional divisions of high and low.

The closing contribution to the first section, by Kimberley Reynolds, looks at the "forgotten

history of avant-garde publishing for children" in Britain in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, and thus represents a similar wish to rediscover things left out of standard histories. Since there has been a reluctance in Britain to venture into radical avant-garde practices, Reynolds adopts the strange concept of "romantic modernism" (with reference to Alexandra Harris' book *Romantic Moderns* 2010) to indicate a reinvigoration of the arts "through re-engagement with tradition and reconnection with place" which she claims to be "the idiom and modus operandi of the British avant-garde" (90). This concept is hardly convincing in an avant-garde context. For one thing, it does not attempt to distinguish between modernism and the avant-garde, and most of the illustrations offered do not strike me as particularly avant-garde, so I remain sceptical of the conclusion that the pastoral nostalgia of these works is "as radical as those that underpinned European avant-garde movements" and that the works discussed "show children's literature as one of the forces that shaped this very British avant-garde". I wonder whether it would not have been possible to draw up another, far more radical avant-garde tradition in British books for children, if not only the illustrations had been considered, but the truly avant-garde legacy of books like *Alice in Wonderland* and Lear's nonsense verse had been included?

In contrast to the meagre British avant-garde offered here, the central part of the anthology deals with the very rich tradition of the Russian avant-garde. This section starts out with Sara Pankenier Weld's fascinating study of the interrelation between the avant-garde artists' radical notion of "infantile primitivism" and children's own creative production, thus expanding and deepening subjects touched on in Olson's contribution. Weld discusses the basic principles of the Russian avant-garde (Malevich, Lissitzky, Mayakovsky, Lebedev) as constructed around a primitivist conception of children's perception, and thus concludes that the fact that they "ended up finding [their] last bastion in children's literature is not merely a consequence of history and the vagaries of politics", but rooted in a shared infantile aesthetics (132).

The theoretical edge of Weld's contribution is followed by the more empirical and bibliographical contribution by Serge-Aljosja Stommels and Albert Lemmens who painstakingly reconstruct the 1929 Amsterdam exhibition of early Soviet children's picturebooks and explain the general historical context, the importance of children's books for the education of Soviet citizens, the

political value of exhibitions abroad, and the widespread reception of Soviet picturebooks in Europe and the USA through such exhibitions. The impact of one such exhibition of Soviet picturebooks and posters in Copenhagen in 1932 is traced in Nina Christensen's article, which convincingly demonstrates the thematic and pictorial influence on progressive Danish picturebooks from the 1930s and 1940s. And Evgeny Steiner rounds off the section by discussing the more intricate collaborative networks between Russian and European avant-garde artists, such as the dialogue between El Lissitzky, Kurt Schwitters, Käthe Steinitz, and Theo van Doesburg, resulting in, for instance, the typographical experiments in Schwitters' book *Die Scheuche Märchen* (The Scarecrow's Fairy Tale, 1925); the many collaborative projects of Russian and French artists in the 1920s and 1930s; and the parallel turn to production and machinery in Soviet and American books for children in the 1920s and 1930s. Steiner's essay is full of wide-ranging and detailed information and has a clear theoretical perspective that throws light on the previous essays in this section. And his brilliant demonstration of the artistic and ideological parallels connecting the ostensibly antagonistic societies of the USSR and the USA is striking.

Clearly the section on the Russian avant-garde and their influence on European and American children's books would have merited a volume of its own in order to trace the many interesting works, the extended transnational cooperation and the exchange of social, political, and aesthetic ideas across the national and ideological borders usually limiting the horizon of national research.

The need to compress too much material in order to fit into the anthology format is felt also in the first contribution to the final section dealing with the post-war period. Sandra L. Beckett, in her article on the rich "Manifestations of the avant-garde and its legacy in French children's literature", wants to cover Surrealism, Constructivism, the most important publishers, as well as the avant-garde legacy in children's books after the late 1960s. This inevitably means that although Beckett selects cases in each category, we get more of an overview than extensive in-depth analyses. One would especially have liked to see more of the illustrations she mentions but cannot show. For instance, it would have been interesting to be able to follow the comparison that Beckett makes between Édy Legrand's pioneering picturebook *Macao et Cosmage ou l'expérience*

*du bonheur* (1919) and Raoul Dufy's illustrations for Apollinaire's *Le bestiaire ou Cortège d'Orphée* (1911) by actually looking at the pictures, and it would have been equally interesting to have heard more about the relations between Legrand and the Vienna Workshops, Russian Constructivism, Bauhaus, and de Stijl that are just mentioned briefly. The surrealist example, *Le coeur de pic* (1937) by Lise Deharme accompanied by 20 black-and-white photomontages by Claude Cahun, is certainly a fascinating and enigmatic publication. It is not difficult to see why it would "intrigue important surrealists", as Beckett writes (221), and again one would have liked to see more examples of both the text and the images. In the pages on Constructivism Beckett mentions an example, also noted by Steiner, of the Russian influence in Western Europe; the book *Ronds et Carrés* (1932) illustrated by Nathalie Parrain (or Chelpanova until 1928) with figures built out of geometrical forms. The passage on publishers is an important reminder of the sort of context that is necessary in order to understand the cultural history of the avant-garde as well as children's books, since it demonstrates the importance of publishers like Robert Delpire and others, and the transnational cooperation between the American publisher Harlin Quist and the French author and editor Ruy-Vidal. Many books are mentioned in connection with the publishers, but again without the pictures and textual examples one would have liked to see.

Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer's article on Pop Art picturebooks also includes a passage about the publishers and their importance—Harlin Quist and Ruy-Vidal are mentioned again, this time emphasising activities in America, along with several other publishers in European countries—as part of a wider historical context in which the "emergence of Pop Art picturebooks and their distribution" is seen as "tightly connected with a shift in political, pedagogical and cultural matters" in the late 1960s (245). Kümmerling-Meibauer has a very inclusive definition of pop art, and her essay aims to "show the scope of genres, artistic styles, and narrative strategies" in "a number of prototypical Pop Art picturebooks from different countries" (250), so even though her approach is very systematic and includes both pictures, titles, paratexts, narratives, and distribution, the overview of a large number of examples (again unfortunately without a comparable number of illustrations) gives the reader the impression of a summary of a much longer text. There is information enough here for a

book, and one cannot help feeling that the material would have profited from a more extensive treatment.

The final contribution, Philip Nel's essay on "Surrealism for Children" takes a more principal stance in its discussion of the reception of avant-garde picturebooks for children. Partly revising his own previous ideas in a book about *The Avant-Garde and American Postmodernity* (2002), Nel discusses whether avant-garde tropes require a cultural knowledge that cannot be assumed to be present in an audience of children, or whether, for example, surrealist books create an avant-garde experience for children whose perception of the world is already more "surreal" than that of grown-ups. When everything is new, there can be no shock of the new, he argues, and thus the critical and disruptive effects of the avant-garde may not operate on its audience of children, but only on the adult reader. From this critical perspective Nel goes on to look at a number of recent books and an app and their possibility of fostering a critically engaged readership.

While Nel's concept of the avant-garde is close to Peter Bürger's idea of the avant-garde as a critical and disruptive, or even revolutionary, movement, and he consequently judges the success or lack of success of his examples by the political effect on their audience, Kümmerling-Meibauer sees her Pop Art picturebooks as connected to the anti-authoritarian movements of the late 1960s, and puts her emphasis on the general pedagogical changes from which these books sprang. Other contributors see avant-garde as a question of belonging or referring to a group or movement, or even, in one case, redefine avant-garde as a nostalgic, conservative, or "romantic modernism". Although I think the notion of "conservative modernism" is stretching the avant-garde concept too far and cannot be reasonably excused as a "specifically British variation of the avant-garde", as the editors try to argue in their introduction (9), the lack of a coherent avant-garde concept in the anthology is not necessarily a problem, since the contributors engage with different layers of meaning and context—some focusing on the characteristics of single works, others contextualising larger

trends, or drawing attention to forgotten works, exhibitions, and channels of exchange. And since avant-garde movements often engaged in fierce antagonism with one another and reacted to widely different historical and cultural conditions, it is difficult to fit them all into one single definition of what constitutes the avant-garde.

Elina Druker and Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer's introduction duly points out the heterogeneity of the avant-garde tradition and refers to the debates among scholars about the notion of the avant-garde, and not least the post-war avant-garde. The editors opt for the open definition of the avant-garde as an ongoing project (adopted by most modern avant-garde research), and in that spirit it makes sense to include contributions ranging from the second half of the 19th century until today. In the editors' opinion, the question of what constitutes an avant-garde is even more complex in the realm of children's literature, since regional, cultural, and ideological contexts differ (as they inevitably do in other cultural areas as well), and since "not only artistic, but also ideological, pedagogical, and social ideas are inseparable from the artistic expression" (5). As an avant-garde researcher, I would say that all of these complications are the same for any kind of avant-garde works or movements. For example, the pedagogical aspects they point out are an inevitable component of any discussion of the political effect and reception of avant-garde art. And something similar is true concerning the neglect of the multifaceted cooperation that went on across national borders: The editors point to this as a still largely unexplored area within studies of children's literature. The anthology provides a most welcome start on these transnational studies, which are also slowly in progress in other areas of avant-garde studies. Judging by the present volume, the avant-garde perspective is not familiar to many researchers of children's books. The editors stress the novelty of this approach in their introduction. But if you look into most anthologies on avant-garde movements, children's books are not familiar ground to most avant-garde scholars either. There should be grounds for further cooperation and new research here.