

Les Avant-gardes littéraires au XXe siècle (Volumes IV and V of Histoire comparée des littératures de langues européennes sous les auspices de L'Association Internationale de Littérature Comparée) by Jean Weisgerber; Theory of the Avant-Garde by Peter Bürger; Michael Shaw; Jochen Schulte-Sasse

Review by: Marjorie Perloff

The Modern Language Review, Vol. 81, No. 2 (Apr., 1986), pp. 426-427

Published by: [Modern Humanities Research Association](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3729712>

Accessed: 23/06/2012 08:52

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Modern Humanities Research Association is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Modern Language Review*.

the Wartons are out. Critical books, articles, and notes of the past fifty years (the period covered by the R. S. Crane bibliographies and their successors) are listed, each with a neutral, informative short paragraph. The fifty-year limit excludes much of the best and some of the essential criticism (Johnson, Hazlitt, etc.); critical editions are also excluded, though one might argue that there is more significant literary criticism in, say, Maynard Mack's introduction to the Twickenham edition of Pope's *Essay on Man* than in nearly all the forty-eight criticisms of that poem listed in this bibliography.

A. J. SAMBROOK

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON

Les Avant-gardes littéraires au XX^e siècle (Volumes IV and V of *Histoire comparée des littératures de langues européennes* sous les auspices de L'Association Internationale de Littérature Comparée). Edited by JEAN WEISGERBER. Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó. 1984. Volume I: *Histoire*. Volume II: *Théorie*. 1,216 pp. \$78.00.

Theory of the Avant-Garde. By PETER BÜRGER. Translated by MICHAEL SHAW. Edited by JOCHEN SCHULTE-SASSE. (Theory and History of Literature, 4) Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press; Manchester: Manchester University Press. 1984. lvi + 135 pp. £25.00 (paperbound £7.50).

There is a wonderful moment in the revue *Beyond the Fringe* (1964) when Alan Bennett, playing the crusty old public-school boy who thinks all Americans are boors, says of Lyndon Johnson: 'I understand he's now taking steps to federalize the avant-garde.' By 1984, the joke has very nearly become a *fait accompli*. Here are two beautifully-produced, expensive, and heavy volumes on the avant-garde, authorized by the AILC in conjunction with the Centre d'Étude des Avant-Gardes Littéraires at the University of Brussels. At the same time, the University of Minnesota Press has commissioned a translation of Peter Bürger's controversial *Theorie der Avantgarde* (Frankfurt, 1974), with a scholarly introduction by Jochen Schulte-Sasse that is almost as long as Bürger's essay. Both Schulte-Sasse and Bürger regularly refer to 'the avant-garde' as if it were a stable object like a table or an historical event like the French Revolution. Surely such avant-gardists as Tristan Tzara and Marcel Duchamp would have found the solemn assessment of their *praxis* a source for delicious Dada parodies.

The caveat of solemnity aside, the AILC volumes are superb reference books that anyone interested in the literature of the early twentieth century would want to own. Volume I begins with a chapter tracing the history of the word 'avant-garde'; interestingly, the first metaphoric use of the military term comes as early as 1596 in Estienne Pasquier's *Les Recherches de la France* (1596): 'Ce fut vne belle guerre qu l'on enterprit lors contre l'ignorâce, don't i'attribue l'auantgarde à Seue, Beze, & Pelletier, ou si le voulez autrement, ce furent les auantcoureurs des autres Poètes' (p. 18). But this 'avant-garde' instance of the word 'avant-garde' is something of an accident: its real use dates from Chateaubriand, Mme de Staël, and especially Sainte-Beuve, and Chapter 2 surveys the nineteenth-century background, both literary and cultural, that created the climate for the antithetical 'radical' literary movements that we now define as 'avant-garde'. The heart of Volume I is the seminal third chapter, which provides the reader with a thorough history of these movements: Futurism, Expressionism, Dada, Surrealism, and, in a minor key, Imagism, Cubism, Constructivism, and the 'neo-avant-garde' of the sixties. Volume II takes up the same material thematically. Chapter 4, 'Tendances esthétiques' by Adrian Marino, discusses such categories as 'Nihilisme', 'Antilittérature', and 'Rupture et renversement'. Chapter 5, by various hands, is an especially useful

survey of genres and forms: 'Le Vers libre', 'La Dispersion syntaxique', 'Les Tableaux-poèmes', and so on. Chapter 6, which relates avant-garde literature to the other arts and to science, is inevitably somewhat superficial. By contrast, Chapters 7 and 8 contain a series of incisive and original essays on the political and social dimensions of avant-garde writing and its critical reception today. Here survey gives way to speculation, and the vexed question of the relation of aesthetic to political avant-gardism is discussed from varying perspectives.

According to classic Marxist theory, as Charles Russell observes in his summarizing essay, the avant-garde of 1910–30 was never more than a symptom of the alienation of art in a dominant bourgeois culture. Having no adequate ties to the real revolutionary forces of society, Futurist and Dada poets and painters gave primacy to linguistic innovation, thus producing an even greater split between idea and *praxis* and depriving the proletariat of an instrument for real revolution. Contemporary Marxists like Russell himself thus reject as 'naive' the enthusiasm for the avant-garde of such earlier 'liberal' critics as Renato Poggioli, whose *Teoria dell'arte d'avanguardia* (Bologna, 1962) argued that only in an open and democratic society can the agonistic and radical spirit of an avant-garde flourish.

Poggioli's view of an avant-garde 'breakthrough' has largely prevailed; indeed, it is doubtful that a team of scholars would undertake a project like *Les Avant-gardes littéraires* without its impetus. Peter Bürger, whom Charles Russell cites respectfully in his essay, takes yet a third position. Himself a Marxist, he wants to recuperate the avant-garde from the harsh critiques of Adorno and Althusser, even as he rejects the notion that the avant-garde ever was or can be politically radical.

The function of the avant-garde, according to Bürger, was to make recognizable for the first time 'certain general categories of the work of art'; that is to say, it is only 'from the standpoint of the avant-garde that the preceding phases in the development of art as a phenomenon in bourgeois society can be understood' (p. 19). It follows that 'the European avant-garde movements can be defined as an attack on the status of art in bourgeois society. What is negated is not an earlier form of art (a style) but art as an institution that is unassociated with the life praxis of men' (p. 49). When Duchamp, for example, signs mass-produced objects (a urinal, a bottle-rack) and sends them to art exhibitions, 'he negates the category of individual production' (p. 51). As such, the avant-garde could exist only once: today one could send any number of signed urinals or other such objects to art exhibitions and no one would be shocked. For Bürger, the neo-avant-garde 'becomes a manifestation that is void of sense and that permits the positing of any meaning whatever' (p. 61).

Bürger's theses are buttressed by precious few concrete examples, and no wonder. If the avant-garde exists only to call into question art as an institution, there is no point characterizing the actual work of Picasso or Picabia, Breton or Broch. Bürger, for that matter, seems to have much less interest in what the avant-garde produced than in family quarrels with Gadamer and Horkheimer, Benjamin and Adorno. It is a pleasure to turn from this programmatic discussion of *the* avant-garde to Weisgerber's extensively annotated and suggestive chapters about Cubist aesthetic, Surrealist dream imagery, and so on. And even here one wonders whether *movements* do not have a fatal tendency to swallow up *poets* and whether an 'avant-garde' that, by definition, excludes Joyce and Eliot, Proust and Pirandello, Brecht and Kafka (all designated as 'Modernists' rather than as *bona fide* avant-garde movement members) is a useful category.

MARJORIE PERLOFF

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA