**RODKER, JOHN (1894-1955)**

Son of Polish-Jewish immigrants into Britain, John Rodker was born in Manchester on 18 December 1894 and subsequently raised in London from age six. A close friend of David Bomberg and ISAAC ROSENBERG (known widely as ‘The Whitechapel Boys’), he was schooled and encultured by the East End Jewish community in London, the context of which – politically vibrant, socially and culturally mixed, confrontational and embattled – shaped his literary and personal genius. Writing shortly before, during and after WWI, his work – essays, prose, poetry and translations – appeared in avant-garde and LITTLE MAGAZINES such as *The Egoist* and *New Freewoman*, *The Dial* and *The Little Review*, and was appreciated and assessed by major figures of canonical modernism such as WYNDHAM LEWIS and EZRA POUND. His editing and publishing roles – notably for the Soviet agency Preslit until 1939 and as a publisher of psychoanalytic texts from the 1940s onward under the Imago imprint – gained prominence as the creative work ceased in the early 1930s after the publication of *Adolphe 1920* (1929) and *Memoirs of Other Fronts* (1932).

Strains of a culturally diverse modernity issue in Rodker's poetry and fiction; high and low culture are blended, experiences of the city are filtered through a post-Romantic subjectivity, and identity is tested against the influences and deformations of experience and language. While his poetry and prose are perhaps most well known, Rodker worked in a number of media, writing experimental stage plays, songs and dance pieces. Indeed, some of the unusual page layout and cadence found in his poetry can be traced back to an interest in staging his work as action – an influence thought to originate in his involvement in the Choric School – rather than as printed words on a page. Though a marginal figure, his work and correspondence with other literary figures of the early twentieth century are illustrative of central concerns of and debates about the modernist period.

Rodker’s contribution to modernism can be gauged by the extent of his involvements, as an author, interlocutor, producer, editor and publisher. He set up the Ovid Press with his then-wife MARY BUTTS in 1919, publishing important works by T. S. ELIOT (*Ara Vos Prec*) and POUND (*Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*); he saw through the controversial publication of JAMES JOYCE’s *ULYSSES* in Paris under the Egoist Press imprint; and, finally, under the imprint of the Imago Publishing Company, he published central psychoanalytic texts, including Freud’s complete works. Rodker’s relationship with other modernists was characterized by their imprimatur. Ezra Pound had tentative praise, and weighed up presenting Rodker as a protégé. Similarly, WYNDHAM LEWIS was an inconsistent promoter; despite their collaboration and correspondence, Lewis’s assessment is tinged with suspicion and anti-Semitism.

Rodker is a telling figure in this complex literary network. His involvement with key modernist players unveils certain market logics and lines of influence, but is also inflected by his Jewish identity, highlighting the representation of Jewish others (and *others* in general) as being central to the movement and its literary and cultural discourse. Lewis notoriously satirised Rodker under the pseudonym of Julius Ratner in his novel *The Apes of God*, describing him as a ‘highbrow sub-sheik of the slum [...] the eternal imitation person [...] whose ambition led him to burgle all the books of Western romance to steal their heroes’ expensive outfits’ (143-4). Ian Patterson has explored the wider implications of this discourse, in which class and racial markers are prioritised, and the inheritance of literary tradition figured as an act of theft rather than a process of legitimate engagement (Patterson 2011, 98). Rodker’s social and political position was further tested by his objections to WWI, during which he went on the run, was imprisoned and tried as a conscientious objector. Inexplicit about his exact political position, he nevertheless took a dissenting stance. Rodker worked as British Empire representative of the Moscow Press and Publisher Literary Service in the 1930s. His relationship with the state parallels the concerns of his literary work, in which the body and subjectivity are frequently depicted as sites of conflict. Taking on influence from the avant-garde trends of the time, his work was issued in radical publications from *The New Age* to *The Enemy*. Rodker was nevertheless drawn into the centre of modernism, though his ‘biological understanding of human motive and behavior’ (Crozier, xviii) and direct treatment of themes are striking, contrasting with work by the ‘men of 1914’ and warranting comparison with the more radical literary experimenters of the period between the wars.

**List of works**

*Poems* (Whitechapel, self-published, 1914)

*Hymns* (London: Ovid Press,1920)

*Montagnes* *Russes*, trans. Ludmilla Savitsky (Paris: Librairie P. V. Stock, 1923)

*The Lay of Maldoror*, trans. John Rodker (London: The Casanova Society, 1924)

*Dartmoor*, trans. Ludmilla Savitsky (Paris: Sagittaire, 1926)

*The Future of Futurism* (London: Kegan Paul, 1927)

*Adolphe 1920* (London: Aquila Press, 1929)

*Collected Poems 1912-1925* (Paris: Hours Press, 1930)

*Memoirs of Other Fronts* ([anonymous] London: Putnam, 1932)

*Poems & Adolphe 1920*, ed. Andrew Crozier (Manchester: Carcanet, 1996)

**References and Further Reading**

Cheyette, B (1993) *Constructions of ‘the Jew’ in English Literature and Society: Racial Representations 1870-1945*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Cloud, G. W. (2010) *John* *Rodker’s Ovid Press: A Bibliographical History*, Delaware: Oak Knoll Press.

Lewis, W (1930) *The Apes of God*, Santa Barbara, CA: Black Sparrow Press.

Patterson, I ( (2011) ‘John Rodker, Julias Ratner and Wyndham Lewis: The Split-Man Writes Back’, in A. Gasiorek, A. Reeve-Tucker and N. Waddell (eds.) *Wyndham Lewis and the Cultures of Modernity*, Surrey: Ashgate.

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