
The Collectivisation of the Avant-Garde

Ben Hickman*¹

¹Centre for Modern Poetry (University of Kent) – United Kingdom

Abstract

This paper will attempt to historicise, through a brisk survey, the concept of community as it has been valorised by poetic ‘avant-gardes’ since the 1950s in North America and the British Isles. In this, I hope to give one instance of how community has functioned in post-war Anglophone aesthetics. First tracing the well-known roots of the concept’s currency to post-war US experiments with small presses, collaboration, theorising and at times communal living - aggregated eventually as the New American Poetry - I will then explore the immediate legacy of these trends in, first, the Language Poetry scene of the 1970s, and second the export of NAP methods to the so-called British Poetry Revival. From here I will explore attempts to revitalise the category of community in our own century, especially in relation to three events taking place in the wake of the financial crisis of 2008: the three ‘Poetry and/or Revolution’ summits held between London and California between 2011 and 2013. In all this I will chart the development of community into an increasingly abstract concept, at once compensating for the avant-garde’s increasing distance from the political communities of their time, and overcompensating as a generalising, quixotic utopia opposed to ‘individualism’. On the first I will examine the connections of post-war avant-garde community with a poetics of coterie; on the second I chart the emergence of ‘collectivity’ as a watchword - pretending to an anti-capitalist politics but with little connection to or interest in actual collectivities. I will finally explore the influence of the increasingly dominant setting of such postures - the academic institution - and the license English and Creative Writing disciplines gave for the transfiguration of artistic gestures into heralds of universal political liberation. I will finally examine in brief the impact of such claims on the Left more generally.

Ben Hickman is Senior Lecturer in Modern Literature at the University of Kent, UK, having studied at University College, London and the University of Kent. His current book, *Art, Labour and American Life, 1917-2020*, has just come out with Palgrave Macmillan. Previous publications include *John Ashbery and English Poetry* (Edinburgh University Press, 2012), and *Poetry and Real Politics: Crisis and the US Avant-Garde* (2016), also with EUP.

*Speaker