



Faith Binckes. *Modernism, Magazines, and the British Avant-Garde: Reading Rhythm, 1910-1914*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. viii + 260 pp. \$99.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-925252-7.

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Little Magazines: Modernism in Miniature

Some might consider that Faith Binckes, in her monograph *Modernism, Magazines, and the British Avant-Garde*, has set her sights rather low. Her particular interests, after all, are the short period just before the Great War, 1910 to 1914, and only one magazine, *Rhythm*, which itself morphed into the *Blue Review* in 1912. Yet from such a proscribed and narrow perspective, Binckes has managed to elucidate some of the major literary themes of the first decades of the twentieth century and at the same time offer a coherent critique not only of literary life during this period but also significantly of how the literature and art of the time became sometimes reluctant, sometimes permissive bedfellows.

It should also not be forgotten that during this period, E. M. Forster published *Howard's End* (1910), Joseph Conrad, *Under Western Eyes* (1911), D. H. Lawrence, *Sons and Lovers* (1913), and Robert Tressell, *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* (1914). At the same time the art world was in turmoil over artist and critic Roger Fry's 1910 postimpressionist exhibition at the Grafton Gallery, which introduced Gauguin, Manet, Matisse, and Van Gogh to a scandalized English public. Fry followed this up with a second postimpressionist exhibition in 1912 featuring Matisse, Picasso, Braque, and Cézanne. In 1913, he went on to found the Omega Workshop, an artists' collective where the applied arts and interior design were offered for sale with the same cachet as "high" art.

The way Binckes has tackled this ferment is perhaps the central theme of the book. Her premise seems to rely

on the Gaia principle of cause and effect. A butterfly flaps its wings in the Amazon jungle which leads to the creation of a hurricane on the other side of the world. It is the interconnectedness of the two events that forces us to acknowledge the power of the butterfly's wings. In similar fashion Binckes suggests that little magazines, and *Rhythm* and the *Blue Review* in particular, had a much greater and more significant effect on the wider world of literary and artistic creativity than might be expected from their short-lived existence and small circulations. She produces a detailed and superbly researched argument to support this view.

Started by John Middleton Murry and Michael Sadler in the summer of 1911, while both were still undergraduates at Oxford, *Rhythm* was a quarterly magazine of art, music, and literature "inspired by the trips to Paris Murry had made from 1910, which, he later claimed, gave him insight into a cosmopolitan 'republic of art' very different from the scene either in London or in Oxford" (p. 2). This early connection with France, a constant focus for Murry as editor, was exemplified by the employment of Scottish artist and Paris resident J. D. Fergusson as art editor. The magazine included articles on Fauvism; reproductions of Picasso, Derain, and Augustus John; and stories by Lawrence and Katherine Mansfield. Binckes draws attention to a Murry essay in the final issue of *Rhythm* where he implied that twentieth-century publications such as his were part of a "shared endeavour with writers across the Channel" (p. 71).

These French connections are examined in some detail in chapter 3, but Binckes begins her story with a forensic examination of the finances of the magazine and the valiant efforts of a number of patrons to keep it solvent. She notes how “money and little magazines are locked in an intimate yet hostile embrace” (p. 15). We soon learn that *Rhythm* eventually bankrupted Murry; suffered at the hands of Mansfield’s publisher, Charles Granville, who absconded with its funds; and eventually required Mansfield herself to invest the whole of her yearly allowance for 1912 in a vain attempt to prop up the magazine’s ailing finances.

One of the perennial arguments of the time, and one that is still aired today, was over the exact meaning of the terms “avant-garde” and “modernism.” One argument suggested that little magazines, because of their ephemeral nature, were part of an avant-garde culture. Once published in book form, however, they became part of the modernist canon. The contrary view was that magazines such as *Rhythm* and the *Blue Review* were essentially examples of the increasing institutionalization of modernism and therefore by definition not avant-garde. There is a certain circularity to such arguments that precludes assertions on either side although some critics, as noted by Binckes, believed that *Rhythm* often failed to be avant-garde enough (p. 11).

In chapter 2, Binckes offers a saner and more nuanced view that introduces notions of flexibility, since any avant-garde must respond to conditions of constant reinvention (p. 67). She also quotes Arnold Bennett’s review of *Rhythm*’s first number where her reading suggests Bennett’s view that “it [*Rhythm*] should possess a coherent manifesto that would definitely sort the sheep from the goats” (p. 43). This lack of a manifesto and the attendant failure of consistency would seem to place such magazines outside the modernism remit as Binckes notes in her conclusion: *Rhythm*’s “tradition of the new ... encouraged the identification of the magazine with the physical person of the artist, a kind of ‘embodiment’ running contrary to that which would emerge as the mainstream of literary modernism” (p. 201).

However, perhaps of more significance today is Binckes’s introduction of a feminist iconography which inevitably draws attention to Mansfield as writer, editor, and Murry’s “paramour” (Rupert Brooke’s description of her on page 171)—all three roles at that time both contested and provocative. This produces one of the most compelling chapters in the book. Chapter 4, “The Type of People One Can’t Stand,” immediately alerts the reader

to questions of class, social status, and scholarly interchange, and her exploration of the relationship between Murry and Mansfield brings such issues to the fore. Received opinion often has Murry as the important man of letters, a career writer, editing weighty periodicals whereas Mansfield was a relative unknown, regarded as promising but with potential unrealized. Binckes’s examination combines a subtle rereading of their relationship with a notably evenhanded approach that is skillfully achieved through an examination of Mansfield’s work, in particular her article “Virginia’s Journal,” in which she satirized the *New Age* magazine, a competitor for which Mansfield had written before joining *Rhythm*. She noted that Murry suffered at times from “‘lapses’ in critical judgement” and “had been portrayed as attention-seeking and infantile, an effeminate consort to the more dominant Mansfield” (pp. 102, 98-99).

At the same time Mansfield was “sexualized and commodified, dismissed as cheap, ambitious, brittle, *déraciné*”; she offered Wyndham Lewis’s vicious put down of her as a “New Zealand mag.-story writer” (p. 100). This construction of Mansfield as the other harks back to the New Woman of the *fin de siècle* and similar male anxieties about pushy females. Mansfield becomes both “cheap” and “brittle”—feminine tropes of cultural subservience—and is also identified as a colonial, an equally damning metaphor for social subservience (p. 100). At the same time her possession of certain manly attributes—dominance and competence—becomes equally belittling. Binckes draws our attention to this again in her conclusion where she asserts that “the magazine also adds an important dimension to wider debates surrounding the modernist construction of the ‘feminine,’ the female body, and its links to materiality” (p. 201). Yet Mansfield’s early death, at age thirty-four from tuberculosis, has inevitably reinforced posterity’s image of her as one of female fragility.

The demise of *Rhythm* and its renaissance as the *Blue Review* resulted in profound changes in the latter’s “artistic orientation” (p. 166). In chapters 5 and 6, Binckes offers an analytical narrative that examines the contested relationship between *Rhythm* and the *Blue Review* with postimpressionism and embraces a rereading of the Georgian poets in the process. The accepted view of the Georgians, notably including during this period Brooke, W. W. Gibson, Gilbert Cannan, and Lawrence, was that their poetry tended toward romanticism, sentimentality, and hedonism.

According to Binckes’s thesis, reading these poets

“in the context of *Rhythm* and the three issues of the *Blue Review* alters the existing view of Georgianism” (p. 197). This is because the periodical offers a more vibrant and vigorous environment than the anthologies (although only the first of five *Georgian Poetry* anthologies, edited by Edward Marsh, was published during the period under discussion here) and thus helps to “disaggregate the image of Georgianism as a twee, tweedy school of nature poetry” (p. 197). This, plus a “drastic change in format and design” and the ending of any involvement of all the women artists from *Rhythm* are the distinguishing characteristics of the three issues of the *Blue Review* (p. 163). Although it contained striking stories by Mansfield, poetry by Gibson and James Elroy Flecker, articles by Hugh Walpole and Frank Swinnerton, and Lawrence’s

story “The Soiled Rose,” it was not long before it, too, in the words of Brooke had “gone bust, through lack of support” (p. 197).

By the end of the book we sense, rather than know, that Binckes has somehow conjured a crucial connection between small magazines and the wider literary culture of the time in a way that avoids the polemical position of some previous scholars and places such magazines within a complicated framework of the many -isms of the time both literary and artistic. The denseness of her allusions can sometimes disconcert, but her skill in navigating the cultural transformation wrought by the written word and the artist’s canvas during this period is something of a revelation.

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