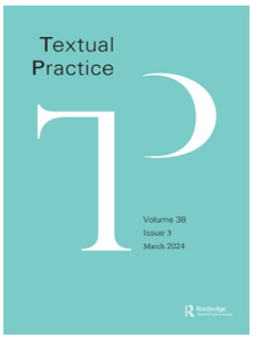

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REVIEW

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Laura Marcus: Rhythmical Subject

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When Laura Marcus died on 22 September 2021, the manuscript of her final monograph, *Rhythmical Subjects: The Measures of the Modern*, had six chapters of a planned eight almost complete. Laura's husband, William Outhwaite, and her colleagues and friends, Helen Small and Lynda Nead, have prepared the book for publication with both rigour and admirable restraint. As they explain in the Preface, they added no additional text and restricted themselves to completing the referencing where necessary, adding the illustrations Laura chose with Lynda's help, and inserting a summary of her notes about Katherine Mansfield's writings that would have contributed to Chapter Four. Their scrupulous, generous work has made available a field-defining work of scholarship by one of the most influential scholars of modern literature in recent times.

The advantage and the difficulty of writing a study of rhythm is that the term and the concept are everywhere. As Steven Connor, no stranger to omnipresent yet intangible subjects, writes in the Afterword, 'There is a general sense in which all the entities we might recognize as psychological subjects would have to have some form of rhythmic responsiveness'.[1] Some of those rhythmical subjects are familiar: there are brilliant new interpretations of authors, artists, and their works that one would expect to find in a study of rhythm and modernity: for example, Chapter Three ('Communities of Rhythm') discusses Dalcroze Eurhythmics and Chapter Four ('Rhythm and the Rhythmists') explores the best known modernist engagements with the 'cult of rhythm' (p. 130), John Middleton Murry's, Michael Sadleir's, and Katherine Mansfield's journal, *Rhythm*, and the associated 'Rhythmist' painters, J.D. Fergusson, S.J. Peploe, and Anne Estelle Rice. But we also encounter many, many less expected instances of rhythm's significance in modern life: to name just three, Marie Stopes's studies of women's 'rhythmic sex-tide' (p. 37), Rudolf Steiner's organic

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architectural designs to foster the practice of eurythmy (p. 92), and Robert Bridges' and Roger Fry's studies of 'rhythmic feeling' in handwriting for the Society of Pure English (p. 223). As the art critic Frank Rutter famously remarked about the pre-war years, 'RHYTHM was the magic word of the moment', and the risk in a book as compendious as this is that the sheer number and variety of examples leaches all definition from the term. Indeed, this was a concern of its early twentieth-century proponents: Rutter himself continued his comments on rhythm by admitting, 'What it meant exactly nobody knew, and the numerous attempts at defining it were not very convincing.[2] Middleton Murry similarly remarked of his conversations with Fergusson that 'One word was recurrent in all our strange discussions – the word "rhythm"', but 'we never made any attempt to define it'.[3] Marcus, however, is a trustworthy guide. Her depth of research enables her to put aside Rutter's and Murry's concerns with notable confidence: 'despite Murry and Rutter's retrospective claims that "rhythm," or "rhythmic", had no very defined meaning for them (and both were writing from a distance of some twenty years), the term (or concept) was not merely an "index of value", she writes; on the contrary, their contemporaries 'were intensely engaged in attempts to give it definition' (p. 158).

Marcus's own work of definition begins by taking us back to a point fifty years before Rutter's and Murry's rhythm-filled moment, to Herbert Spencer's 'theorization of a rhythmic universe' in 1862 (p. 1). In that year Spencer published *First Principles of a New System of Philosophy*, which contained a chapter entitled 'The Rhythm of Motion'. According to Spencer, rhythm was fundamental to the universe as we know it, 'from the slow gyrations of double stars down to the inconceivably rapid oscillations of molecules', and from there across social formations from financial markets to religions, philosophies, fashions, and art works.[4] His arguments were immensely influential in subsequent studies of rhythm. In this remarkably learned first chapter, Marcus demonstrates Spencer's impact on definitions of rhythm in works of theosophy and spiritualism, psychology, biology, sexology, aesthetics, and prosody, and *First Principles* reappears in the final chapter as a key source for D. H. Lawrence's understanding of 'rhythmic life', especially as expressed in *The Rainbow* (p. 267).

The care with which early definitions are explored in Chapter One pays dividends in subsequent chapters. Throughout the book, Spencer's terms and analogies reappear. Particularly prevalent is Spencer's analogy of the wave, which (in his words) 'undergoes minor ascents and descents of several orders while it is being raised and lowered by the greater billows', or 'occurs in the little rills which, at low tide, run out of the shingle banks above' to create a 'compound rhythm'.[5] As we move through the nineteenth and early twentieth century, we encounter Havelock Ellis arguing that to appreciate the 'general rhythm' of the universe 'we have but to stand on

the seashore and watch the waves that beat at our feet, to observe that at nearly regular intervals this seemingly monotonous rhythm is accentuated for several beats, so that the waves are really dancing the measure of a tune' (p. 34), Marie Stopes explaining the 'fundamental rhythm' of sexual desire by reference to 'the regular ripples of the sea breaking against a sand-bank' when 'the influx of another current of water may send a second system of waves at right angles to the first, cutting athwart them' (p. 38), Huntly Carter describing life as 'according to science […] assimilated to a rhythm, a series of waves, a number of vibrations in ascending progression' (p. 139), Laurence Binyon defining the 'universal rhythm of life' as 'subtle and natural, unendingly various, like the waves of wind in the corn' (p. 199), and Virginia Woolf recording in her diary, 'I am writing The Waves to a rhythm not to a plot' (p. 243). Marcus's nuanced, detailed analysis of the precise terms in which rhythm is described is carefully developed across the course of the book to show how nineteenth-century descriptions inform twentieth-century conceptions.

Spencer is only one of the theorists of rhythm discussed in Chapter One, which also examines Grant Allen's 'physiological aesthetics', psychological research by Wilhelm Wundt, William James, and Thaddeus Bolton, and Havelock Ellis's Nietzsche-influenced account of the 'art of life' as dance, 'in which the dancer achieves the rhythmic freedom and harmony of his soul beneath the shadow of a hundred Damoclean swords'.[6] While the many strands disentangled in this chapter are expertly picked up and woven into the book's tapestry, it is the importance Marcus attributes to Spencer that is one of the major revelations of this study. It may be that a further revised version of the book would have balanced Spencer's dominance with more discussion of Nietzsche's influence (the Preface notes that Marcus was 'considering whether more might be said, somewhere, about rhythm in Nietzsche').[7] but even so, one is repeatedly struck by the way Spencer's arguments and imagery stand behind twentieth-century aesthetic positions historically attributed to others. Above all, this research requires us to reappraise our understanding of modernist vitalism and of the centrality of 'form' to modernism. Chapter Four examines the familiar narrative of Henri Bergson's influence on *Rhythm* and the Rhythmist painters, but this discussion, coming after such a compelling account of a much wider variety of source material, does have the effect of somewhat loosening Bergson's hold on modernist interpretations of vitalist philosophy. 'Rhythm' emerges as a term and a set of ideas that encompass vitalism, but are not restricted to it, and this much expanded concept becomes available as a means of rethinking the role of form, and especially 'significant form', to use Clive Bell's term, that has been so central to definitions of modern art (and not only fine art). The aesthetic debates of the Bloomsbury Group undergo, indeed, a significant reinterpretation. Attending to Roger Fry's

thinking about rhythm reveals much stronger connections between vitalism and significant form than has been suggested previously, and it also enables an appreciation of Laurence Binyon's role in establishing the terminology for modern art most often attributed to Bell and Fry. Binyon's lectures, essays and books about Chinese and Japanese art deployed rhythm as a key term in the attribution of value to non-mimetic art and, though it is not detailed here, Binyon's interpretation of East Asian art can also be related to Spencer's impact on art criticism. Reading artistic experiment in terms of rhythm rather than form also has the effect, long overdue, of appreciating the importance of the Rhythmist painters, especially J. D. Fergusson, for early twentieth-century culture. Marcus's extended analysis of Fergusson's paintings, very fully illustrated, and her consideration of his impact on literature and dance is one of the most enjoyable sections of the book.

Spencer's importance to the book's narrative reflects its deeply interdisciplinary nature. This is not a book restricted to direct lines of influence (though it is certainly rigorous in tracing those). Rather it achieves the very difficult feat of presenting the intertwined networks of thought that crossed disciplines at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In their excellent Introduction, Isobel Armstrong and Josephine McDonagh quote from Marcus's Fellowship application to the Institut d'études avancées de Paris: 'Rhythm served as a way of mediating between areas, at a time when many modern disciplines were in the process of formation or consolidation' (p. xvi).[8] Indeed, just as the book examines the rhythmic oscillations of minds and bodies, it also provides a vivid portrait of an era when knowledge could be generated beyond subject specialisms: the book's title, of course, is a pun that highlights the book's interest in both individual and institutional thought. To take just one example of the intricate web of connections Marcus traces across fields: in the last section of Chapter Two, 'The Rhythm of Beauty', the philosopher John Dewey's *Art as Experience* (1934) is discussed. This section follows an account of Dewey's friendship with the book's dedicatee, the art collector Alfred C. Barnes, which begins by noting their interest in the work of F. Matthias Alexander, whose 'movement re-education programme' invites comparison with the contemporaneous systems of expressive movement developed by the theosophist Rudolf Steiner and the composer Émile Jaques-Dalcroze discussed in Chapter Three. Dewey develops his argument in *Art as Experience* with reference to the psychologist William James's account of consciousness as a rhythmic 'alternation of flights and perchings' (as discussed in Chapter One), the art critic Roger Fry's *Vision and Design* (discussed in Chapter Five), and the author Vernon Lee's work of 'physiological aesthetics', *The Beautiful* (discussed earlier in Chapter Two), in relation to which he notes her engagement with German theories of empathy (discussed in Chapters One and Two). The Fauve artist Henri Matisse, whose *Le Bonheur de vivre* (1905-6) Barnes

owned, and whose *La Danse* mural (1932-3) Barnes had commissioned for the Barnes Foundation, in which Dewey was involved, is quoted several times in *Art as Experience*. For the art critics Frank Rutter and Roger Fry, as for many others, it was Matisse's work, especially the first version of *La Danse* (1909), exhibited at Fry's Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition, that justified the centrality of the term rhythm in art criticism (as discussed in Chapter Five). Matisse was the major influence on the Rhythmist artist J.D. Fergusson, and in Chapter Four, Marcus discusses *Le Bonheur de vivre* and *La Danse* as models for Fergusson's *Les Eus* (c. 1910), chosen as the cover for *Rhythmical Subjects*.

While the achievements of this book as a cultural history are formidable, one cannot read *Rhythmical Subjects* without being reminded that Marcus was first and foremost a literary critic, an inspirationally enthusiastic and thorough reader. It is D.H. Lawrence and Virginia Woolf who are the primary beneficiaries of her sustained literary analyses in this book. In Chapter Three Marcus presents the British reception of a predominantly German tradition of thought about the relationship of music to the body through examination of Gudrun's display of Dalcroze Eurhythmics in Lawrence's *Women in Love*. In Chapter Six ('The American Rhythm: New Mexico, New Rhythms'), Marcus provides a very substantial analysis of Lawrence's thought and writings, from his wartime conception of a community he called 'Rananim' and his hope that the United States might provide that utopia, to his writings informed by the periods he lived in New Mexico from 1922 to 1925: *Studies in Classic American Literature*, his articles on Native American culture (especially dance), *St Mawr*, and *The Plumed Serpent*. As Marcus notes, 'Lawrence's representations of Native American culture may […] produce significant disquiet', his insistence on rhythm interpretable as 'an attempt to bridge the gap between the dominant culture and those it had disinherited or a way of essentializing racial identity and securing the terms of racial difference' (p. 307). But such difficulties are never smoothed away in Marcus's work: always committed to the fullest possible understanding, she insists our reading is not restricted to the comfortable, the palatable.

Marcus is perhaps best known for her writing about Woolf, the author she has returned to repeatedly in her scholarship, whether on modernism, life-writing, psychoanalysis, or cinema. In Chapter Five ('Vital Rhythms: Art and Literature in Bloomsbury and Beyond') she presents a virtuosic reading of Woolf's oeuvre through the lens of rhythm, from 'Street Music', published in 1905, to Woolf's last novel *Between the Acts*, via analyses of *Mrs Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, *The Waves* and *A Letter to a Young Poet*. Woolf's deployment of the concept of rhythm is remarkably extensive and flexible. It 'encompasses the rhythms of consciousness, in addition to natural rhythms (bodily rhythms, including the heartbeat and respiration; the rhythms of waves; death and renewal, imaged in the account of the

sun's eclipse in 1929 as an event of death and rebirth; daily rhythms; and the rhythms of the life-course)', 'accounts of prose rhythms […] and the rhythms of poetry and song', and 'social rhythms and the rhythms of modern urban life, and, in more ambivalent ways […] the rhythms, or metrics, of habit, and, at the furthest extreme, those of social control' (p. 243). 'Ambivalence' indeed becomes a significant term in this chapter, apparently introduced into Woolf's lexicon through her reading of Freud in the late 1930s.[9] Ambivalence encodes a form of rhythm itself, and here it also marks the difference between Woolf's conception of rhythm and that of Clive Bell and Roger Fry. Some of Woolf's writing about rhythm, for example in *To the Lighthouse*, is clearly in dialogue with Fry's account of the new rhythms of modern drawing. But for Fry rhythm represents a balance of forces, while for Woolf, 'its aspect was frequently more Janus-faced; turned towards either creative energy or control-mechanism' (p. 251). In 1926, Woolf told Vita Sackville-West that writing is not about the *mot juste*, 'it is all rhythm',[10] an argument explored most experimentally in *The Waves*, which compares the rhythms of the natural and social worlds and, within the latter, the rhythm of the world's 'machine' in relation to individual rhythms of existence. It is the argument of Woolf's essay on the poets of the 1930s too: in *A Letter to a Young Poet*, the recommendation is to 'stand at the window and let your rhythmical sense open and shut, open and shut', to incorporate and synthesise the world outside the poem.[11] The chapter closes with a discussion of *Between the Acts*. In her diary Woolf wrote that the rhythm of the last chapter 'became so obsessive that I heard it, perhaps used it, in every sentence I spoke'.[12] As in *The Waves*, the rhythm of the prose tests out ideas about rhythms internal and external to the characters and, as in *The Waves*, rhythm has an ambivalence: there is rhythm to both mechanisation and to nature, to the telling of history and the experience of 'now', and as Marcus notes, even the statement '*Let's break the rhythm and forget the rhyme*' – normally, one would think, a positive statement in a modernist text – is described by the narrative voice as a 'megaphonic, anonymous, loud-speaking affirmation' that one could not help but associate, during the Second World War, with the voice of the dictator (p. 254).

The richness of the six chapters published sharpens one's regret that some of the book remained to be written. One wonders – given that the criticism of Mansfield's short stories and poems was apparently the last section to be written for Chapter Four – whether there were other literary analyses that would have been added to *Rhythmic Subjects*. The substantial discussion of Vernon Lee's writings on aesthetics in Chapter Two is highly suggestive of connections to the short stories of *Hauntings* (1890). Marcus explores how Lee saw all the arts as 'a kind of dancing, a definite rhythmic carrying and moving of the soul', and aesthetic response as requiring repetition, 'initiation and training', so that the remembered rhythm, melody or dance steps 'haunt'

the mind (p. 56). The Preface tells us that there were to be a further two chapters. The first of these would have been titled 'Urban Rhythms and City Symphonies' and was to be about 'film rhythm in the work of Hans Richter, Abel Gance, Eisenstein, and others' and the second would have dealt with 'syncopations and polyrhythmia in writing, including prose rhythm, and in early twentieth-century music, including jazz and also Stravinsky, Scriabin, Honegger' (p. vii).

But it is churlish to dwell on these absences when Laura and her editors have given us so much to enjoy in this wonderfully rich book. Laura's last book, like her conversation, brims with suggestions for further thought and discussion: we go away inspired to experience the new world she has opened up for us. Rhythm turns out to have been the ideal subject for Laura's genius as a scholar. Like her book, Laura was committed to interdisciplinary enquiry, was an enthusiastic traveller across continents, was generous in aesthetic appreciation and, above all, revelled in human interaction. It is hard to think of many people who would better deserve the appellation of 'Rhythmical Subject'.

Notes

1. Steven Connor, 'Afterword', in Laura Marcus (ed.), *Rhythmical Subjects: The Measures of the Modern* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), pp. 310–4 (p. 310).
2. Frank Rutter, *Art in My Time* (London: Rich & Cowan, 1933), p. 132, Marcus, p. 157.
3. John Middleton Murry, *Between Two Worlds: An Autobiography* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1935), p. 135, Marcus, p. 156.
4. Herbert Spencer, *First Principles of a New System of Philosophy*, 2nd edn (London: Williams and Norgate, 1867), p. 273, Marcus, pp. 1-4.
5. Spencer, pp. 253-45, Marcus, p. 3.
6. Havelock Ellis, *The Dance of Life*, new edn (New York: Modern Library, 1929), p. 61, Marcus, p. 63.
7. William Outhwaite, Helen Small, and Lynda Nead, 'Preface', in Marcus, pp. vii-viii (p. vii).
8. Isobel Armstrong and Josephine McDonagh, 'Introduction', in Marcus, pp. xv-xxx (p. xvi).
9. Virginia Woolf, 'A Sketch of the Past', in Jeanne Schulkind (ed.), *Moments of Being: Autobiographical Writings* (London: Pimlico, 2002), pp. 78–160 (p. 116), Marcus, p. 251.
10. Virginia Woolf, in Nigel Nicholson et al. (ed.), *The Letters of Virginia Woolf* (London: Hogarth Press, 1975-80), III: p. 247, Marcus, p. 241.
11. Virginia Woolf, 'A Letter to a Young Poet', in *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (London: Hogarth Press, 1942), pp. 132–44 (pp. 140-41), Marcus, p. 250.
12. Virginia Woolf, Letter to Vita Sackville West, 15 November 1940, in Anne Olivier Bell (ed.), *The Diary of Virginia Woolf* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977-84), v: p. 339, Marcus, p. 251.