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Rural Modernity in Britain: A Critical Intervention ed. by
Kristin Bluemel, Michael McCluskey (review)

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the cognitive engagement and reach of the user or reader; West, in Fielding's view, asserted the novel's cognitive affordances but also insisted upon its autonomy. This account may suggest an unacknowledged humanism in which subject and object remain neatly separated by resisting a logic of prosthesis in which the two become mutually imbricated and transformed, but Fielding does not discuss this tension in those terms.

Such inquiries into the phenomenological consequences of media technologies and narrative techniques often seem to be short-circuited by the figures discussed by Fielding who writes that "modernist theorists attempted to imagine how the novel could avoid being an experience, how it could be its own, independent, intellectual object" (159). It is somewhat difficult to know how to interpret this claim. The formally inventive novels written and discussed by these modernists offer distinctive and even challenging reading experiences, but the assertion of the novel's autonomous operations often seems to entail a disavowal of the emotional experiences or cognitive activities of the reader. Here, a more critical assessment of these theories would be clarifying, but it is sometimes unclear whether Fielding is simply describing the theories of James, Ford, Lewis, and West or if she adopts them as persuasive accounts of modernist texts.

While the connections between these writers' theory and fiction are often illuminating, it would also be helpful to consider possible points of disjunction. "Affect and epistemology are opposed," Fielding writes in reference to West (127). This opposition recurs in most of the chapters, and it is often mapped onto a hierarchy between artistic novels and middlebrow fiction. One might ask how clearly such a distinction can be maintained, especially with regard to a text like *Parade's End* which is structured by problems of cognition as well as a sentimental romance plot. Might essays on the novel by West, Ford, and others be read more skeptically for their blind spots or as promotional work written to shape the reception and prestige of their fiction? Fielding does cast doubt on Lewis's rather dubious suggestion that one could evaluate a novel by reading a single page at random, but critical pressure could also be put on West's claim that the novel performs a scientific function.

Despite these questions, Fielding offers a valuable discussion of modernist theories of the novel that renews ongoing debates over aesthetic divisions between high culture and mass culture, while also showing how these theories are often modulated through discourses of technology. Her knowledge of narrative theory and modernist aesthetics is impressive, and her readings make important contributions to the scholarship on James, Ford, Lewis, and West. Her extensive research also draws attention to figures such as Percy Lubbock and Q. D. Leavis who helped to shape the ways in which modernist novelists thought about form. Fielding's book brings into focus a fascinating debate over the aesthetics and epistemology of the modern novel as a technology for knowing.

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As Bluemel and McCluskey observe in their introduction to this valuable, wide-ranging collection of essays, modernism, as "theorised by twentieth-century critics associated with university and metropolitan centres, is a product of cities: Baudelaire's Paris, Wyndham Lewis's London, Kafka's Prague, Alfred Stieglitz's New York" (3). Different scholars might suggest different authors

202 and places, seeing Eliot or Woolf as the central figures in London, or including Döblin's Berlin among the literary locations, but the idea that the city was the main site of modernity continues to determine the way in which modernism is conceived and taught.

The emphasis on the urban means that readers still often understand early twentieth-century rural life primarily in its relation to the city, a tendency that draws on modernist as well as popular texts that represent the countryside as the site of retreat from an encroaching modernity. This idea of the rural is frequently mobilized as part of a necessary critique of advanced capitalism, but risks erasing the experience and histories of the populations it purports to describe, defining them negatively, by what they lack, reject, or simply have not obtained. The countryside is too often conceived as a space determined by the absence of the new, and consequently as historically as well as geographically distinct from the metropolis. In the period itself, this fantasy enabled travelers from the city to imagine that a relatively short journey would bring them into contact with lost traditions and ways of life, an idea central to what Kristin Bluemel calls the "cult of the countryside that so preoccupied interwar readers" (84). As Peter Lowe argues, popular series such as "British Heritage" and the "Face of Britain," both issued by B. T. Batsford, encouraged the public to see their national heritage as exemplified by rural life and "as 'threatened' by the forces of modernity" (258). The real Britain, or more often England, could be found in the village, in the rituals and forms of work it sustained, which were made more accessible to an urban, middle-class public in particular by increasing car ownership. As Michael McCluskey argues, the idea reshaped economic relations between town and country, as "village craftsmen and women" became "heritage sites in themselves, something for tourists to seek out on excursions into rural Britain" (39). It also informed critical discourse; F. R. Leavis and Denys Thompson used George Sturt's *The Wheelwright's Shop* (1923), with its account of a lost, coherent way of life, to support their claim that Britain had experienced a "process of dissolution" that cultural theory and analysis must address.¹ These arguments and images of rural England depended on a particular, limited understanding of the countryside that concentrated on the agricultural south, a narrow focus too often reproduced in current political rhetoric and popular narrative. The location of an authentic Englishness in seemingly prosperous rural areas like the Cotswolds and the home counties has significant implications, not least because it excludes the northern working-class in particular from discussions about the identity and future direction of the nation.

The object of *Rural Modernity in Britain* is not just to extend the varieties of rural places, occupations, and experiences considered in analyses of the early twentieth century, but also to contest what Edward Allen calls the "idea that all things modern originated amidst the termini and switchboards of urban life" (31). The authors recognize that the countryside was neither homogeneous nor isolated from the rapid technological and social changes that characterized the period but was reshaped by a multitude of material and cultural forces, from electrification to what Ysanne Holt describes as new "discourses about art, craft, design, aesthetic ideals, and notions of taste" (184). These processes of development were necessarily uneven, their nature and extent in any given place determined by a variety of geographical, economic, and historical factors, but few if any rural areas, no matter how isolated, remained unaltered during the period.

None of this means that the countryside and its inhabitants were the passive object of external forces, their evolution determined by earlier changes in the cities. The process of modernization was always more complicated than the conventional image of a slow diffusion from urban center to rural periphery suggests. Bluemel and McCluskey's volume is at its most valuable when insisting on the agency of those living and working in the country, their ability to adapt new technologies and discourses for their own ends. This often involved taking control of their own representation, something illustrated by McCluskey's analysis of "one of the most popular genres of interwar amateur film," which he calls the "village biography" (36). The practice of recording the "people, places, activities and history of a particular village" not only emphasizes a willingness to take advantage of the possibilities offered by new technologies but a recognition

of the importance of actively intervening in processes of narration (36). Accounts of the countryside proliferated in the period, most obviously in the numerous “fictional and non-fictional literary portraits of village life,” but not all were produced by the middle-class writers and artists seeking a refuge from the city, a retreat into a simpler, idyllic past (36). Those who lived in the countryside used new forms and media to explore their situation, altering in the process the means of representation.

The development of the “village biography” is just one example of the way in which those in rural areas refused to reproduce the dominant image of the countryside as a static space, the site of an authentic, coherent national identity uncontaminated by modernity. Even writers whose livelihoods depended on their ability to appeal to such nostalgic desires often complicated or subverted the images they inherited. As Dominic Head argues, “[o]ne of the more interesting elements of the rural novelists’ heritage pieces is the extent to which they resist the straightjacket of convention and the easy equation between the celebration of the rural and an unchanging verdant England” (207). *Rural Modernity in Britain* explores a variety of innovative strategies artists used to challenge the categories within which their work was normally understood and engage more effectively with their changing social and material environments. One significant strength of the volume is its range; it not only considers a wide variety of artists, but also a variety of media. It is particularly concerned with the visual arts and includes an excellent selection of color plates as well as numerous black-and-white pictures. The contributors not only explore the work of well-known painters, such as Paul Nash, but also relatively neglected figures such as the once popular wood-engraver Agnes Miller Parker, the subject of Kristin Bluemel’s illuminating chapter. Bluemel’s argument that “scholars of interwar British literary and print culture need to engage with the less respected ‘middlebrow’ genres and virtually unknown techniques of book illustration in order to understand the . . . possibility and significance of rural modernity in Britain” has far-reaching implications, suggesting that a meaningful critical engagement with the countryside in the period involves contesting evaluative hierarchies as well as extending the range of subjects covered (99). This demands the reassessment of people who have been marginalized, as well as the recovery of those who have been forgotten. Nigel Harrison and Ian Robertson’s re-reading of Clough Williams-Ellis illustrates the possibilities of this process. For a long time, Williams-Ellis was dismissed as “the second-rate architect who designed the bizarre Welsh holiday village of Portmeirion,” but Harrison and Robertson make the case for him as the “architect of some of the earliest modernist buildings in Britain,” some of them, like the Laughing Water Restaurant, built in rural areas (187, 196). They argue that even Portmeirion, its status revived by its use as the setting for *The Prisoner* (1967–68), is increasingly seen as prescient rather than absurd, a “hyperreal postmodern simulacrum” (201). Long regarded as eccentric and reactionary, in part because of his work with the Council for the Preservation of Rural England, Williams-Ellis emerges from this volume as a more significant and complex figure. Multiple essays refer to his writing, in particular *England and the Octopus* (1928), affirming his cultural influence in rural England in this period.

Rural Modernity in Britain has a breadth which not only means it will appeal to a wide variety of scholars but also emphasizes the complexities of the countryside and the artistic, critical, and theoretical responses to it. Bluemel and McCluskey refuse to reproduce the conservative focus on the agricultural south, imagined as the site of an ahistorical, homogeneous Englishness, insisting instead on geographically and socially diverse communities connected by their active participation in processes of material and cultural change. The emphasis on regional and national difference, demonstrated in essays by Nick Hubble on Lewis Grassie Gibbon’s representations of Scotland, Chris Hopkins on material and textual relations between England and Wales, and Ysanne Holt on the Anglo-Scottish border, are indicative of a commitment to a broader, more nuanced view of rural areas.

Modernism is, as Astradur Eysteinnsson argues, an attempt to *interrupt* modernity, and the recognition that modernity extended into a greater range of spaces than has been generally acknowledged has significant implications for modernist studies; critics must not only look beyond Bloomsbury, but also see the countryside as something more than the place where disenchanted city-dwellers retreated, or about which they fantasized.² In recent years, politicians and commentators have reasserted a reactionary image of Englishness, articulated in part through images of the countryside and rural communities. A variety of popular forms, from period dramas to cookery and property shows, contribute to the idea of an inherently conservative identity located primarily in the country, in villages, and small towns conceived as self-contained and unchanging. It would be optimistic to imagine that those involved in this nationalist project could be persuaded to think or behave otherwise by a volume of scholarly essays, as few seem susceptible to rational argument of any kind; but any project that complicates the image of the British countryside is welcome and timely.

Notes

1. F. R. Leavis and Denys Thompson, *Culture and Environment: The Training of Critical Awareness* (1930; London: Chatto & Windus, 1950), 3.

2. Astradur Eysteinnsson, *The Concept of Modernism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), 6.