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Murry, John Middleton (1889-1957)

John Middleton Murry, born in Peckham, London on 6 August 1889, was a prolific English writer best known today as the husband and literary executor of Katherine Mansfield. The son of an internal revenue clerk, determined to overcome his lower middle-class surroundings, Murry won a scholarship to Christ’s Hospital, Sussex, and another to Brasenose College, Oxford, where he graduated with a first in Classics. He founded the journal *Rhythm*, beginning the editorial and critical labors that defined his reputation during his life. Murry edited a succession of literary magazines—most influentially, the *Athanaeum*. He steadily produced volumes of literary criticism, politics, religion, and other non-fiction until his death, drawing attention (and often ire) for his radical politics and his critical disagreements with T. S. Eliot.

Influenced by Pablo Picasso, Henri Bergson, and Bernedetto Croce, Murry founded *Rhythm* (1911-13, later the *Blue Review*) alongside Michael Sadleir and John D. Fergusson. Murry first published with A. R. Orage’s *The New Age*, through which he met fellow contributor Katherine Mansfield in December 1911. He moved into her flat a few months later, inaugurating a complicated romantic and literary partnership that turned to marriage in 1918. Their fraught friendship with D. H. and Frieda Lawrence proved fruitful; Murry founded *The Signature* with Lawrence and Mansfield in 1915, and Lawrence modeled many characters after Mansfield and Murry, including Gudrun and Gerald in *Women in Love* (1920)—which Murry savaged in his review for *The Nation and Athenaeum*. Lawrence’s fiction was at the core of Murry’s critical perspectives on modernism, as evidenced in his *D. H. Lawrence* (1930), *Son of Woman: The Story of D. H. Lawrence* (1931), and *Reminiscences of D. H. Lawrence* (1933).

Declared unfit for active service (due to pleurisy), Murry worked for the War Office by editing *Daily Review of the Foreign Press* during World War I. After 1916, he formed part of the circle that formed around Ottoline Morrell and the Bloomsbury Group at Garsington Manor (experiences that Mansfield would portray in “Bliss”). During this especially productive period of his life, he also reviewed for the *Westminster Gazette* and *Times Literary Supplement* and published *Fyodor Dostoevsky: A Critical Study* (1916), his first full-length work of criticism. Despite his unsuccessful experiments with fiction, drama, and poetry, Murry reached the height of his influence in the years immediately after the war, editing the *Athenaeum* from 1919-1921, where he published Clive Bell, E. M. Forster, Aldous Huxley, D. H. Lawrence, Georges Santayana, Lytton Strachey, Paul Valéry, and Virginia Woolf.

As both the *Athenaeum*’s sales and Mansfield’s health failed, Murry gave up the former and joined the latter in Menton, France, where Mansfield’s search for treatments for her tuberculosis had finally led. There, Murry prepared his six Oxford lectures, which would become published as *The Problems of Style* (1922), which adopts analytic philosophy methods to define literary style as idiosyncratic but impersonal. This well-reviewed study could be productively compared to E. M. Forster’s *Aspects of the Novel* (1927). In late 1922, Mansfield joined G. I. Gurdjieff’s Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man in Fontainebleau, where—during a visit from Murry on 9 January 1923—she died. Murry then founded *The Adelphi* (1923-1948), whose middlebrow character earned it a broader public following than many of his ventures.

Despite the unexpected popularity of the *The Adelphi*, it did not impress Murry’s former colleagues from Garsington, becoming a favorite target of Leornad and Virginia Woolf. The periodical’s self-conscious “romanticism” and cultivation of an accessible, confessional style of criticism contrasted with the “classicism” of T. S. Eliot and his professionalized editorship of *The Criterion*. As Eliot’s reputation grew, Murry’s waned. Murry’s whitewashing of Mansfield’s personality and his saturation of the market with her letters, journals, and unpublished writings worsened the situation, as did his vocal socialist pacifism. Consequently, the 1930s, which could be considered, quantitatively, Murray’s most prolific period, was also the time he was dubbed “the best-hated man of letters in the country” (Rayner Heppenstall in *John Middleton Murry: A Study in Excellent Normality*, 1934). Still, his continued production of well-received criticism—particularly *Keats and Shakespeare* (1925), *Studies in Keats* (1931), and *William Blake* (1933)—ensured his continued visibility in the London literary scene.

Equally conspicuous were his radical politics in the late 1930s and the 1940s. Murry’s socialist pacifism informed not only his management of *The Adelphi* and political publications (including *The Necessity of Communism* in 1931 and *The Necessity of Pacifism* in 1937), but also his experiments at communal living, first in 1916 in Cornwall with Mansfield and the Lawrences and then in his farm, The Oaks, in Langham, Essex in the mid-1930s. This latter commune, dubbed the Adelphi Center, did not succeed—except as an evacuation center for refugees during the Spanish Civil War and during WWII. In August 1936, though, Murry held there an influential Summer School, attended by political figures like Reinhold Niebuhr, George Orwell, Karl Polanyi, Herbert Read, and John Strachey. Murry came under fire for his pacifism at beginning of WWII after he argued that England should avoid another world war by allowing the Nazis to control Europe.

Murry’s subsequent change of heart and conversion to Conservative politics did not rescue his reputation, but merely fed into criticism of his theories as vacillating and incoherently eclectic.

In 1938, diagnosed with Buerger’s disease and disturbed by the dissolution of his third marriage (out of four total), he considered taking orders as a member of the Anglican clergy. Murry continued to publish, preferring political over literary topics, with the major exception of the much-appreciated *Jonathan Swift* (1954). Still, his reputation continued to suffer, in large part due to his (quite lucrative) activities as Mansfield’s executor, which were interpreted variously as overstating Mansfield’s talent, taking unconscionable liberties by publishing material she did not want to be published, or manipulating her legacy through heavy-handed editing. It is perhaps ironic that Murry’s reputation today revolves primarily around the charge that he unduly influenced Mansfield’s reputation.

John Middleton Murry died of a heart attack on 12 March 1957 in Bury St Edmonds, Suffolk, England.

List of Works

*Fyodor Dostoevsky: A Critical Study* (1916)

*The Problem of Style* (1922)

*Keats and Shakespeare* (1925)

*The Life of Jesus* (1927)

*Son of Woman: The Story of D. H. Lawrence* (1931)

*The Necessity of Communism* (1932)

*William Blake* (1933)

*Between Two Worlds* (1935)

*The Necessity of Pacifism* (1937)

*Jonathan Swift* (1954)

Further Reading

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