

Laurence Binyon and the Modernists:

Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, and Marinetti

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This article will claim that Laurence Binyon deserves a re-assessment for two reasons: his critical work has echoes in the poetic theory of Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot, and, secondly, he was a pivotal figure for the avant-garde in Britain. Although Binyon started his career in the late Victorian period and his work may not appear to diverge from that of his direct predecessors, he was susceptible to some of the most innovative artistic movements of the early twentieth century. His early texts on Chinese and Japanese art show that Binyon was much more modern than Pound's biographers claim, and his work needs to be assessed in that light. Binyon's use of the term "make it new" long before Pound first mentioned it, and his progressive poetics in "Poetry and Modern Life", are particularly interesting for our thesis.

Laurence Binyon (1869) made his mark early as a poet and a writer who would be noted. After having attended St. Paul's School (1881-1888), he went to Trinity College, Oxford, where in 1890 he was awarded the prestigious Newdigate Prize for Poetry for his epic poem "Persephone". Oxford was the place where he met the poet Lionel Johnson and through the Century Guild, he was introduced to Arthur Mackmurdo and the artist Selwyn Image, both of great consequence in his future career.¹ Binyon started publishing in their little magazine the *Hobby Horse* and joined the network of poets that held their meetings at Mackmurdo's house, 20 Fitzroy Street in London. The network could boast the presence of artists such as Walter Crane, Roger Fry, Bernard Shaw, Arthur Symons, and many others.² In 1893 he joined the British Museum's Department of Printed Books, which provided the opportunity for him to meet W.B. Yeats, Charles Holmes, Augustus John, Thomas Sturge Moore, and Henry Newbolt. If the British Museum reading room was a convenient and obvious place to make new acquaintances that was even more the case in London's fashionable restaurants and bars. Binyon seems to have been the networker *par excellence*. By the middle of the 1890s, Binyon became interested in studying the artistic production of the Low Countries and almost simultaneously, he

¹ Hatcher, 25.

² *Ibid.*, 47.

developed an interest in Asian art. By 1909, when he met Ezra Pound, he was the Assistant Keeper at the British Museum and he had written plays, five volumes of poetry, and books about Blake, oriental art, and seventeenth-Century Dutch painters.

Despite his centrality to London literary networks and his prolific creative and critical output during his lifetime, Binyon has now been largely forgotten. Binyon is commonly associated with the transition period between the Victorian and the modernist era, arbitrarily referred to as the Edwardian/Georgian period. Today Binyon is best known for his war poem “For the Fallen,” and among Poundians for being the man who introduced Pound to Wyndham Lewis at the Vienna Café in London, where Binyon and his friends had lunch every day. Most of Pound’s biographers mention Binyon as a poet and art historian, and they write that he introduced Pound to orientalism. John Tytell says of Laurence Binyon that he was a translator of Dante, “creating for Pound a commonality of interest” although his poetry was, “too old-fashioned” for Pound to admire.³ This is inaccurate since Binyon only started working on Dante in the 1930s. David Moody mentions Binyon as “a poet in the tradition of Wordsworth and Arnold,”⁴ and Kenner only mentions Binyon in passing in *The Pound Era* and refers to Pound’s use of Binyon’s famous quotation ‘slowness is beauty’ in Canto LXXXVII

Only sequoias are slow enough

BinBin ‘is beauty’.

‘Slowness is beauty.’⁵

³ Moody, 42.

⁴ Ibid., 82.

⁵ Pound, *The Cantos of Ezra Pound*, 592.

Pound heard the phrase “slowness is beauty” for the first time in 1909. Twenty-five years later, in 1934, he wrote to Binyon:

I wonder if you are using (in lectures) a statement I remember your [sic] making in talk, but not so far as I recall, in print. Slowness is beauty. Which struck me as very odd in 1908 (sic),⁶ when I certainly did not believe it, and has stayed with me every [sic] since.⁷

At the time Pound was not always positive about Binyon. In his review of Binyon’s *The Flight of the Dragon: An Essay on the Theory and Practice of Art in China and Japan*, Pound commented:

Mr. Binyon has not sufficiently rebelled. ... He is far from being one of the outer world, but in reading his work we constantly feel the influence upon him of his reading of the worst English poets.⁸

Robert Lowell said of Binyon’s Dante adaptation that “he was saying what the Italian was saying, but he was saying it in the language of about 1910—like minor Robert Bridges.”⁹ T.S. Eliot also regarded Binyon as dusty and conservative; witness the letter he wrote to his mother about a lecture he gave at the Arts League of Service at the Conference Hall on October 28, 1919, entitled “Modern Tendencies in Poetry,” for which Binyon was the chairman. Eliot told his mother that he “carefully avoided mentioning any living poet by name”¹⁰ because he considered Binyon to be already dead himself.

⁶ Binyon and Pound only met in 1909.

⁷ Pound, “Ezra Pound to Laurence Binyon”.

⁸ Pound, “Chronicles,” 112.

⁹ Meyers, 131.

¹⁰ Valerie Eliot, 346.

Binyon's best known, and perhaps his best volume of poetry up to then, *London Visions* (1908), is a Romantic naturalist look at the city, especially from the viewpoint of the outcast, and his most famous poem, "For The Fallen," written in 1914, is not much more modern. The rhythm is very straightforward, there is rhyme and alliteration in every stanza, and the strongest poetic feature used is repetition. The following stanza is read at Remembrance Sunday services in the UK every year.

They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old:

Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.

At the going down of the sun and in the morning

We will remember them.

The metrical scheme is based on an alexandrine, and the rhythm is straight-forward, were it not for the poetic license and grammatical deviation in the first and second lines. "[A]nd in the morning" is a welcome variation to the pattern and makes the stanza more interesting. The strength of the poem is in the mimesis, in what it represents. It almost seems as if Laurence Binyon the poet and Laurence Binyon the critic were two different people. Binyon never considered himself to be a great poet, and he never really was, though his later work, published in the 1930s and 1940s, was more noteworthy.

This article will claim that Laurence Binyon deserves a re-assessment for two reasons: his critical work has echoes in the poetic theory of Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot, and, secondly, he was a pivotal figure for the avant-garde in Britain. Although Binyon started his career in the late Victorian period and his work may not appear to diverge from that of his direct predecessors, he was susceptible to some of the most innovative artistic movements of the early twentieth century. His early texts on Chinese and

Japanese art show that Binyon was much more modern than Pound's biographers claim, and his work needs to be assessed in that light.

Flight of the Dragon and Vorticism

In this first section we focus on *Painting in the Far East*, published in 1908, and *The Flight of the Dragon*, published in 1911, and reviewed by Pound in 1915. A possible explanation why Pound waited four years is that at the time of its publication he simply did not have the knowledge to write a review on the topic, although that did not always stop him from doing so. In 1913 he received the bulk of the Fenollosa papers, which would teach him a great deal about Chinese and Japanese art, and he worked on them at Stone Cottage during the winter of 1913-1914.¹¹ Pound became, at Mrs. Fenollosa's request, "a literary executor of Fenollosa". He added words where he thought them necessary, and published a selection of the plays and made them known to the Anglo-Saxon world. The Noh theatre dated back to the fourteenth century, and was a form of drama in which ritual dances were performed to honour the gods. The Noh plays were solely for the military class, and formed the "principal entertainment of the Samurai".¹² *Cathay*, published in 1915, was the direct result of Fenollosa's notes of the Noh theatre and became one of Pound's most famous volumes.

Only a year earlier Binyon had revised the manuscript of Fenollosa's magnum-opus, *Epochs of Chinese and Japanese Art*.¹³ Binyon met Ernest Fenollosa in 1908 when the latter came by the Department and the Print Room, nine days before his death. Pound, on the other hand, never met Ernest Fenollosa, yet Mary Fenollosa gave him her

¹¹ Stock, 148.

¹² Van Wyck, 34.

¹³ Hatcher, 170.

husband's remaining manuscripts. In *Ezra Pound: His Metric and Poetry*, T.S. Eliot writes that Mrs Fenollosa was convinced after reading Pound's poems in *Poetry* that he was the man for the job.¹⁴ This is indicative of Binyon's reputation as a poet, at least compared to Ezra Pound. Binyon was the better scholar, he was more critical, had much more research experience as a British Museum man, and had been studying the art of the Far East since the mid 1890s. Pound only became very much interested in Chinese and Japanese art after his arrival in London in 1908. Nevertheless, Pound was the poet who according to Mrs Fenollosa was best suited to put her husband's theory into practice, whereas Binyon's poetry was still rather traditional, even if his views were not.

Interestingly enough, Binyon was most progressive when writing about Chinese and Japanese art. Of his two books, *The Flight of the Dragon* was the biggest success and stayed in print until 1972. The book urges artists to ignore their direct surroundings, and instead find a home in the freedom and wholeness of the universe.¹⁵ Binyon even speaks of a "torrent" which distinguishes the Japanese artist from the European. While European artists seek unity by building up their "composition round a central group," the Japanese used "the fluid lines of a torrent in [their] design."¹⁶ According to Hatcher, Pound was influenced by Binyon,¹⁷ but Vorticism in general was influenced by Chinese and Japanese art. Moreover, Binyon was not the only scholar studying Chinese and Japanese art at the time who could have influenced Pound. It is not unlikely, however, that Pound copied several of Binyon's ideas and adapted them to his modernist viewpoint. In "The Renaissance," for instance, first published in *Poetry* in 1914, Pound writes that "the last

¹⁴ T.S. Eliot, *Ezra Pound: His Metric and Poetry*, 18.

¹⁵ Binyon, *The Flight of the Dragon*, 25.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 47.

¹⁷ Hatcher, 169.

century rediscovered the Middle Ages” and that it is “possible that his century may find a new Greece in China”.¹⁸ This analogy of China as a new Greece is a clear echo of what

Binyon wrote in *Painting in the Far East*:

The Japanese look to China as we look to Italy and Greece: for them it is the classic land, the source from which their art has drawn not only methods, materials, and principles of design, but an endless variety of theme and motive.¹⁹

Perhaps Pound looked at Binyon the way the Japanese looked to China, which only makes *The Flight of the Dragon* more interesting for British art, because of its strong Vorticist resonance. When Ezra Pound arrived in England his knowledge of Chinese and Japanese art did not amount to much more than what he knew from looking at his mother’s Ming Vase or what he had seen at the Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition. His appreciation of Chinese culture was awakened not in America but in England in the years 1909-14, and his first mentor in Chinese art was Binyon.²⁰ Binyon gave Pound tickets to a series of four lectures he delivered, entitled “Art & Thought in East & West: Parallels and Contrasts.”²¹ Pound soon became Binyon’s “protégé” and Lewis became T. Sturge Moore’s.²² This relationship is made fun of in Canto LXXX:

So it is to Mr Binyon that I owe, initially,
Mr Lewis, Mr P. Wyndham Lewis. His bull-dog, me,
as it were against old Sturge M’s bull-dog, Mr T. Sturge Moore’s
bull-dog, et²³

¹⁸ Pound, *The Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, 215.

¹⁹ Binyon, *Painting in the Far East*, 6.

²⁰ Qian, *The Modernist Response to Chinese Art*, 4.

²¹ Hatcher, 161.

²² Kenner, 236.

²³ Pound, *The Cantos of Ezra Pound*, 527.

The Flight of the Dragon shows Binyon's modern ideas, in particular his admiration of the way Chinese and Japanese art seek constant movement. His two-page essay "The Return to Poetry" in the Spring 1912 issue of *Rhythm* emphasizes this view. "Within the last few years Oriental art has opened its treasures to us. We are fascinated by an art beside which ours seems so turbid, so torrential in matter, so solid, so immobile in form."²⁴ Binyon was becoming more and more disappointed with the artistic production of his contemporaries and turned to the Far East in search for renewal. In *The Art of Botticelli*, published in 1913, Binyon wrote that "we cannot discard the past; we cannot throw away our heritage, but we must remould it in the fire of our necessities, *we must make it new* and our own."²⁵ Binyon considered Botticelli an example, because he "recovered from the Greek world a charm which he fused in his own nature and made part of his own creations, a real and living continuity".²⁶ "Make it new" later became one of Pound's famous quotes, if not his most famous quote, after he published an essay under that title in 1934 and which came to stand for the entire modernist movement. "Make it new" was not the only "hint of modernist rhetoric" in *The Art of Botticelli*.²⁷ Binyon writes that a painter, "to be master of the pictorial expression of rhythmic movement, must have imaginative vision."

Observation alone will not help him. No array of posed models will enable him to paint forms dancing on the earth, much less on air. It is something

²⁴ Binyon, "The Return to Poetry," 3-4.

²⁵ Binyon, *The Art of Botticelli*, 17.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 18.

²⁷ Corbett, 183.

incommunicable that must be born within himself. And this is the vision which the poet has and which he instinctively embodies in the moving rhythm of song.²⁸

Binyon pleads for a “newer” art, a form of art that comes from within, rather than from what tradition demands. He notes that although Binyon wants to make it new, he says this without any “ringing condemnations.” Binyon’s emphasis is on “remoulding” the past rather than doing away with it, which is why Hatcher calls Binyon a conservationist. Binyon was less drastic, less loud, and less extreme than Pound or Marinetti. He would never have proposed to destroy Venice or, like Pound, to destroy all machines. He did, however, as Corbett argued, want to make things new, but he wanted to do so without getting rid of the past. This is related to the oriental tradition, of which Binyon says in his book *Painting in the Far East*, that trying to achieve this both limits and liberates the artist, and that it tests his originality.²⁹ The artist should avoid imitation, but start from what he or she knows, and then attempt to surpass the original.

In *The Flight of the Dragon* Binyon praises Chinese and Japanese art for the way they used colour, for the way the artists did not build up their composition around a central group, for the way they did not find it essential for their subject-matter “to represent or be like anything in nature,” and mostly for the way they stressed the importance of “rhythmic vitality.”³⁰ Woon-Ping Holaday states that Binyon’s “influence on Pound’s early appreciation of oriental art was more general and perhaps more significant than has been previously suggested.”³¹ Holaday makes this assertion based on unclear connections and from reading Binyon’s other texts that focus on Chinese and

²⁸ Binyon, *The Art of Botticelli*, 54.

²⁹ Binyon, *Painting in the Far East*, 149.

³⁰ Binyon, *The Flight of the Dragon*, 21.

³¹ Holaday, 27-28.

Japanese art around that time. “The principle of continuity” found in Chinese art, which Binyon endorsed, was also found in Pound’s career, in his “emulation of the masters—Homer, Dante, Villon, Confucius—and the testing of it, the straining against the lines to ‘make it new’ and to render the tradition fresh and personal.”³² However, it must be said that Holaday herself questioned her own thesis, and wondered if Pound himself ever came into contact with the paintings described in *Painting in the Far East*. She wants to believe that Pound was “influenced by the Chinese approach towards art at an early stage in his career,”³³ but even so, just like Qian also states, “there is no question that Binyon must be singled out for his pivotal role in fostering an early admiration for Chinese art and aesthetic within England and, to a lesser degree, America.”³⁴ To what extent Pound was directly influenced by Binyon is difficult to prove. The aim of this essay, however, is to show Binyon’s modernity and the similarities between Binyon and Pound’s poetics.

Certain tenets in *Blast* resemble Binyon’s ideas in *The Flight of the Dragon*. Pound writes that the Vorticist does not rely upon “similarity or analogy, not upon likeness or mimicry [sic].” He writes that Vorticists want to “leave nature and men alone” and “in painting [the Vorticist] does not rely upon the likeness to a beloved grandmother or a caressable mistress.”³⁵ In *The Flight of the Dragon* Binyon writes that it is “not essential that the subject matter should represent or be like anything in nature.”³⁶ Earlier in *The Flight of the Dragon*, Binyon had already mentioned imitation of nature as the reason for “much of the unsatisfactoriness in European theories of art.” He refers to Aristotle’s theory on art, which focuses on imitative art. Binyon was not much of a

³² Ibid., 30.

³³ Ibid., 31.

³⁴ Qian, “Pound and Chinese Art in the ‘British Museum Era,’” 101.

³⁵ Pound, “Vortex Pound,” 154.

³⁶ Binyon, *The Flight of the Dragon*, 21.

supporter of the rooted European idea “that art is, in some sense or another, an imitation of nature, a consequence of the imitative instinct of mankind.”³⁷ According to Binyon it “is not man’s earthly surrounding, tamed to his desires, that inspires the artist; but the universe, in its wholeness and its freedom” that becomes a “spiritual home” and thus inspires the artist.³⁸ The attitude against mimesis was widespread at the time. Binyon adopted this view from studying Chinese and Japanese art, in which art came from “within,” and which was much more interpretative than British art. Around 1911 Pound also underwent a change, a “metamorphosis” from Late-Romantic to Modernist poet,³⁹ influenced by the Fenollosa papers he received, and possibly also influenced by Binyon. Pound’s use of eastern art may have been instrumental to a reorganisation of his views of representation. “Pound explains the Vorticist’s capture of the world through energy as ‘conceiving instead of merely observing and reflecting’;⁴⁰ and no longer accepted “mimetic naturalism” as an ideal. He rejected “mimetic naturalism,” which is what Binyon also recommended, but it does not mean that he was directly influenced by Binyon.

Another subject touched upon in *The Flight of the Dragon* is rhythm. Binyon asks what rhythm is, and concludes that “no one seems to know precisely.”⁴¹ Although he admits that it is very hard to define rhythm, he also believes that we can “often recognise what we cannot define.” He refers to the movements when we dance. The power that “comes into play” far “surpasses ... the application of brute strength and muscular

³⁷ Ibid., 10.

³⁸ Ibid., 25.

³⁹ Qtd. in Corbett, 185.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 188.

⁴¹ Binyon, *The Flight of the Dragon*, 15.

effort.”⁴² Rhythm is something else, something smoother that has its own engine. In the spring 1912 edition of *Rhythm*, the literary magazine edited by John Middleton Murry, Binyon writes:

A rhythm imposed is no rhythm; it is like the scansion-tortured words of the incompetent versifier. Rhythm is subtle and natural, unendingly various, like the waves of wind in the corn. We must feel it in ourselves before we can express it. We must be wooers; neither slaves, nor enslavers.⁴³

It comes down to moving away from imitation again and trying to do what the great masters of China and Japan could do with so little effort, with only one touch of the brush. Though this sounds promising, it remains rather vague. Binyon was torn between two poles: the desire to liberate artists from strict adherence to nature and the need to position the artist within a cultural and literary heritage.

Laurence Binyon, T.S. Eliot, and Marinetti

Binyon’s reputation as a respected critic came from his position at the British Museum, where he established the Department of Oriental Prints and Drawings, and from his critical work. One of T.S. Eliot’s letters to his mother testifies to Binyon’s position, but also reveals his image of outmoded poet. When Eliot gave a lecture entitled “Modern Tendencies in Poetry” to the Arts League of Service at the Conference Hall on October 28, 1919,⁴⁴ for an audience of about three hundred people, he reports that it was quite a success, though he had a rather annoying chairman. That chairman was Laurence Binyon.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Binyon, “The Return to Poetry,” 3-4.

⁴⁴ The lecture was published in *Shama 'a* (Urur, Adjar, India), in the April 1920 issue, under the title “Modern Tendencies in Poetry”.

Binyon, is a middle aged poetic celebrity who evidently knew nothing about me except that I was supposed to be the latest rage and he didn't understand it and didn't like it. He did his best, but thought it his duty in his introductory speech to refute – or at least deny – everything he thought I would say. I carefully avoided mentioning any living poet by name, which disappointed the people who had come to hear me praise Pound or condemn Rupert Brooke, or put my foot into it in any of the ways in which I might bring popular fury onto myself.⁴⁵

Eliot avoided mentioning “any living poet by name” not to irritate Laurence Binyon and other more conservative minds. Three weeks after this lecture Eliot finished writing “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” which was first published in the *Egoist* in two parts, in the September 1919, and the December 1919, issues. According to James Edwin Miller it is “likely” that the “substance of the lecture ended up in Eliot’s most famous essay.”⁴⁶ Though there are not that many differences between the lecture and the essay, it is difficult to find out which came first, since the first part of the essay was published before the lecture, and the second part, published in December, was not that different from the first. What is interesting, though, is that the term *tradition* itself is absent from the lecture.⁴⁷ The connection between past poetry and present poetry is more emphasized in the essay than it was in the lecture, which Binyon surely appreciated much more. Binyon the conservationist never looked at the future of poetry without looking at the past, in line with Botticelli’s vision, and in keeping with Eliot’s essay, in which the word *tradition* is used ten times. Among other things he argues that “no poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation

⁴⁵ Valerie Eliot, 346.

⁴⁶ Miller, 331.

⁴⁷ White, 373.

of his relation to the dead poets and artists.”⁴⁸ And while some say that the dead writers are remote from us and that “we know so much more than they did,” that is only because *they* are “that which we know.” He was in favour of tradition, and writes that it should only be “discouraged” when followed from one generation to another because “novelty is better than repetition,” and the “past” is “altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past.” Another key phrase in Eliot’s text is that “the poet must develop or procure the consciousness of the past and that he should continue to develop this consciousness throughout his career.”⁴⁹ Though the two poets became good friends later on,⁵⁰ the letter Eliot sent to his mother on November 10, 1919, gives the impression that Binyon was very much opposed to renewal and not a great supporter of contemporary poetry. From his viewpoint, Eliot was right, but Binyon was in favour of innovation, though not necessarily in the form of modernism.

His essay “Poetry and Modern Life” (1918), discussed in the next section, clearly explains this, but already in 1912, in an interview with the *New York Times*, Binyon sounded progressive. In the interview he states that “Chinese art ten centuries ago was more modern than our art of to-day. By modern we mean intimate, near and actual to us.”⁵¹ One reason why Binyon did not consider his younger contemporaries “modern,” he says is because they are “hindered by the delusion that art is the mere imitation of nature.” Binyon continues: “[t]he whole point is ... an understanding of the principle of change. The Chinese artists understood this principle that underlies all life, for them the

⁴⁸ T.S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism*, 44.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁵⁰ In the 1930s Binyon and Eliot corresponded on Binyon’s Dante translation, in 1940 Eliot offered Binyon to include some of his poems in an anthology, and after Binyon’s death Eliot proposed to establish a Binyon bursary at his old University, Oxford, to allow students the pleasure of a visit abroad.

⁵¹ “We Need More Emotional Understanding in Our Art.”

ideal was continual movement, constant fluidity,”⁵² which almost sounds exactly like the definition of Pound’s Vortex. Binyon told the *New York Times* that he liked the Americans’ “instinctive love of change, the demand for something new and growing, the reaction against rigidity.”⁵³ He wanted the same in European art, and believed in Futurism and Cubism, though he also said he did not understand the Cubists’ programme, and he thought “their productions were rot.” The Futurists “have, perhaps, that idea of getting at the underlying rhythm and meaning of things,” but they cannot “carry it out.” “The movement has been sadly commercialized by a lot of people who have no ideas.”⁵⁴ Binyon was a supporter of Futurism in theory, but not in practice.

But Futurism was the future. When Pound gave a lecture on the French troubadour poet Arnaut Daniel on March 12, 1912, he was confronted with an avant-gardist Futurist movement that scooped up all the attention. Marinetti’s lecture, also scheduled that night, was attended by a huge crowd and was “fully reported in the morning edition of *The Daily Chronicle*.” The subsequent days articles on Marinetti kept appearing in the *Morning Leader* and *The Times*.⁵⁵ Sir Philip Burne-Jones called the Futurists “a band of maniacs” and said that Futurism wasn’t “really worthwhile discussing” because, he said, “we are not dealing with Art in any form.”⁵⁶ Ultimately Marinetti received a lot of attention in London, but did not have that many supporters. Of the London artists C. R. W. Nevinson was the only one with name and fame to join Marinetti, and in 1914, when the Italian artist planned to appear at the Coliseum for an entire week, from Monday June 15 to Saturday June 21, the curtain was lowered after

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Rainey, 195.

⁵⁶ Qtd. in Rainey, 198.

fifteen minutes, because the stage manager feared that “people would start throwing things.”⁵⁷ According to *The Times* Marinetti mistook his audience,

when he tried to deliver an academic exposition of Futurist principles at the Coliseum, he had, in consequence, to put up with a rude reception from a gallery which seemed fully qualified to give him a lesson in his own “Art of Noises.”⁵⁸

The press loved Marinetti the troublemaker and the controversy his visits to London provoked.⁵⁹ The Vorticists were perhaps the Futurist’s fieriest opponents. In *Blast 2* Wyndham Lewis called the Futurist “a hypocrite who takes himself in first”⁶⁰ and Ezra Pound condemned Marinetti for wanting to destroy his beloved Venice. Futurism was described as “a picturesque, superficial and romantic rebellion of young Milanese painters against the Academism which surrounded them.”⁶¹ Of course, the movement was much more than that, but the Vorticists’s reaction and rejection may find an explanation in their concern that so few people cared about them or their magazine. Moreover, other artists such as Fry, Sicker, Bell, or Hulme, did not care to enter into a “prolonged dispute” with Marinetti, Nevinson, and their supporters. Futurism was never a real threat to English art.⁶²

Considering his classical upbringing and high regard for tradition, it may seem surprising that Binyon was so positive about Futurism in his interview with the *New York Times*. He clearly saw the futurist manifesto’s professed intention to want to destroy the art and literature in the British Museum as a metaphor for the movement’s love of the

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 209.

⁵⁸ Qtd. in Levenson, 42.

⁵⁹ Rainey, 198.

⁶⁰ Lewis, 42.

⁶¹ “The Melodrama of Modernity”.

⁶² Tillyard, 224.

future rather than their aversion to the past. The First Futurist Manifesto, published on the front page of *Le Figaro* on February 20, 1909, incites people “to destroy the museums, the libraries,” and “fight against moralism, feminism and all opportunistic and utilitarian meannesses.”⁶³ The Futurists were tired of art that relied too heavily on classical heritage, praised the age of the machine, and glorified “war - the only health giver of the world - militarism, patriotism, the destructive arm of the Anarchist, the beautiful Ideas that kill, the contempt for woman.”⁶⁴ Binyon, ever modest, was the complete opposite of the flamboyant Marinetti, especially if we keep in mind his most famous motto, “slowness is beauty,” which clashes with just about anything Marinetti stood for, and yet Binyon thought that the Futurists believed in the “idea of getting at the underlying rhythm of things.” He appreciated that the Futurists, just like him, despised “imitation of external things,” and was rather pleased with “the shock” they gave to the public.⁶⁵

Poetry and Modern Life

The final text we want to discuss in our rereading of Binyon’s critical work is “Poetry and Modern Life,” a lecture delivered at the Royal Institution of Great Britain on May 31, 1918, not *that* long before Eliot’s reading, in which Binyon said that “[c]hange is the secret of life; and with a new generation, [the modernists of the early twentieth century] showing a remarkable abundance and variety of gift, a reaction from the aims and methods of the last generation was inevitable.”⁶⁶ In the lecture, Binyon presents his thoughts on the future of poetry. He asks his audience “to approach” several issues

⁶³ Marinetti, 124.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ “We Need More Emotional Understanding in Our Art”.

⁶⁶ Binyon, *Poetry and Modern Life*, 7.

“without prejudice.” The first question Binyon asks his audience is whether they think it might be “plausible to claim that a new kind of poetry” should emerge after the war, if it is to be “an adequate expression of this age and of its spirit?” He asks how much truth there is in that claim, and also “in what sense” poetry can be new? He continues by saying that “while some cherish the great traditions of English poetry so ardently that they are loth to accept innovations,” others are for boldly throwing over the past, shaking free from the tyranny of the “dead hand” and striking out into the future.⁶⁷ Pound, of course, was the latter type. Binyon was somewhat in the middle, but went as far as to question the value of poetry other than as decoration. He believed that after such a cruel war people would need a way to vent their emotions, but said that writers of his day and age could not go back to “the artifice of Tennysonian rhythms” and avoid stock metaphors and “the mellifluous rhythms in blank verse of which Tennyson was so finished a master.”⁶⁸ This is not the poet who, as Pound held it, had not rebelled enough, and who “constantly harks back to some folly of nineteenth century Europe” and who had a “disgusting attitude of respect toward predecessors.”⁶⁹ Pound seems to have exaggerated a little in his review of *The Flight of the Dragon*, but in fact Binyon’s poetics also evolved towards a more “modernist” ideal. In the 1912 interview with the *New York Times* Binyon sounded thoroughly modernist. “Poetry and Modern Life” not only confirms those earlier ideas, but endorses them, especially in its discussion of poetics.

When it comes to meter, Binyon says that “to write poetry without metre exacts a higher discipline, a stronger inspiration, and a severer sense of form than to write in

⁶⁷ Ibid., 3.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 6.

⁶⁹ Pound, “Chronicles,” 86.

metre.”⁷⁰ Yet Binyon never wrote without meter himself. “Only those who have mastered all the secrets of metre,” he said, “are really competent to discard it.”⁷¹ We can compare that statement to T.S. Eliot’s claim that “no verse is libre for the man who wants to do a good job.”⁷² Binyon appears very progressive, even modernist, in his speech; and in his plea for fresh poetry he refers to Yeats, in whose verse, he says, “you will find a sedulous sifting of diction and vocabulary, with the aim of getting rid of the dead matter of poetic tradition and discovering fresh imagery.”⁷³ Binyon’s opinion about rhythm in “Poetry and Modern Life” dovetails with Pound’s belief in musicality. Moving away from prescribed meter opens up the rhythm and allows it to flow freely, and when Binyon said that “only those who have mastered all the secrets of metre are really competent to discard it,” he must have had someone like Pound in mind. In the *ABC of Reading* Pound defines rhythm as “a form cut into TIME,” and melody as “a rhythm in which the pitch of each element is fixed by the composer.”⁷⁴ Time was everything to Pound, because bad verse is often the result of not following time relations. But he did not believe in art as a science. “You don’t ask an art instructor to give you a recipe for making a Leonardo da Vinci drawing.”⁷⁵ In Provence, Pound says, it was even considered “plagiarism to take a man’s form, just as it is now considered plagiarism to take his subject matter or plot.”⁷⁶ One could write a book about Pound’s ideas on rhythm and meter, on his interest in Greek and

⁷⁰ Binyon, *Poetry and Modern Life*, 10.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² T.S. Eliot, “Prufrock and Other Observations,” 8.

⁷³ Binyon, *Poetry and Modern Life*, 8.

⁷⁴ Pound, *The ABC of Reading*, 198.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 201.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 69.

Roman prosody for example, but the gist of it all is that he wanted the poet “to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome.”⁷⁷

Pound’s poetry is a modified version of free verse, and can be seen as a textbook example demonstrating that free verse is in no way more simplistic than conventional verse, or that it has no relation to conventional verse. Binyon supported this view on verse, he too believed in a combination of traditional and loose meter and predicted that tradition would never disappear. Almost a hundred years ago Binyon wrote: “Just now poetry finds delight in a loosening and expansion of traditional forms in a variety of experiments,” but “later, no doubt, it will return with a new joy to tighter forms and cleanly ringing metre, for it is by such change and reaction that an art lives.”⁷⁸ Not all art from the past is worth remembering, though, for he said that “a creative poet does not go to the past for the sake of what is past, but for the sake of what is permanently living.”⁷⁹ Meter is still important in contemporary poetry, but already a hundred years ago Binyon understood that the best poetry, perhaps, comes forth from a combination of meter and the loosening of traditional forms.

This is what Binyon did, twenty years later, when he was working on his translation of *The Divine Comedy* in the 1930s. He used a technique similar to Pound’s. Binyon not only wanted to communicate the sense of the words but something of Dante’s tone and of the rhythm through which that tone was conveyed. This was not merely a matter of matching, with “triple rhyme,” Dante’s terza rima. It involved a more intimate

⁷⁷ Pound, “A Retrospect,” 3.

⁷⁸ Binyon, *Poetry and Modern Life*, 10-11.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 15.

correspondence.⁸⁰ Pound did the same in his translation of the Anglo-Saxon poem “The Seafarer.” Pound’s “Seafarer” is not the same poem as the Anglo-Saxon “Seafarer.” It is an adaptation, an interpretation of the existent Anglo-Saxon version, more than merely a translation. Pound followed the style of “the Troubadour”⁸¹ and did not worry about word order or the correct modern English word for the correct Anglo-Saxon word. He only cared for the musical effects of the text. Binyon was never a Troubadour, but he was a connoisseur of poetry. He translated the *Divine Comedy* more than twenty-five years after Pound translated “The Seafarer,” using somewhat the same technique. It is probably why Pound praised Binyon’s translation, and called it the best so far, because it was different from all other Dante adaptations. After the publication of the *Inferno* Binyon asked Pound to proofread the other parts, which he was still writing. Pound was much impressed by its quality. Their correspondence between 1934 and 1938 covers more than 60 pages, mostly word by word comments by Pound on Binyon’s translation. In a letter to Binyon, Pound called it “the most interesting English version of Dante” that he had ever seen or expected to see and said it was one of the “few pieces of writing” he was thankful for.⁸² In “Hell,”⁸³ an entire essay dedicated to Binyon’s translation, Pound refers back to his first meeting with Binyon: “I found our translator in 1908 among very leaden Greeks, and in youthful eagerness I descended on the British Museum.”⁸⁴ On the next

⁸⁰ Fitzgerald, 490.

⁸¹ In the *ABC of Reading* Pound stated his poetic principles. One of them said that there should be a fusion of poetry and music, modeled after the poetry of Arnaut Daniel and other Troubadours. Moving away from a steady meter meant moving towards a smoother cadence, to ultimately try to approach the musical poetry of the troubadour. Pound’s ideal was “*writing to be sung*,” a superlative almost impossible to reach.

⁸² Pound, Ezra Pound to Laurence Binyon.

⁸³ “Hell” was first published in the April 1934 issue of *The Criterion*.

⁸⁴ Pound, “Hell,” 201.

page, Pound writes that at “any rate Dante has cured him.”⁸⁵ Pound praises Binyon for keeping Dante’s mistakes, and for having shown how little Dante needs notes.

Though Binyon and Pound were never close friends, we can call their relationship a lifelong companionship. When Ezra Pound came to London in 1908 he knew hardly anyone. Pound called himself Binyon’s protégé, or even his bull-dog, but the bull-dog soon became a stray dog that chose its own path. Pound became a rebel, whereas Binyon, a British Museum man, continued to respect and represent the establishment. Pound criticized Binyon in his review in *Blast* 2, but he also showed respect when he said that Binyon “is far from being one of the outer world,” and that his intellect is vastly superior to his predecessors.⁸⁶ Binyon was never an eccentric modernist, and his ideas were never as direct as Pound’s, Lewis’s, or Eliot’s, but his ideas about the future of poetry, especially in relation to Chinese and Japanese poetry, were very modern and adumbrated Pound’s. When Binyon is remembered today it is either as the scholar who introduced Ezra Pound to orientalism, or for his four memorable lines in “For the Fallen,” and too often as the poet in the tradition of Wordsworth and Arnold. Several of Binyon’s poetic principles in *The Art of Botticelli*, in *The Flight of the Dragon*, and especially in “Poetry and Modern Life,” however, were modernist *avant la lettre*, and not that different from Ezra Pound’s. Binyon wanted to “make it new,” and he encouraged the new generation to do so. Pound was one of those younger poets who also aspired to change poetry while keeping true to the classics, an ideal he shared with Eliot and Binyon. They both denounced mimetic art as an ideal and adopted the Chinese and Japanese vision that pursued above all things the representation of movement and rhythm rather than forms.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 202.

⁸⁶ Pound, Ezra. “Chronicles,” 112.

Binyon believed that rhythm had to come naturally, that it could not be imposed, and thought that those who truly master poetry are able to write in free verse. Rhythm was also the core of Pound's vortex, in which the swift movement of lines and rhythm found in Chinese and Japanese art is the central idea. Binyon and Pound both considered China a new Greece, an unexplored field, potentially prompting a new renaissance. Binyon led the way for Pound during his first years in London, and what began as a mentorship became a lifelong companionship. The overlaps in their poetics reveal an aspect of Laurence Binyon's work that was previously unknown, thus freeing him of the image of an old dusty poet who constantly harks back to the poets of nineteenth century Europe.

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