

Little Magazines & Modernism

New Approaches

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Introduction

Suzanne W. Churchill and Adam McKible

This field, this wilderness, in which we were so recently a lonely pioneer, will soon be dotted with shacks, perhaps even with palaces.

—*Harriet Monroe, Poetry 6, no. 5 (September 1915), 315.*

The Muse was on the make hereabouts: patronesses had been discovering her; prizes were multiplying; newspapers were giving critics their head; poetry magazines, mushrooms or hardier plants, were springing up overnight; it was raining anthologies—boom times!

—“*Casual Comment,*” *The Dial 64 (April 25, 1918), 410.*

Editorial comments like these register the excitement generated by the Little Renaissance of the early part of the twentieth century—“boom times!” for alternative reviews such as *Poetry*, *The Dial*, *The Masses*, *The New Freewoman*, and *The Little Review*.¹ Little magazines seemed to pop up daily, racing to print the latest unorthodox ideas or revolutionary platforms. These periodicals were, in large part, the center of Anglo-American modernism in the early decades of the twentieth century, and they were considered vital by the men and women who were busy shaping the cultural and political landscape.² Gorham Munson, whose work appeared in such influential journals as *Secession*, *Broom*, and *SN4*, notes the central place of little magazines, in his memoir, *The Awakening Twenties*, in a chapter entitled “Magazine Rack of the Washington Square Book Shop”:

A number of us impecunious young writers were regular patrons of its magazine stand. Magazines priced at fifteen cents to thirty-five cents we could afford, and many an exciting quarter hour was spent looking over the new issues displayed on the rack just inside the shop’s entrance.

It was a very selective rack. One could not find the big-circulation magazines ... Most of the fifteen or so magazines carried by the Washington Square had no circulation whatever in [mainstream America].

In what a high-pitched anticipatory mood we ducked into this book shop once or twice a week to see what was new on its magazine rack. Here were the publications of the new movements in American art and thought and literature. Here were the reviews that were stimulating the young. Here were the magazines we wanted to write for—were, in fact, already writing for one or two. Even before the issue containing a book review we had

1 Lisa M. Steinman refers to the “so-called Little Renaissance of 1914 to 1918,” in *Science, Technology, and American Modernist Poets* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 20.

2 The essays in this volume address Anglophone little magazines, but the phenomenon of modernist little magazines was global and multilingual.

contributed could reach us by mail, it would be on sale in the Washington Square Book Shop rack; and when that happened, the excitement of our visit was doubled.³

Like the Washington Square bookshop in which they were displayed, little magazines provided a small space for many writers, artists, and activists to meet and test out a seemingly limitless number of new ideas.

The emphasis on collective groundbreaking that characterized little magazines in their heyday gave way to subsequent critical practices of strip-mining, in which individual artists were extracted from the heterogeneous terrain in which they first published, and singled out as the elite geniuses of modernism. Attention to the individual achievements of modernist writers such as James Joyce, T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and Gertrude Stein, though necessary and important, can obscure the extent to which their writings and reputations were made possible by little magazines today. It also can eclipse the energetic collaboration that generated so much modernist creativity and that still crackles on the pages of little magazines today. In *Camera Work*, which was published out of Alfred Steiglitz's art gallery at 291 Fifth Avenue, New York, artist Charles Demuth captures this sense of camaraderie in his response to the question "What is 291?": "'Let us start a magazine,—a gallery,—a theatre': This is always in the air; seldom: 'Let *me* create a moment.'" ⁴ Even Ezra Pound, the master promoter of modernist elites, recognized the necessity of the collective for little magazines: "Where there is not the binding force of some kind of agreement, however vague or unanalyzed, between three or four writers, it seems improbably that the need of a periodical really exists. Everyone concerned would probably be happier publishing individual volumes."⁵

Little magazines draw attention not only to the "binding force" that drew disparate modernist writers and artists to collaborate, but also to the heterogeneity of their efforts, goals, and ideals. Little magazines acted as social forums for writers of different genders, races, and nationalities. For scholars today, they provide loci of identification and difference, allowing us to recover lines of connection, influence, conflict, and resistance that entangle the many strands of modernism. For example, *The Little Review*, although best known for publishing such experimental works as James Joyce's *Ulysses* from its New York offices, began in Chicago broadcasting the anarchist views of Emma Goldman. And the office of *The Liberator*, a leftist little magazine, provided a place for Mike Gold, a budding Communist from the Jewish streets of the Lower East Side, to overhear the Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, a wildly eccentric German immigrant, recite her Dadaist poetry to Claude McKay, a Jamaican sonneteer with connections to radical political organizations in England and a growing prominence in the flourishing Harlem Renaissance. Despite their differences, figures such as Joyce, Goldman, Gold, Freytag-Loringhoven, and McKay identified themselves as modernists, both to each other and to the public, by writing for and reading little magazines. Alfred Kreyborg, one of the greatest

3 Gorham B. Munson, *The Awakening Twenties: A Memoir-History of a Literary Period* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985), 87–8.

4 Charles Demuth, "What is 291?" *Camera Work* 47 (1914–15), 32.

5 Ezra Pound, "Small Magazines," *The English Journal* 19, no. 9 (November 1930), 703.

initiators and enthusiasts of modernist little magazines (he edited *The Glebe* and *Others*, and participated in several other little magazine ventures), describes this process of self-discovery in his memoir of the period: “Just as the men and women one discovered among the Imagists and the finer pages of *Poetry* and *The Little Review* had come up out of nowhere, so with these men and women [in *Others*]. This nowhere had at last assumed a recognizable shape and sentience and one was able to say something sharply relating to a person and his place.”⁶

The ability to “say something sharply” may indeed be one of the distinguishing features not only of modernist little magazines, but also of modernism in general. Ann Douglas characterizes “mongrel Manhattan” during the rise of modernism as a place of clashing ideas and personalities, and Christine Stansell reminds us that bohemian modernism was often the product of raucous dialogues between seemingly incongruent figures, rather than the interior monologues of subsequently canonized “masters”: “One story of modernism often told begins with the exiled, solitary artist gazing out from his rented room onto the streets of the strange and unknowable city below. But another starts off with an eclectic assortment of people in a downtown café—women and men, patrician-born and barely educated, Yankees and Russian Jews—absorbedly talking, feeling their odd concourse to be in league with something new on the streets outside.”⁷ Little magazines provide a record of the large-scale conversation that became modernism, an odd and absorbing concourse that cannot be reduced to a single movement or coherent set of principles. These periodicals—“rich, dialogic texts”—reveal modernism to be a complex network of artistic, social, political, economic, and technological activities.⁸ Presenting multiple voices and perspectives, crossing disciplinary boundaries, and both resisting and engaging mass culture, little magazines collectively represent the development of modernist art and modern ideas at least as well as Prufrock’s monologue.

Indeed, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” was first published in the June 1915 *Poetry*, alongside poems by Bliss Carman, Arthur Davison Ficke, and Skipwith Cannell—poets who were, according to the editors, “well known to our readers.” Eliot, in contrast, was introduced as “a young American poet resident in England, who has published nothing hitherto in this country.”⁹ First billing was given to the exotic free verse landscapes of the Syrian-born immigrant, Ajan Syrian. Eliot’s poem appears last, tucked between a selection of conventional rhymed lyrics by Dorothy Dudley, Georgia Wood Pangbom, and William Griffith, and a prose section that included a eulogy for Rupert Brooke, a “symbol of the waste of war,” and reviews of Edgar Lee Master’s *Spoon River Anthology* and *Some Imagist Poems—An Anthology*. Little magazines thus embed great modernist works like “The Love

6 Kreyborg, *Troubador: An American Autobiography* (New York: Sagamore Press, 1957), 89.

7 Christine Stansell, *American Moderns: Bohemian New York and the Creation of a New Century* (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 2000), 8.

8 Sean Latham and Robert Scholes, “The Changing Profession: The Rise of Periodical Studies,” *PMLA* 121, no. 2 (March 2006), 528. See this article for a discussion of the dialogic nature of periodicals.

9 “Notes,” *Poetry* 6, no. 3 (June 1915), 158–9.

Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” in the literary and social discourses, political debates, and historical events of the day, allowing us to see the famous monologue as part of the larger dialogue of modernity.

A Definition of Little Magazines

Diverse in size, agenda, and longevity, modernist little magazines are, like modernism itself, vexingly difficult to define. To define little magazines by a small circulation would exclude journals such as *The Liberator*, which had tens of thousands of subscribers, compared to the few hundred readers of *The Egoist* and *Others*. To set parameters based on financial instability leaves out such journals as *The Dial*, which was bankrolled by the independently wealthy Scofield Thayer and J. S. Watson, Jr. To limit lifespan would eliminate *Poetry*, which is still being published today. To describe little magazines as venues for aesthetically experimental writing excludes political venues such as *The Masses* or *The Messenger*, which often favored traditional literary forms. And to deny institutional affiliation excludes journals such as *Crisis* and *Opportunity*, the organs of the NAACP and the National Urban League, respectively. As William Troy admits in his 1930 attempt to eulogize the genre, “The genealogy of magazines offers one of the most confusing of studies. To pursue the different strains of heredity, to separate the tangled criss-cross of influences, when the subject is not even as dependably concrete as a man, but only one of the more elusive and insubstantial of man’s expressions, is a pretty nearly hopeless task.”¹⁰ Writing the same year with considerably more bravado, Ezra Pound is undaunted by the task of defining magazines, declaring that, “a review is not a human being saving its soul, but a species of food to be eaten.”¹¹

For the purposes of this volume, we have classified the species as follows: little magazines are non-commercial enterprises founded by individuals or small groups intent upon publishing the experimental works or radical opinions of untried, unpopular, or under-represented writers. Defying mainstream tastes and conventions, some little magazines aim to uphold higher artistic and intellectual standards than their commercial counterparts, while others seek to challenge conventional political wisdom and practice. These two approaches, aesthetic experimentation and political radicalism, are not necessarily mutually exclusive, although this was often the case prior to the 1930s. Because of their often unorthodox contents, little magazines appeal to small, sometimes elite (or elitist) readerships willing to exercise their minds to comprehend aesthetic movements such as Futurism, Imagism, and Dada, or to contemplate political movements such as anarchism, socialism, and feminism. Although the term “little” refers to the magazine’s small audience (as compared to mass market audiences), rather than to its size, significance, budget, or lifespan, these journals are characteristically but not exclusively small-budget operations with

10 William Troy, “The Story of Little Magazines,” *Bookman* 70, no. 5 (January 1930), 481.

11 Pound, “Small Magazines,” 697.

short runs.¹² Whatever the format, scope, or preferred topics of conversation, little magazines tend to share two features: a vexed relationship to a larger, mainstream public and an equally vexed relationship to money.

Current Trends in Periodical Studies

The excitement first generated by little magazines is being rekindled today by modernist scholars who refuse to treat these periodicals merely as handy anthologies of great modernist works. As Mark Morrisson suggests in his preface to this volume, scholars interested in the culture of modernity, twentieth-century print culture, commercial culture, gender, race, politics, editorial theory, and digital archiving have all turned to little magazines as primary texts. “The Rise of Periodical Studies,” heralded in a recent issue of *PMLA* by Sean Latham and Robert Scholes, indicates a widespread resurgence of interest not only in little magazines, but also in mass-market periodicals and daily newspapers. Indeed, Latham and Scholes argue that periodical studies have, until recently, focused too exclusively on little magazines, valorizing literary and artistic ventures over commercial enterprises. They argue that the distinction between art and commerce is spurious: “The rise of cultural studies enables us to see this distinction as artificial, since high literature, art, and advertising have mingled in periodicals from the earliest years, and major authors have been published in magazines both little and big.”¹³ We agree that attention to the wide array of periodicals can enhance our understanding of modernity. But though all periodicals may be of interest, they are not all alike.

Distinguishing between the littles and the bigs (and even “those in-between”) helps us understand some of the key differences and divisions that animated modernist literary production. The much vaunted opposition between commercial magazines and the smaller ventures with “loftier” aims and “purer” purposes, however artificial, nevertheless served to motivate a great many modernist publications, influencing how and what people wrote and where they published. As recent scholarship has shown,¹⁴ there was a great deal of overlap and cross-fertilization between the various spheres of modern print culture, as both mass-market and non-commercial magazines borrowed each other’s tactics to engage in the same project of creating

12 For further definitions of little magazines, see T. S. Eliot, “The Idea of a Literary Review,” *New Criterion* 4 (1926), 1–6; Allen Tate, “The Function of the Critical Quarterly,” in *Essays of Four Decades* (New York: Morrow, 1959), 45–55; Lionel Trilling, “The Function of the Little Magazine,” in *The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society* (New York: Harcourt, 1949, 1979), 89–99; Frederick J. Hoffman, Charles Allen, and Carolyn Ulrich, *The Little Magazine: A History and Bibliography* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1946); Paul Bixler, “Little Magazine, What Now?” *The Antioch Review* 50 (1992), 75–88; Reed Whittmore, *Little Magazines* (1963); Felix Pollak, “Elitism and the Littleness of Little Magazines,” *Southwest Review* 61 (1976), 297–303.

13 Latham and Scholes, “The Rise of Periodical Studies,” 519.

14 Morrisson’s Preface provides an overview of this scholarship, and we will not replicate his effort here.

a modern literary world.¹⁵ All publications, great and small, were part of a larger moment in publishing history, and there was a great deal of slippage, dialogue, and interaction between them. Nonetheless, it is still important to develop a typology of periodicals.¹⁶ The modernists themselves considered the distinctions between little magazines and mass-market periodicals to be crucial. Those who wrote for, edited, and published little magazines often walked a tightrope between rejecting and reforming mass audiences, and if we erase the line between little magazines and mass-market publications, we risk losing sight of this precarious balancing act.

A Critical History of Little Magazines

Given the excitement generated by little magazines in the first half of the twentieth century and today, it is not surprising that critical interest in these periodicals has been fairly sustained from the outset. The impulse to document and eulogize the genre can be traced to the previously quoted 1930 essays by William Troy and Ezra Pound. Both *The Dial* and *The Little Review* folded in 1929, generating a sense that the great age of little magazines had come to an end: “It would seem as if the time were at hand for the sad offices of the valedictorian, for the dusty labors of the chronicler,” Troy lamented. “It would seem as if another chapter in our literary history—one of the liveliest and most colorful—is rounding to an end.”¹⁷ Of course, the little magazine story did not end; new chapters and plot twists emerged: the politically turbulent thirties generated a wave of primarily leftist periodicals such as *The Anvil*, *Challenge*, and *The Partisan Review*, and the forties witnessed a resurgence of literary journals, including *The Kenyon Review*, *The Sewanee Review*, and *The Quarterly Review of Literature*. “As compared with the little magazines of the Nineteen Twenties, which were informal and even irresponsible, those of the Nineteen Forties are correct and academic,” Malcolm Cowley observed, noting the tendency of the latter generation to be affiliated with and bankrolled by universities.¹⁸

If little magazines got serious in the forties, the decade also produced the most significant and comprehensive history of little magazines, Hoffman, Allen, and Ulrich’s *The Little Magazine: A History and Bibliography*. Published in 1946, this reference work established the parameters of American little magazine studies for most of the past fifty years, and its continual utility to generations of scholars stands as a testament to its insights and to the information it offers.¹⁹ As Cary Nelson observes, Hoffman’s book “remains the single most useful source for the study of

15 See Robert Scholes’s Afterword in this volume for a discussion of the overlaps among “Small Magazines, Large Ones, and Those In-Between.”

16 Alan Golding’s essay in this volume demonstrates the value of precise typologies when he distinguishes between *The Dial* and *Vanity Fair*, arguing that “different magazines’ relation to capital is *itself* an ideological difference inseparable from their aesthetic stances,” 73.

17 Troy, “The Story of Little Magazines,” 476.

18 Malcolm Cowley, “The Little Magazines Growing Up,” *New York Times Book Review*, September 14, 1947, 5.

19 Hereafter we will refer to the authors of this volume as Hoffman.