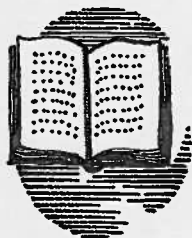


## CONCLUSION:

### Reflections upon Little Magazine History



#### CHAPTER XII

soil. There was no question of survival in the twenties and thirties; they were a time calling for ceaseless literary endeavor, and providing the means in a variety of interesting ways. But the first five years of this decade were difficult ones for little magazine activities. Wars are a great drain upon personal and national energies. Writers have had little time for their trade. Many of them were occupied with nonliterary tasks, by necessity or by choice. The public was often indifferent to their predicament.

The poet's trumpeting for a political and military cause may very well improve the quality of radio and cinema fare. But in so submitting to the demands of an issue too large and too immediate to be solved personally, he has necessarily and obviously to abandon any personal views which may run counter to it or confuse its singleness of direction. The war demands neither contemplation nor equivocation; the poet must forego both in the interests of action. The effects upon him, though perhaps only temporary, are nevertheless felt. This problem is brilliantly analyzed for us by Andrews Wanning in a recent issue of *Furioso*. To write stirring and yet good poetry in a time of war, he says, "would need skill in the use of words, some dramatic imagination, and a certain indifference to the immortality of one's work."<sup>1</sup> The

<sup>1</sup> "Ruminations Over the Dilemma of Poets in Wartime," *Furioso*, II, 47 (1943).

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technique of direct persuasion is, however, not entirely consistent with the poet's more complex view of his world. The emotional quality of such persuasion is direct, unequivocal, and available in dozens of journalistic accounts of events. But the egocentricity of the poet must be abandoned. This egoism, of which much has already been said in this essay, is not of necessity antisocial, but it does judge public events from an aesthetically private vantage point. The poet demands that the privacy of his judgment be respected. The pressure of events may well force him into a kind of poetic journalism, employing the obvious idiom of cultural commonplace, the kind of political comment to which the reader turns to be assured of what he already believes in.

Another disadvantage of such times as these is the tacit acceptance of a circumscribed language for poetry. Patriotism has a simple language all its own. Heroism demands abstractions and slogans, by which a human act is viewed as typical rather than individual. Any subtlety of interpretation is a definite barrier to understanding on this level. For this reason, the poet is limited in his choice of materials and in his attitude toward them. A single act of courage must be regarded as typical of the courage of a nation; the treachery of the enemy is also seen as an all-encompassing evil. This necessity strikes a hard blow at the integrity of the poet; for he is frequently called upon to make poetry out of public emotions of which he has had little or no personal knowledge. Occasionally a poet of some conviction and talent may so treat an incident for its inherent aesthetic value, allowing the reader to look at its beauty or tragedy without interference. This is the case in Dylan Thomas' poem, "Among Those Killed in the Dawn Raid Was a Man Aged One Hundred":

When the morning was waking over the war  
He put on his clothes and stepped out and he died,  
The locks yawned loose and a blast blew them wide,  
He dropped where he loved on the burst pavement stone  
And the funeral grains of the slaughtered floor.  
Tell his street on its back he stopped a sun  
And the craters of his eyes grew spring shoots and fire  
When all the keys shot from the locks, and rang.<sup>2</sup>

The ideal of the artist is by no means completely abandoned, even in a time of absorption in international military affairs. Indeed, some writers are more than ever convinced that "Now" is the time for a re-

<sup>2</sup> *New Poems*, Norfolk, Connecticut, 1943, n.p.

newed affirmation of aesthetic aims and purposes. The danger, they declare, is imminent; the real enemy is the host of men and the pressure of circumstance which will serve to mislead the artist. The little magazine, therefore, needs to be rededicated to a very serious purpose:

"So it is necessary for the real artists and intellectuals and scientists to be continuously alert to the attempts to divert and confuse them, and it is necessary for them to define and understand more and more clearly their own and their contemporaries and their predecessors work, and to know the nature of their society and of past societies, and to ensure that work which they are doing will be presented and find its audience and produce the full effect of its validity and not be suppressed by the thousand and one means the controlling group has of effecting suppression."<sup>3</sup>

The affirmation of the poet may seem strange in these times, but it has the entire valid history of twentieth century experiment supporting it. In the opinion of William Carlos Williams, whose entire life has been linked with this history, the poem remains the primary means for focusing the world. This value should not be "seduced by political urgencies." The poem is a definition of reality; that definition must not be allowed to become a trite political commonplace. The political complexion of any society, says Williams, is only the "surface show." Beneath it life is a complex of warring motives, which only the poet can understand. Successful campaigns to secure a unity of purpose may be tolerated and indeed are necessary in times of emergency, but they must not be mistaken as the true reality.<sup>4</sup>

Thus there are some little magazines striving to hold to the sanctity of the aesthetic imperative. The right to disagree, because one's conscience does not allow agreement, is hard to maintain in a time when right and wrong seem so simply divided and so dependent upon the fluctuations of military power. But such a magazine as *Retort* has held to it, in the face of increasing pressure against all but the single major disagreement with Fascism and the totalitarian state. The magazine was begun in 1942, "as an organ of expression for the independent left, those radicals who have lost faith in the traditional dogmas and ready-made formulas of the revolutionary movement, but who have not succumbed to despair or made their peace with the status quo."<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> "The Program," *Now* (New York), 1, 5 (August 1941).

<sup>4</sup> "Midas: A Proposal for a Magazine," *Now* (New York), 1, 18-24 (August 1941).

<sup>5</sup> "Retorting," *Retort*, 1, 56 (Spring 1943).

The all-out drive against Nazism has recently occupied the attention of many little magazines. Some of them began with a deliberate intention of avoiding commitment on social and political issues but have since the outbreak of war unhesitatingly joined the anti-Nazi front. *Wales*, for example, a magazine of great merit, has announced its intention of opposing Nazism of all sorts, including the "local variety": "Our fight will be against any establishment of Fascist principles in this country. When we have finished the war there are forces which will gladly set up such a system in this country. That is what we shall have to fight if we are to live."<sup>6</sup> Similarly, *The New Alliance* of Edinburgh committed itself to a struggle against the enemy in 1940.

England's *Horizon* began in 1940 with the intention of biding its time. In the opinion of its editor, Cyril Connolly, political activity has too often acted to prevent the creation of good work. It is the privilege of the artist to wait for social issues to "clear of themselves." "Our standards are aesthetic," he told his subscribers, "and our politics are in abeyance. This will not always be the case, because as events take shape the policy of artists and intellectuals will become clearer, the policy which leads them to economic security, to the atmosphere in which they can create, and to the audience by whom they will be appreciated. At the moment civilization is on the operating table and we sit in the waiting room."<sup>7</sup>

The effect of such an announced policy upon the appearance of the magazine was immediate. The emphasis of the first issues is upon the direct impression of the poet and upon the critic's large evaluation of culture. The value of the magazine is that it encouraged writers to write "on the subjects about which their feelings are deepest," and thus avoided the superficial glare of the political headline. Inevitably, perhaps, the magazine shifted its position, as the war became more immediate, shocking the artist into joining in one way or another. Here the dilemma of the artist in a time of war was brilliantly illustrated. In his own mind he was perhaps desperately opposed to authoritarian control; yet this opposition is after all only one side of his desire for independence. And, in the opinion of such men as Stephen Spender, the war has asked for a response which is beyond the poet's competence. To Spender's apparent return to the doctrine of poetic immediacy, enunciated by him in such places as the *Penguin New Writing* and in his recent book, *Life and the Poet*, more determined and convinced

<sup>6</sup> Editorial, *Wales*, x, 254 (October 1939).

<sup>7</sup> Editorial, *Horizon*, 1, 5 (January 1940).

critics objected strenuously. The British *Now*, reviewing Spender's most recent remarks, declared that his doctrine of aesthetic freedom was essentially a false one and harmful to his own work: "The contradictions implicit in his own attitude, most notably his refusal to admit art as something fashioned by its time, have led Mr. Spender to the slack writing and over-simplification contained specially in the first and last chapters, and at intervals all through his book."<sup>8</sup>

The titles of two American magazines, *Decision* and *Direction*, might well give a clue to their respective reasons for being. *Decision* was established by Klaus Mann in January 1941. He was supported by an impressive board of editorial advisers, which included his distinguished father. The magazine announced itself as "A Review of Free Culture," committed to the establishment and clarification of "a new humanism" which would counter the depersonalizing effects of Nazi tyranny. In *Decision* the aesthetic and moral incentives were to be firmly united in a cause; yet Mann did not wish its contribution to fall prey to the accusation of chauvinism. "We shall try," he said in *Decision*'s first issue, "to approach the great problems of modern life, not with the perfunctory curiosity of reporters nor with the routine pathos of politicians, but with the consuming fervor a good philosopher experiences in examining the intricacies of some vitally significant moot question, a good soldier when fighting for the cause he believes in."<sup>9</sup>

In its twelve numbers one finds a variety of direct or indirect comments upon the necessity for a free culture, given the unity of fervent partisanship for a cause. In most respects, *Decision* demonstrates better than any other magazine of its time the strength of political conviction in the artist and the power which a political decision can be given if it is backed by aesthetic agreement. One of the magazine's weaknesses, however, is the direct result of this sincerity. Out of respect for the courage of Nazi-held countries, *Decision* presented "anthologies" of the work of various writers from each of them. The nationalist motive for selection is an artificial one at best. There is also much confusion over the question of one's attitude toward the nation in which so many of the contributors had found a temporary refuge. How far can one go in praising American literature without overstepping the bounds of gratitude? It was a pardonable weakness to find many Europeans grateful to America and a little self-conscious about it all. *Decision* might ultimately be praised for its excellent and compara-

<sup>8</sup> Julian Symons, "A Poet in Society," *Now* (London), 1, 70 (1943).

<sup>9</sup> "Issues at Stake," *Decision*, 1, 7 (January 1941).

tively calm estimate of the culture of its time; the symposiums on political matters and social action, though very necessary to the magazine, will not serve to insure its place in our literary history. The contributions of Thomas Mann, therefore, are likely to prove the most significant documents published in its pages.

The *Direction* of Darien, Connecticut, while it was financially able, utilized some of the devices of the popular photographic magazine, in an effort to impress the importance of the arts upon its readers' consciousness. The magazine expresses confidence in the artist's role in society. The world can do much worse than accept the artist's interpretation of society, it argues, for he lives in the consciousness of "order from chaos"; forces of revolution "move through him." Hence *Direction* presented writers who were aware of their world and might also "take some part in the building of the future." *Direction* may be regarded as a popularized cultural guidebook to the present and future. The third number presented a collection of writing done by workers in the Federal Writers' Project, and discussed the economic value to the artist of national subsidies, especially in view of the financial uncertainty of little magazine efforts. Such problems as federal aid to writers are particularly difficult, however, because they encounter the fundamental issue of aesthetic liberty versus political commitment.

The difficulty of managing the little magazine's financial career seems especially to have taken the center of attention in the last few years. The race against indebtedness has been lost in spite of a variety of expedients: reduction of a magazine's size, irregularity of appearance, appeals sporadic and desperate for aid in a financial crisis, and too often suspension temporary or permanent. Keeping the little magazine alive will continue to preoccupy those who are convinced of its value. James Laughlin's New Directions efforts have solved the problem in Laughlin's own generous way. Universities have become a more important sponsor of little magazines. Federal subsidy is a third possibility. Without some definite assurance of continuation, which will allow the artist freedom of expression, the little magazine might well be in danger of disappearing.

What will be the future direction of the *avant-garde*? There is the question of the policies it will assume, and the related problem of its effect upon the society of letters. Is experiment a temporary, provisional thing? Are we entering upon a long period of aesthetic silence, during which our attention will be concentrated upon international

politics and economics? Marxism has given much of our literature a directly political reference, and the impact of the war is not likely to remove such an emphasis. Not that literature is likely to become a succession of political reports. But the attention of many who at one time welcomed individualism is now turned toward international military and political affairs. The European cultural reviews that we have already mentioned underline that fact; and a recent addition to their number, *Review*: 43, has the same motivating purpose.

The little magazines will certainly continue in the forties, perhaps more and more drawn within the intellectual boundaries of the university campus. Many of the *avant-garde* are now teaching: Norman Macleod at Briarcliff Junior College; Yvor Winters at Stanford University; Robert Penn Warren at the University of Minnesota. R. P. Blackmur is with the Institute for Advanced Study, in Princeton. John Crowe Ransom has never left the academic world. It is possible, therefore, that those who have entered academic communities will bring with them the aesthetic prerequisites of their *avant-garde* activities and will encourage a host of new writers by granting them similar freedoms. If that is the case, the little magazine will continue in somewhat altered form. Its financial problem, while not altogether solved, may not harass the editors quite as much. But its editorial complexion is likely to change at intervals of several years, and there will be fluctuations of quality and direction. Of course, there have been university reviews of past years which have been *avant-gardist* in their sympathies. It is not altogether impossible, however, that some universities will not want to be represented by what they mistake for radical thinking, and magazines will under those conditions appear and disappear, shifting place of residence as they have in the past. Many of the *avant-garde* distrust the university atmosphere, or rather have never regained the confidence they lost by virtue of their original experience with it.

About the desirability of preserving the continuity of little magazine history there can be no doubt. As long as there exists within any nation a condition which puzzles the artist with its contradictoriness, or its confusion, or its injustice, there will be an environment favorable to further experiment. Even though we might assume that all readers have accustomed themselves to all experimental forms (few subscribe to that hope), the native contrariness of the artist will always force him to protest against the *status quo* in literary taste, to debunk the prevailing notions as faddist, and to announce his view of the

world of sense and society as indispensable to the salvation of culture's good repute.

Finally, it is possible that the *avant-garde* will become conservative, even reactionary, in its theory and practice. It is not altogether ridiculous to imagine a revolt, sponsored by little magazines, against what are now viewed as revolutionary literary forms and styles. A cry for "Intelligibility!" may arise from the rank and file of unknown writers, who may forthwith establish mimeographed sheets quoting from the poems of John Greenleaf Whittier and other "primary" writers. This, however, is the least likely of all probabilities.

## II

The printed page reveals only a part of the freshness and originality of the writer as person. Our century is blessed and cursed with a most amazing number of documents telling the story of its aesthetic adolescence. While much has been done, by Frederick Lewis Allen, Mark Sullivan, and others, with the political and social eccentricities of the twenties and thirties, the little magazines offer an abundance of material for rounding out the picture of those years. The men and women of the time—what were they like? In what way were the irregular issues of their magazines put together? On what basis and with what preparation? That is a fascinating story in itself, and it can illuminate the total picture with an infinity of detail. We have already noted the influence of personalities in the making of little magazine history. By way of conclusion, we might add a few details to the story.

Little magazine history is filled with incident; the struggle against censorship, for example, was of the utmost importance to editors, for freedom from censorship was one of the terms which had to be accepted before modern literature would have a hearing. Guido Bruno's magazines took up the issue constantly. Bruno was indignant, on one occasion, to find that John S. Sumner had suppressed a book by Alfred Kreyborg. Sumner, reasoned Bruno, by suppressing the book was preventing the only effective way of eliminating vice, for it is only by candid discussion of human weakness that man will learn to distinguish good from evil.<sup>10</sup> We have noticed the battle which *The Little Review* fought over the printing of Joyce's *Ulysses*. *The Laughing Horse* also committed an indiscretion: one of its first numbers printed

<sup>10</sup> "Is It Indecent to Expose Vice?" Bruno's, 1, 21 (January 20, 1917).



a letter of Lawrence's and it was obliged to move its offices from California to New Mexico. Accordingly, the magazine was much exercised over the question of censorship and aesthetic liberties; the entire issue of February 1930 is devoted to that question. Among the notable arguments which the magazine advanced during its career was that offered by Arthur Davison Ficke. Literature, said Mr. Ficke, cannot be made "safe for democracy": "Until life changes its character into a thing of stainless morality, literature must reflect life with all its lights and shadows. You cannot make literature aseptic until you have made life aseptic, and no large-minded man would wish to do so."<sup>11</sup>

This was a battle against popular moralities, in which all of the avant-garde joined eagerly. They were agreed upon this one thing at least—that censorship must not interfere with what they had to say, that they would rather go to court for having said it than settle out of court at a price their conscience refused to pay.

Malcolm Cowley, looking back upon the days of dada, "superrealism," and Village antics, tells us that there was a strain of irony in the age, irony deliberately made evident by the "tongue-in-cheek" attitude which most aesthetes adopted toward their announced integrity of purpose:

"There were occasions, I believe, when Greenwich Village writers were editorially encouraged to write stories making fun of the Village, and some of them were glad to follow the suggestion. Of course, they complained, when slightly tipsy, that they were killing themselves—but how else could they maintain their standard of living? What they meant was that they could not live like *Vanity Fair* readers without writing for the *Saturday Evening Post*."<sup>12</sup>

The truth is that those days were marked by eccentricity of behavior, some of it deliberate, some casual, and much of it a natural enough exercise of what a variety of persons considered the artist's prerogative. Revolt was on the surface somewhat bewildering to outsiders looking in upon its strange manifestations. And it was quite natural for such magazines as *The American Mercury* to regard the carnivalism of revolt as simply the reverse side of the bourgeois coin. The *Mercury* was not dear to the hearts of the avant-gardists. In the first issue of that magazine, Ernest Boyd wrote an article called "Aesthete, Model 1924." Mr. Boyd denounced the aesthetes of the twenties for regarding themselves slightly, and behaving themselves ludi-

<sup>11</sup> "The Problem of Censorship," *Laughing Horse*, v, n.p. (1923).

<sup>12</sup> Cowley, *Exile's Return*, p. 68.

crously. In fact, he said, they were simply repeating the history of the nineties. The essay seems to have affected the writers in question rather unpleasantly. Their counterblow was *Aesthete*, 1925, a single-issue magazine which appeared in February 1925. Mr. Allen Tate, one of the intractables included in Boyd's attack, explains that "Except for the story by Slater Brown, the entire magazine was written over a Saturday night in January, 1925, and through most of the following day at the old Broadway Central Hotel, in New York."

Present at the meeting of indignant "aesthetes" were Tate, Brown, Kenneth Burke, Malcolm Cowley, John Wheelwright, Hart Crane, Matthew Josephson, "and one or two others whom I can't remember after seventeen years."<sup>13</sup> William Carlos Williams sent in his contribution by mail. *Aesthete*, 1925 was born of indignation, and its contents give full witty measure of the collective grudge borne Mencken and Company. "Every article contained in this issue of *Aesthete*, 1925 is guaranteed to be in strictly bad taste," reads the editorial announcement. John Wheelwright contributed a parody "chat," "Little Moments with Great Critics." Hart Crane's "Chanson" ridicules the editorial pompousness of "Mr. M.":

"I"

said Mr. M. as we crossed the street together  
"am compelled to reject this  
poem. . ."

At that moment a terrific detonation interrupted his  
dictum  
and Mr. M. soared into space astride  
the lid of a  
man-hole

The last I saw of him he was miles high  
trying to climb off  
in suchwise did Mr. M. ride into Heaven.  
Hallelujah!

On the inside of the back cover was an advertisement for the "Mencken Promotion Society," written by Kenneth Burke. "We want smirks instead of piety," it reads. "We want to think it is intellectual to drink beer."

<sup>13</sup> Allen Tate, a letter included with the Princeton University Library copy of *Aesthete*, 1925.

Such is a single incident in the history of the little magazine and of those who wrote for it. They were alternately gay and serious; and if it is not always possible to distinguish the gaiety from the seriousness, we may be comforted by the reflection that both are, in the twenties at least, eccentric as measured by the standards of any settled age. "Talented, hard-working and intelligent people have always had their excesses and their ridiculous moments," says Robert McAlmon in another connection. "Vide, the Greek philosophers, the Elizabethans, our law-makers, etc. Their unexpurgated lives are worth study."<sup>14</sup>

Take but a few of the Aesthete, 1925 group. What is the summary of their accomplishment? In what way and to what ends do their lives influence our judgment of the value of our literary history? Cowley and Josephson were dadaists in Paris, and they plagued the serious-minded Gorham Munson with their editorial whims and antics. Cowley is now a literary editor of *The New Republic*. Josephson has written creditable and popular biographies of Zola and Rousseau, and has contributed to the literature of debunking with his books on American wealth and power. Kenneth Burke bids fair to become one of America's most important critics. His most recent book, *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, is a masterful study of the philosophical ingredients of poetic imagination. Tate, the "Henry Feathertop" of *The Fugitive's* first issue, has alternated between teaching at Princeton University and writing poetry and criticism, and has recently taken over the editorship of *The Sewanee Review*. John Wheelwright and Hart Crane have died, but they left an important poetic legacy.

The point is not that the "aesthetes" of 1925 have settled down, sobered up, or died off, but that their experiences have provided us with more than a pleasant reading of memoirs. It is regrettable, say some critics, that so many little magazines "died to make verse free." The objection of these critics to the period is that total freedom has wasted poetic energies: that the artist, afforded a free run of verse and gin mill alike, has not been disciplined; that some writers might have written the poetry they were capable of writing, had they not dissipated their energies in an age which gave them neither conventions to respect nor models to follow. It is impossible to answer such a criticism without referring again to the peculiar nature and the undoubted advantage of an experimental environment. What makes the work of those times an apparent confusion of contradictory tastes is, after all,

<sup>14</sup> "Truer Than Most Accounts," *The Exile*, II, 43 (Autumn 1927).

the very milieu. Only a small part of the total product of any age, as Harriet Monroe said in an early issue of *Poetry*, can be regarded as truly great, of lasting value. The apparent confusion of a time such as the twenties may well militate against excellence and may offer no precise aesthetic discipline by which creation can assume a recognizable shape and form.

These are the difficulties of an age. The little magazines were in a sense partner to the confusion which puzzles the historian and the critic alike. Designed to encourage the unknown writer, to afford opportunity for him to appear in spite of his times, their editorial generosity tolerated new verse and new prose in quantity; there must therefore have been a tremendous bulk of doggerel and "trash." In fact, though no statistical survey has been made or need be made, much more than half of the total production deserves no more than a first hearing. Nevertheless, writers were never before received and encouraged to continue as they have been in the little magazines of our century. It is impossible to say that the writers whom we accord some respect today would have been better off without the influence of the little magazine, or that they might have realized their powers more fully had they been subjected to an influence more disciplinary and founded upon a more consistent, traditional, and discreet aesthetic.

The importance of all these first efforts, however, lies in their availability for a just estimate of our times. Of their intrinsic value it is perhaps best not to say too much. But it is possible to argue that freedom of experiment does not damage the spirit of an age, and that in a majority of cases the capable artist will not be flattered beyond hope of recovery by having a bad poem or story see the light of print. This is because, more than in any other literary period, the writers of our time tempered their enthusiasm with self-criticism. Since more materials were published, poets were more critical about the eventual merit of their work. Above all, the little magazine acts as a mirror of its age, reflecting all that goes on within it. Scarcely a discussion in the *Village*, or a reading, or a riot, which did not find its way in some form or another to publication.

All of this may give us an opportunity for critical appraisal which we have never had before. If the little magazines did not sponsor the unilinear development of a single dogma, they did encourage the safe accommodation of many. If they are guilty of granting the printer's impartial accolade to much that is of no value, they saved a great many writers the agony of uncertainty about the merit of their work. If they

do not afford an easy method of evaluating our times, they at any rate reward conscientious search with an agreeable abundance. The little magazine is, after all, not more nor less than the persons who produced it, the critics who abhorred it, the writers who welcomed it. Impulsiveness in aesthetic matters may not be the best motive for producing works of lasting value, but its accumulative result is an extremely honest, naïve, and audacious representation of a many-sided and tumultuous period.

A BIBLIOGRAPHY  
OF LITTLE MAGAZINES