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Article

Of Aesthetic Experimentations and Modernism: British Periodicals and the First World War

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ABSTRACT

The years of the First World War witnessed an unprecedented surge of new British periodicals and magazines flocking the literary market. These periodicals testify to the sudden proliferation of avant-garde aesthetic ideas which ultimately sowed the seeds of diverse literary experimentations. These innovations gradually paved the way for the blossoming of the Modernist movement in British literature. Interestingly, the artistic trend had been initiated in the years leading to the Great War, culminating during the years of the conflict and the decades following it. Some notable instances in this regard include Alfred Orage's*The New Age*, Ford Madox Ford's *English Review*, John Middleton Murry's *Rhythm*, Dora Marsden's *The Freewoman* (subsequently *The New Freewoman* and *The Egoist*), Gordon Craig's *The Mask*, the Arts and Crafts Magazine *The Acorn*, Douglas Goldring's journal of open-air life *The Tramp*, the *Times Literary Supplement*, *Book Monthly*, *Mainly About Books*,*T.P.'s Weekly* among several others. Focusing on select periodicals, this analysis intends to explore the crucial role played by them in shaping the Modernist literary sensibility in the early decades of the twentieth century.

In his short story "The Tale", Joseph Conrad explores the moral dilemma of a naval commander subsequent to his decision of intentionally directing a neutral Scandinavian ship towards its doom. His decisive action, largely based on his suspicion of the vessel functioning as a supply-ship to a German submarine leaves him in a psychological state of perpetual uncertainty. The commander is unsure if he has been able to extend a "stern retribution" on the "basely guilty", or in execution of his instinctive choice he has only "added to the corpses" that "litter the bed of the unreadable sea" with "bodies of men who are completely innocent" (Conrad 245). The officer's quandary looms large upon the reader's mind, especially in his exasperating reiteration at the end of the story: "I don't know, I shall never know" (245). As the story implies, he has to endure with the unresolved liability of his action for the rest of his life. Interestingly, "The Tale" is Conrad's only story to be set directly against the backdrop of the First World War, though his insightful exploration of a tale within a tale tends to shift the reader's attention from direct combat experience towards the complex moral and ethical dilemmas plaguing the human mind during a catastrophic crisis. Besides striking a chord with the contemporary readers, the tale successfully remained in literary circulation in the post-war scenario too, as the appeal of its readership evolved from a subtle affirmation of patriotic bravado during the years of the Great War, to an implicit political critique of the conflict in the post-war decades of retrospection. In its representation of the protagonist's emotional turmoil and the oppressive survival guilt the story marked a remarkable transition, retaining its topical relevance among the readers. Such a discernible transition is evident, as "The Tale" continued to recur not only in Conrad's later fictional compilations (like the *Tales of Hearsay,1925*) but also in major international short story anthologies, most significantly, even in compilations critical of the carnage unleashed by the war—a ready instance being the assiduously compiled *Great Short Stories of the War* (1930)—which even included a German pacifist writer like Fritz von Unruh along with the British, French and American counterparts.

The publication of Conrad's "The Tale" in the October edition of the *Strand Magazine* (1917) with its allied promotion on the magazine's cover tends to underscore the major role such popular periodicals played in the British publishing culture during the years of the First World War. As Annalise Grice rightly points out "Literary journals, magazines and newspapers played a significant role in the publishing culture of the modernist period, providing writers with money, networking opportunities and platforms from which to promote their public voices" (47). Conrad is not a solitary instance in this context, as cutting across various genres, many leading British writers of the period discovered veritable artistic spaces for themselves in these journals, magazines, periodicals and newspapers to experiment and articulate their myriad voices of loss, propaganda, trauma, disillusionment, horror, mourning, dissent and anguish during the years of the Great War. Through a brief critical exploration of some of these literary contributions made by these writers in verse and prose, primarily to the British dailies, magazines and other periodicals of the time, this analysis intends to underscore the crucial significance they merit in the literary landscape pertaining to the First World War and shaping of modernism on the threshold of the twentieth century.

It can be justifiably argued that during the years leading to the First World War, a number of periodicals emerged which played a key role in spearheading the modernist movement in the subsequent years. In fact, a sudden deluge of experimental magazines over flooded the literary market during this time. The formidable list included periodicals like Alfred

Orage's*The New Age*, Ford Madox Ford's *English Review*, John Middleton Murry's *Rhythm*, Dora Marsden's *The Freewoman* (subsequently *The New Freewoman* and *The Egoist*), Gordon Craig's *The Mask*, the Arts and Crafts Magazine *The Acorn*, Douglas Goldring's journal of open-air life *The Tramp*, the *Times Literary Supplement*, *Book Monthly*, *Mainly About Books,T.P.'s Weekly* among several others.[i] Each of these journals made distinctive contributions in facilitating literary modernism by providing crucial space to artists and writers to experiment with their avant-garde ideas and creations.

In this context, it is beyond doubt that in the decade prior to the outbreak of the war, Harold Monro's *Poetry Review* (1912-13) and *Poetry and Drama* (1913-14) were two significant literary magazines that spearheaded the cause of modernist innovations. As Andrew Thacker observes in "Avant-garde Journals": "The space granted to Futurism by Monro in *Poetry and Drama* offers an indication that this magazine, in the absence of a war, might have continued to investigate new currents in continental European culture. Monro's 'open house' approach to editing meant that he did not align the magazine to any one of the new isms emerging at the time: Georgians, Imagists and Futurists were all published in its pages" (388). Major writers contributing to these literary magazines included Ford Madox Ford, F.S. Flint, T.E. Hulme, Ezra Pound, Iris Barry, Robert Frost and Edward Thomas among several others. Encouraged by Monro, many of them tried to assimilate the continental crosscurrents in their works. But beyond these efforts, perhaps the most iconoclastic avant-garde response came from the literary magazine *Blast*, an exponent of the Vorticist movement which was edited by Wyndham Lewis. Though the venture was short lived it drew contributions from leading literary figures and artists of the day. Ezra Pound, Henri Gaudier Brzeska, Rebecca West, Spencer Gore and Ford Madox Hueffer contributed to the first edition of the *Blast* that appeared on 2 July 1914 (though dated 20 June 1914). The inaugural edition also included the Vorticist manifesto penned by Wyndham Lewis with several writers and artists as signatories.

Among other proclamations in the manifesto, the ninth observation underscored the modernist purpose "The artist of the modern movement is a savage (in no sense an 'advanced', perfected democratic, Futurist individual of Mr Marinetti's limited imagination): this enormous, jangling, journalistic, fairy desert of modern life serves him as Nature did more technically primitive man" (Manifesto II 33). Lewis's subsequent editorial in the second edition of *The Blast,* underscored his deep faith and optimism in the enduring capacity of art, even in times of mayhem and annihilation:

> BLAST finds itself surrounded by a multitude of other Blasts of all sizes and descriptions. This puce-coloured cockleshell will, however, try to brave the waves of blood, for the serious mission it has on the other side of World War. The art of Pictures, the Theatre, Music etc., has to spring up again with new questions and beauties when Europe has disposed of its difficulties […] We will not stop talking about Culture when the War ends! (*Blast Issue 2,* 5)

The second issue of the *Blast* was inordinately delayed, appearing almost twelve months after the introductory issue on 15 July 1915. This final war number was remarkably successful, vindicating the efficacy of Vorticism in effectively conveying the experience of the war. Works like Christopher Richard Wynne Nevinson's "On the Way to the Trenches", William Roberts's "Combat" and Edward Wadsworth's "Rotterdam" and "War Engine"

imparted a unique dimension to art relating to the Great War. It also carried poems by Ezra Pound, Helen Saunders and Jessica Disnmorr besides a couple of poems by T.S. Eliot— "Preludes" and "Rhapsody on a Windy Night". Many of the writers and painters associated with the *Blast* like Lewis, Ford and Gaudier-Brzeska enlisted for the war, with Henri Gaudier Brzeska losing his life on 5 June 1915 in an assault at Neuville St. Vaast. Though *Blast* was short lived it left an indelible imprint on the world of little magazine publishing casting its influence on post-war magazines like Lewis's the *Tyro,* the *Enemy,* and Pound's the *Exile.*

Like Wyndham Lewis, in 1915, D, H. Lawrence resolved to launch his fortnightly "little paper", *The Signature* for a targeted readership in collaboration with John Middleton Murry and Katherine Mansfield. The latter contributed two short stories to the short-lived venture under the pseudonym "Matilda Berry". What prompted the launch of the *Signature* was Lawrence's urgency and desperation to "do something" against the onslaught unleashed by the outbreak of the First World War. "One must speak for life and growth amidst all this mass of destruction and disintegration", Lawrence asserted (249). As Peter Brooker observes "*The Signature* was an expression of Murry, Lawrence, and Mansfield's coming together in common despair at the war, but not in any comfortable artistic or ideological agreement or even conventional friendship" (323). For his brief periodical venture, Lawrence had written six essays voicing his anti-war stand hopeful "if only people, decent people, would read them, somehow a new era might set in" (Lawrence 405). Through his essay, "There was a Little Man" Murry, as he mentions in *Between Two Worlds,* tried to "convey the feverish resistance of my personal consciousness of the War" (Murry 353). The *Signature*, short lived like *The Blast,* had to wind up due to financial difficulties; and Lawrence managed to produce only three issues against the initially envisaged six numbers.

Besides these significant short-lived aborted efforts, the other periodical that left behind a long lasting impact was *The Egoist* which was subtitled *An Individualist Review.* Between 1914 and 1919, the periodical carried significant modernist works in verse and fiction including sections of James Joyce's *Ulysses.* Succeeding Dora Marsden's feminist magazine, *The New Freewoman, The Egoist* metamorphosed into a crucial literary publication especially under the influence of Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot during the war years. Besides carrying important works of Imagist verse, it provided crucial space for young writers like James Joyce to experiment with their work. Leading contributors included Wyndham Lewis, William Carlos Williams, Charlotte Mew, Marianne Moore, Hilda Doolittle, Richard Aldington, Amy Lowell and F.S. Flint. T.S. Eliot, the last literary editor of *The Egoist* made a significant contribution to ensure its place in English literary history. Besides reviewing multiple literary works, Eliot contributed important articles like "In Memory of Henry James" (January 1918) and "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (September, December 1919) to the periodical. As Louis K MacKendrick observes in the essay "T.S. Eliot and the *Egoist:* The Critical Preparation":

> In the *Egoist* Eliot was a critical journalist, propounding what were to become the bases of his literary theory, seeking the "single critical motive" … and only rarely discovering the "good and new". Hi review subjects pale beside the creative criticism they excite, and yet were made to surpass what he felt to be the ignominy of "reviewing" for a livelihood. (147)

Besides these individualistic responses, during the years of the war, periodicals also provided a fertile ground for further evolution of a "new aesthetic" in the form of a myriad range of short stories. As Barbara Korte rightly points out, "… the short story was deemed to have an affinity to the first fully technological and industrialized war, which exploded extant norms of perception, interpretation and representation" (x). Korte underscores the compatibility of the genre with the ongoing conflict: "Its aesthetic seemed highly suitable for articulating the experiences of the front with its moments of violence, shock, disorientation and strangeness" (x). Works of most eminent short story writers first made their appearances in different contemporary newspapers and magazines before finding their way in various anthologies and compilations of short fiction. A cursory glance at the chronology of some of these important works and their inaugural appearances confirms the validity of this observation: Arthur Machen's "The Bowmen" (1914), "Sapper"' or Herman Cyril McNeile's "Private Meyrick—Company Idiot" (*Daily Mail*), Stacy Aumonier's "Them Others" (August 1917), Arthur Conan Doyle's "His Last Bow" (September 1917), Joseph Conrad's "The Tale" (October 1917), D.H. Lawrence's "Tickets, Please" (April 1919), Harold Brighouse's "Once a Hero" (July 1921), Katherine Mansfield's "The Fly"(March 1922), A.W. Wells' "Chanson Triste" (November 1924), John Galsworthy's "Told By the Schoolmaster" (May 1927), Robert Graves's "Christmas Truce" (15 December 1962 as "Wave no Banners"), Muriel Spark's "The First Year of My Life" (June 1975), Julian Barnes's "Evermore" (November 1995) among several others.[ii] As it has been rightly observed by Korte:

> A great number of periodicals offered a market for both traditional storytellers (such as W. Somerset Maugham and John Galsworthy) and modernists (including Virginia Woolf and Katherine Mansfield), who explored the short story's potential in terms of a new aesthetic. Through the latter in particular, the short story acquired the reputation of a form congenial to the modern condition. Its emphasis on isolated moments and mere fragments of experience, its art of condensation and ambiguous expression seemed ideal for capturing modern life with its hastiness, inconclusiveness, uncertainties and distrust of traditional beliefs. (x).

In short in and around the years of the First World War, periodicals, magazines and dailies played a crucial role in establishing the short story as new form of aestheticism. As pointed out earlier, the form seemed best suited for commensurate articulation of the challenging times. The situation was alike both for the established writer at home and the combatant defending the country at the Front. As the British war poet Edmund Blunden pointed out, "The mind of the soldier on active service was continually beginning a new short story, which had always to be broken off without a conclusion" (ii).

As this analysis explores, periodicals in and around the years of the First World War remain witness to some of the major experimentations in literature and art. In fact, the seeds of literary modernism which took full force immediately in the decades following the Great War were sown in the years leading to the conflict. As Andrzej Gasiorek points out about the developments of this time in the essay 'The "Little Magazine" as Weapon: *BLAST* (1914-15)': "Writers and artists met, mingled, collaborated and quarreled, forged alliances and broke them, elaborated aesthetic positions and literary theories, vied for prestige, and generally struggled to gain audiences and readerships for their works". London as the

epicenter of the blossoming literary activities even drew interest of American writers like Ezra Pound, Hilda Doolittle, William Carlos Williams among several others. Periodicals like the *Blast, Egoist* or even *The Signature* in their own unique waysinitiated themes and ideas that were going to take the center stage in the following years. The new modes of experimentations included exploration of significant themes triggered by the first technological warfare in human history. New works carried in these periodicals examined themes like alienation, individualism and the absurdity of human existence in growing world of technology and automation. The urge to experiment was ubiquitous not only among artists across the continent but also across the Atlantic. In this context, it ironic to note that though divided by the ongoing First World War, most artists in the western world continued to remain united in their advocacy of art and aesthetics.

NOTES

[i]Alfred Orage's*The New Age* (1894- 1938), Ford Madox Ford's *English Review* (1908- 1937), John Middleton Murry's *Rhythm* (1911-1913), Dora Marsden's *The Freewoman* (23 November 1911—10 October 1912),subsequently *The New Freewoman* (June 1913 – December 1913) and *The Egoist,* (1914-1919), Gordon Craig's *The Mask* (1908-29), the Arts and Crafts Magazine *The Acorn* (1905-6), Douglas Goldring's journal of open-air life *The Tramp* (1910-11), the *Times Literary Supplement* (1902--), *Book Monthly* (1903), *Mainly About Books* (1907). *T.P.'s Weekly* (1902--1916)

[ii]Arthur Machen's 'The Bowmen' (first appeared in the *Evening News* on 29 September 1914), 'Sapper' or Herman Cyril McNeile's 'Private Meyrick—Company Idiot' (*Daily Mail*), Stacy Aumonier's 'Them Others' (the *Century,* August 1917), Arthur Conan Doyle's 'His Last Bow' (the *Strand Magazine,* September 1917), Joseph Conrad's 'The Tale' (the *Strand Magazine,* October 1917), D.H. Lawrence's 'Tickets, Please' (in the *Strand Magazine*, April 1919), Harold Brighouse's 'Once a Hero' (in *Pan*, July 1921), Katherine Mansfield's 'The Fly'(the *Nation,* March 1922), A.W. Wells' 'Chanson Triste' (*The English Review*, November 1924), John Galsworthy's 'Told By the Schoolmaster' (*Argosy*, May 1927), Robert Graves's 'Christmas Truce' (in the *Saturday Evening Post*, 15 December 1962 as 'Wave no Banners'), Muriel Spark's 'The First Year of My Life' (*New Yorker* , June 1975), Julian Barnes's 'Evermore' (*New Yorker,* 13 November 1995) among several others.

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