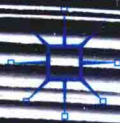


# MODERNISM, PERIODICALS, AND CULTURAL POETICS

MATTHEW CHAMBERS



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AND CULTURAL POETICS

Matthew Chambers

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For Karolina Krasuska

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## INTRODUCTION

In the September 20, 1923, issue of the *Times Literary Supplement*, an unsigned review of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* appeared. The review, later attributed to Edgell Rickword, opens by asserting that "between the emotion from which a poem rises and the reader there is always a cultural layer of more or less density from which the images or characters in which it is expressed may be drawn" (178). The "cultural layer," also referred to as the "middle ground" between the poem and the reader, is judged to be obscured by "this refractory haze of allusion," and as a result "there is in general in [Eliot's] work a disinclination to awake in us a direct emotional response" (178). The review establishes a schema for a poem's reception: a transit from the poem through the cultural layer to the reader. Rickword does not clarify what this layer consists of, or is bounded by, but in his critique of *The Waste Land's* "refractory haze of allusion," it can be surmised that uniformity, consistency, and transparency are desirable aspects. What is striking, then, about this review is Rickword's culturalist emphasis, and, in turn, his opinion that there can be a certain degree of appropriate structuring of this layer—in other words, that there exists a more or less correct level of mediation (or "middle ground") between the poem and the reader, and furthermore, that that level can be identified and assessed. Ultimately, if the requirement is that the poem elicits a "direct emotional response," then there must be a singular readership similarly bound by a shared culture.

*Modernism, Periodicals, and Cultural Poetics* addresses how late modernist poetry in Britain tended precisely toward a culturalist expression that shaped the perception of poetry's role in solidifying an ethnolinguistic English identity. Importantly,

it demonstrates how this process occurred within the pages of literary periodicals and was shaped by their specific modes of functioning within the sphere of cultural production. I use the term “periodical formations” to describe networks of exchange within and between different literary periodicals that condition the types of poetry published and the kinds of poetic discourse that come to cohere and predominate. Recent publications have clearly signaled how active, widespread, and absolutely central literary magazines were to modernist literary production: for example, Richard Price and David Miller’s *British Literary Magazines, 1914–2000: A History and Bibliography of “Little Magazines”* (2006); Peter Brooker and Andrew Thacker’s *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines* (2009); and the recently established *Journal of Modern Periodical Studies* all indicate a resurgent interest in modernist literary magazines. A reemphasis on periodical production following the publication of Eliot’s *The Waste Land* and culminating with a transitional set of magazines in the 1940s illustrates a complex and diverse series of debates and negotiations about not only the tradition of English poetry and its role in contemporaneous form, but also how poetry of the period related to the avant-garde trends prominent on the European continent and in America.

Periodicals have been source material for modernist studies and in some cases have been utilized to make overarching structural claims. For example, Michael Levenson argues in *The Genealogy of Modernism* that T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* was the provocation of English modernism directed at and against traditional forms, but the magazine it first appeared in—Eliot’s *Criterion* (1922–39)—was its consolidation (167). The poem was originally published in *Criterion*, and Levenson characterizes the site of its publication as a study in contrasts: “If the poem threatened to outrage, the intellectual pedigree of the adjacent essays provided reassurance . . . [as they were] reputable, restrained, even staid” (213). The longevity and respectability of *Criterion*’s run resulted in the legitimization of Eliot’s experiment. *Criterion* was a site where a unified vision of literature could be articulated, defended, and propagated over time and in response to competing articulations. Jason Harding

insists that “consideration of the institutional role of *Criterion* in the cultural and intellectual debates of the interwar period necessitates constant attention to the periodical *qua* periodical” (1). Harding counters Levenson’s generalization with a call for a rigorous review of the details of *Criterion*’s publishing history, especially in relation to other literary magazines, as “literary journalism is not a private speculation in a vacuum, rather an intervention in an ongoing cultural conversation, most immediately a dialogue with a shifting set of interlocking periodical structures and networks” (1). Most importantly, centering periodicals as the site where poetic claims were presented and contested fleshes out a literary period too often reviewed under the terms and production of its most canonical figures.

This work utilizes Jason Harding’s work on periodicals as one possible way to think beyond the canon by reemphasizing periodical production following the publication of Eliot’s *The Waste Land*. For Harding, treating Eliot’s periodical within its social and historical context provides a more nuanced understanding not only of the periodical itself but also of the period in which it was published. More complex than a straightforward illustration of Eliot’s intellectual development, the periodical networks *Criterion* was engaged in demonstrate the “centrality of print journalism” for the interwar period, which requires “the modern reader to develop an awareness of the complexity of the reception of these commonly hotly contested debates by multiple interpretative communities” (2). Harding, in treating *Criterion* as centrally involved in a specific set of periodical networks, prioritizes the literary journal as the core genre of literary development in the interwar period. Harding’s periodization is one common to studies of early twentieth-century British literature, which treat 1939 as an *annus horribilis* for British society as a whole, and indeed for much of the world, and it thus delimits a literary period with a military event. Indeed, there is much evidence that is used within a narrow literary frame to suggest that 1939 was the end of a period: even more strictly within the scope of literary magazines, not only *Criterion* but other influential journals such as *New Verse* and the *Left Review* had ceased publication by that year. Paper rationing and a prohibition

against beginning new magazine titles in the early part of the war additionally meant that there were few titles whose runs extended into the 1940s. However, certain literary debates that had thrived in the 1930s—Romanticism vs. Classicism, poetry and belief, as well as the influence (or rejection) of Auden's poetry—persisted into the 1940s, most notably in the pages of *Poetry* (London), a journal widely considered then and now as the central location of poetry publishing in Britain in the 1940s.<sup>1</sup> Vitally, many of these debates express a culturalist dimension that is not always tethered to Eliot and *Criterion*. Instead, they reflect what Jed Esty terms the “romance of retrenchment,” or “to reclaim territorial and cultural integrity for English culture was to disavow the history of British expansionism while assimilating the anthropological (and colonial) notion of solidarity back to the core” (39). Read in the context of the shift from high to late modernism in the 1930s in Britain, this means that “if high modernism offered a *cosmopolitan-aesthetic* mediation of universal perspectives and their local antithesis, then late modernism represents a new *national-cultural* mediation of the universal and the local” (Esty 36). In this work, this diagnosis is applied to the study of literary periodicals where the claims for poetry and a sense of Englishness productively overlap.

### REAPPROACHING LATE MODERNISM IN ENGLAND

Writing on post-*Waste Land* British modernism tends to present literary production in terms of this increasing cultural insularity. Krishan Kumar argues that such policing of English identity in the interwar period did not result in strong nationalist claims, partly as a result of the ramifications of the nationalist ideological drive of the First World War, and instead English nationalism “saw itself in a quieter, more introspective mode” (232–33). Jed Esty also refers to this shift as “demetropolitanization,” or the retrenchment of a nationalist perception from a metropolitan one. Esty argues that “contraction was both a material predicate and an available metaphor for the revival of cultural integrity in midcentury England . . . [and] if expansion had exacerbated . . . the fundamental unknowability of

English society as a totality, then contraction mitigated . . . that unknowability" (47). Indeed, how Eliot envisions his place, and the place of *Criterion*, was symbolic of a broader structural trend within English modernist poetry from the late 1920s to the late 1940s: validating projects in an English poetic tradition, as well as claiming the cultural centrality of the work.<sup>2</sup>

I refer to this period as "late modernist" against the popular reading of the term as a post-World War II phenomenon. This book works partially from Tyrus Miller's framing of the term. He argues that "the late modernist response to modernism is inseparable from its emergence as a *historically* codified phenomenon . . . [as modernism] had to have become in a way 'historical'" (22–23). For Miller, late modernism is necessarily tied to high modernism as an "allegory" of the latter's demise. Late modernist work more readily engaged with the cultural and political context it was writing from, reflecting the increasingly fraught international political situation in the 1930s, and additionally it challenged the "relatively strong symbolic forms still evident in high modernist texts" (20). And yet, it is important to underline that it is an Anglo-American shift from high to late modernism that Miller outlines. For example, Peter Nicholls, in his *Modernisms*, identifies James Joyce's *Ulysses* as the seminal text of high modernism and links a group of contemporaries of Joyce—T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Wyndham Lewis, and Virginia Woolf—to declare that their "family resemblances" could be characterized by an emphasis on the "self's unoriginality, its embeddedness in a complex tradition." For Nicholls, high modernism describes a "polemical thrust given . . . to an anti-mimetic art . . . directed against the imitative tendencies associated with the mass politics of a democratic age" (251). High modernism, in short, is best described as a literary tendency in a small group of Anglo-American writers that emphasized aesthetic formalism over subjective or political expression.

Miller's perspective on late modernism, diagnosing its strengthened cultural and political emphasis, fits into newer and larger trends in modernist studies focusing on its embeddedness in historicity and its cultural conditioning. In fact, the field of work has become so expansive, it would be difficult

to name enough representative examples, but sticking to those that foreground periodicals as an object of study, Suzanne W. Churchill, Eric White, Adam McKible, Mark Morrison, and Faith Binckes, among many, many others, have all presented approaches of how we need to think about modernisms in their immediate context.<sup>3</sup> Recently, in calling for the consideration of a “planetary aesthetics of modernism,” Susan Stanford Friedman argues that we need to rethink the aesthetic requirements for considering modernist form, as they have historically been conditioned by terms set in a European core. Friedman argues that we need to “provincialize” such modernisms “as ONE articulation of a particularly situated modernism—an important modernism but not the measure by which all others are judged and to which all others must be compared” (487). Despite Nicholls’s careful attention to a multiplicity of modernisms, he leaves his European-centered construction unproblematicized, and more relevant to this writing, he commits the same oversight with high modernism—i.e., at no point does he interrogate the Anglo-American dimension of high modernism. What is most significant about Friedman’s treatment of high modernism is that she relativizes high modernism among a geographical plurality of equally significant modernisms. What this book argues is that this “relativization” is indeed actually part of the rhetorical logic of late modernist poetry in Britain, and thus Friedman’s argument that we need to focus on other modernisms globally can effectively be used to claim closer attention to the retrenchment of English identity.

### PERIODICAL FORMATIONS

Claims about movements, periods, and trends are overdetermined by the dominant form of media from which they are disseminated. Jason Harding proposes looking at this conditioning when framing the development of modernism in his essay “Modernist Poetry and the Canon”:

It involves tracing the emergence of the new poetic in the avant-garde “little magazines” established just before or during the

First World War; the subsequent discussion of this poetry in the critical reviews of the interwar period; culminating in the institutional consolidation of a revolutionary poetic moment in university textbooks and syllabuses after the Second World War. (225)

Following Harding's claim about the developing modernism "in the critical reviews of the interwar period," this book focuses on periodicals that temporally coincide with the disciplinary interest in canon formation. For example, Hugh Kenner identifies F. R. Leavis's *New Bearings* (1932), a book we will return to in the first chapter, as "an intelligent start at canon-defining" (365). In other words, to rephrase E. P. Thompson's famous phrase that opens *The Making of the English Working Class*, "The English literary canon was present at its own making."<sup>4</sup> By analyzing periodicals, the nature of the rise and solidification of those canonical structures can be laid bare. There are clearly many more magazines contemporary with the ones reviewed here, and this puts real constraints on the kinds of claims that can be made about the period in which they are produced. In taking a few of the better-known magazines, such as *Scrutiny* and *New Verse*, and setting them next to some more obscure ones, such as *The Calendar of Modern Letters* and *Contemporary Poetry and Prose*, connections to trends and debates among other books and magazines can be brought into focus.<sup>5</sup>

One core issue at stake is how do we think about, for example, *Scrutiny*, which primarily functioned as a literary review, in relation to *New Verse*, which is best known for publishing poetry and could be better classified as a "little magazine," when both were centrally engaged in the shaping of poetic production in 1930s Britain. In 2006, Sean Latham and Robert Scholes argued in "The Rise of Periodical Studies" that "as digital archives become increasingly available, we must continue to insist on the autonomy and distinctiveness of periodicals as cultural objects (as opposed to 'literary' or 'journalistic' ones) while attempting to develop the language and tools necessary to examine, describe, and contextualize them" (519–20). Robert Scholes and Clifford Wulfman, in *Modernism in the Magazines*, propose that "instead of assigning a single signifier to a

magazine (*little* versus *mass*, for example), we need to identify a set of characteristics that contribute to our understanding of the magazines and then cluster them in different ways . . . a *language of magazines*" (70). In other words, periodical studies have recognized a broad range of styles, formats, and even economies of scale, and this both justifies the analysis of periodicals as objects of study and raises the issue of classification, framing, and naming.

I use the term "periodical" over "little" or "literary" magazine to emphasize the regularity and rootedness these publications projected (as opposed to the purposeful immediacy and kinetic irruption attempted by Wyndham Lewis's *Blast* and *Tyro*). Scholes and Wulfman address the historical development and construction of such terminology. "Periodical," they argue, expresses a general category that includes any publication "issued at regular or irregular intervals" (45). A "magazine," which originally meant a storehouse for items, by the early twentieth century also included the meaning of periodicals that "collected and published a miscellany of textual objects" (46). "Journal" or "review," they explain, is often used distinctly from magazine.

There is still . . . a connotation of seriousness attached to the word *review* and of frivolity attached to *magazine*. No learned journal would call itself a magazine. The word *journal* itself is derived from *diurnal*, or daily, but it lost that specificity very early in both English and French and is now just a synonym for *periodical*. (46)

Many of the periodicals in this writing, with these definitions, would be considered "magazines," with the possible exception of *Scrutiny* (more rightly thought of as a "review"). The idea of the "little magazine" further complicates matters, as Scholes and Wulfman point out: "The *lit* in *little* suggests literariness in the context of magazines, and the notion of a 'little magazine' connotes cuteness as well" (56). In other words, "literary," in their estimation, "combines a generic and a qualitative significance," and words like "little" or "mass" "are in fact modernist



notions, designed to make an invidious division into versions of 'high' and 'low'" (61).<sup>6</sup> As "periodical" most broadly describes the varying types of publications analyzed without also prescribing a set of assumptions of their content, I use this term throughout.

Harding uses the concept of "networks" to foreground the flow of the exchange between Eliot, *Criterion*, and certain corresponding periodicals. I prefer the term "formations" to "networks" to emphasize how exchanges and interactions between publications and authors can sediment. Hence, I use the term "formations" and not "networks" to characterize the interrelationships of periodicals in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, to emphasize how these exchanges were not free floating and were indeed engaged in rhetorical power struggles. I take my cue from Peter Brooker and Andrew Thacker's walk through Raymond Williams's thinking on "cultural formations" in their introduction to *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines*, where they highlight the complex space periodicals inhabit in modernist discourse. As Brooker and Thacker paraphrase Williams, a cultural formation is "a formal or informal association of individuals engaged in some nature of cultural production which in turn sets them in different relations with broader trends in society" (18). Williams develops a tripartite structure for both the "internal organization" and "external relations" of a formation.<sup>7</sup> The second form of "internal organization" is most relevant to our discussion here: "those [organizations] not based on formal membership, but organized around some *collective public manifestation*, such as an exhibition, a group press or periodical, or an explicit manifesto" (68). Williams's listing of a "group press or periodical" as a "collective public manifestation" points to the value of analyzing magazines in their historical context, as the manner in which literary periods rise, cohere, and are memorialized is seldom the result of isolated actors or publications. Brooker and Thacker's take on this assertion by Williams emphasizes the way it "reveals how formations change over time: encompassing the often characteristic relations between magazines of imitation, rivalry, and competition or of their amalgamation, evolution,