



“Retrograde” Religions and the “Kooky” Occult—Uncharted Territories in Cultural Maps of Modernism

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In “Published by Us, Written by Us, Read by Us’: Little Magazine Networks,” Celia Aijmer Rydsjö and AnnKatrin Jonsson re-examine expatriate American little magazines such as *Exile*, *Transition*, and *Booster/Delta*, this time with an eye to material circumstances and international networks. They contend that viewing little magazines in such a way shifts the focus of modernist studies from individuals to networks and spaces (61), reflecting the larger shift from the “Men of 1914” vision of the High Modernists to the broader perspective of the New Modernist Studies. Rather than taking an aesthetic or theoretical approach, Aijmer Rydsjö and Jonsson relocate their level of analysis to the streets, the cafés, and the basements of modernism, to the level of “intentional action and lived experience,” thus presenting to us an intriguing “cultural map of modernism” (41). Yet, this map, along with most other cultural maps of modernism, contains a nebulous territory that might well carry the warning that *HERE BE DRAGONS*. Within this void stew the marginal topics of spirituality and religion in general, or heterodoxy/occultism in particular.¹



¹ My conceptualization of the occult existing as a dangerous, even ridiculous, territory on Aijmer Rydsjö and Jonsson’s cultural map of modernism parallels Robert T. Tally Jr.’s consideration of utopia in literary cartography: a “bizarre, historical curiosity, a political dead-end or a false notion of social thought, like the powder of sympathy or bilious humors of medicine” (9). Yet, like Tally’s utopia in the face of a cynical postmodernism, the “bizarre, historical curiosity” of the occult is still all around us, providing imaginative alternatives in times or places where these alternatives would seem least likely. While utopia, as Tally sees it, can no longer be mapped in the real world (9), I attempt here to solidify the fantastical realm of heterodoxy and the occult in print culture as a recognized territory on a literary map. Still, my “new and better” (8) map is

My intention here is not to fault Aijmer Rydsjö and Jonsson's cartography for leaving this particular territory uncharted—one essay can only do so much work!—but to illustrate how spiritual and religious concerns have been consistently exiled from most discussions of modernism, especially in relation to little magazines and other forms of material culture. Aijmer Rydsjö and Jonsson argue effectively for the “importance of the local and international networks that underlay [the] production and distribution” of little magazines (41); theirs is a premise of inclusion, so I will take this opportunity to further expand the networks under consideration and include some of their more unsavory or embarrassing characters and beliefs.

Aijmer Rydsjö and Jonsson focus on differing levels of interdependencies within these networks, giving specific attention to “the exchange of values, visions, ideas, financial circumstances, friendships, kinship, and sexual relationships” (42), all topics of interest in which most recent periodical histories routinely engage.² To pursue another level of engagement, I would add “and spirituality” in the context of heterodox belief. If indeed “kinship” or “values” encompass this term, I maintain that the process of naming (and revealing) remains necessary, as it is in so much research on modernism.

As a case in point, consider Suzanne Churchill and Adam McKible's 2005 article, “Little Magazines and Modernism: An Introduction.” Here, they mention how little magazines act as “open, heterogeneous social settings in which writers of various races, nationalities, and classes read and responded to each other's work” (1). Again, this is a routine claim concerning the cultural work of little magazines. Churchill and McKible more specifically note that “aesthetic movements such as Futurism, Imagism, and Dada, or... political movements such as anarchism, socialism, and feminism” (4) all found a place for contemplation and debate within the pages of little magazines. They reiterate this claim in the introduction to their 2007 edited collection, *Little Magazines and Modernism: New Approaches* (6). Surprisingly, in both the short article and in the lengthier introduction to this important book, there is no sustained attention to spirituality or religion, forces that must surely connect

just one more revision in an endless procession of further revisions and reimaginings.

² See Brooker and Thacker's *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines* as well as Brown and Tulsa Universities' Modernist Journals Project for their valuable advancements of scholarship in these areas.

people and networks as much as, if not more than, the given aesthetic and political movements.³ In both of these texts, and in so many other periodical studies, discourses of spirituality, religion, the metaphysical, the paranormal, the heterodox, the occult, *et cetera*, are all too often obscured behind the veil of more fashionable radicalisms; very few scholars openly consider these discourses or recognize their importance through the explicit act of naming them. It seems to me that what Leon Surette and Demetres Tryphonopoulos have referred to as that “scholarly ailment that might be called ‘occultophobia’” (xiv) is still endemic within contemporary modernist studies.⁴ While Aijmer Rydsjö and Jonsson’s work is excellent in returning attention to the street-level and material modernism that still needs much recuperation, the persistence of “occultophobia” relegates many interesting connections to the abandoned and dusty séance rooms of history.

To expand the connections between material circumstance in relation to heterodoxy and little magazines, consider Hoffman, Allen, and Ulrich’s classic definition of the little magazine, upon which Aijmer Rydsjö and Jonsson begin their discussion: “a little magazine is a magazine designed to print artistic work which for reasons of commercial expediency is not acceptable to the money-minded periodicals or presses” (qtd. in Aijmer Rydsjö and Jonsson

³ Churchill and McKible repeatedly emphasize race, class, gender, aesthetics, and sexuality as important topics for analysis in recent periodical studies, but it is not until page sixteen of the introduction to *Little Magazines and Modernism* that they make any mention of spirituality; even then, it is only to reveal the title of Bruce Clarke’s chapter, “Suffragism, Imagism, and the ‘Cosmic Poet’: Scientism and Spirituality in *The Freewoman* and *The Egoist*.” When explaining the significance of this chapter, Churchill and McKible look only at how “Anglo-American modernism developed within a shifting political and aesthetic constellation and that little magazines were an essential crucible for this development” (16-17). As has become commonplace, the actual spiritual beliefs and practices held by modernist writers, and the great influence of these beliefs and practices on Transatlantic culture as a whole, are once again discounted in favor of political and aesthetic considerations so that the heterodox, the occult, the mystic, or, in this case, the “cosmic,” are again segregated from discussions of modernism as a larger movement. It is as though Churchill and McKible wash their hands of the matter and defer to Clarke, who ably handles the topic (although the loaded term “occult” is never used).

⁴ Surette and Tryphonopoulos allege that “literary scholarship has neglected—even suppressed—the important contribution of occult speculation to the theories and practices of the High Modernists” (xiii).

41).⁵ Little magazines “are willing to lose money, to court ridicule, to ignore public taste, willing to do almost anything—steal, beg, or undress in public—rather than sacrifice their right to print good material” (qtd. in Aijmer Rydsjö and Jonsson 41). Such an eye to spectacle brings the most notorious occultist of the twentieth century to mind: Aleister Crowley. As Mark Morrisson explains in his 2008 article, “The Periodical Culture of the Occult Revival: Esoteric Wisdom, Modernity and Counter-Public Spheres,”⁶ Crowley’s little magazine, *Equinox*, operated at a loss, subsidized from his personal fortune (16-17). Beautifully bound in white cloth and adorned with gold leaf (16), *Equinox* was a sacrifice on Crowley’s part. He willingly made it to further his spiritual, aesthetic, and political ends. Concerning the latter, Crowley was determined to embarrass the fragmenting Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn—whose adherents included William Butler Yeats, Algernon Blackwood, Florence Farr, and MacGregor Mathers—by publishing its secret rituals (17). Crowley’s deluxe magazine brings to mind Aijmer Rydsjö and Jonsson’s observation that some little magazines were “collector’s items by choice from the very start” (14); Crowley was certainly aware of the cultural *caché* afforded to the deluxe material object, and he capitalized on it to wage his personal war on his former colleagues.

More connections between the occult and material culture can be gleaned from the pages of the London-based magazine, *The New Age*, edited by A.R. Orage. In Sean Latham’s case study of this publication in “The Mess and Muddle of Modernism: The Modernist Journals Project and Modern Periodical Studies,” he takes

⁵ Hoffman, Allen, and Ulrich’s canonical study of modernist little magazines, however thorough, is not complete. Churchill and McKible point out that “the contributions of African Americans, political radicals, and women are regularly neglected, belittled, or misunderstood” (9), as are, of course, heterodox beliefs and practices. The only mention of heterodox practices comes in Chapter 10, “Variations on the Psychoanalytic Theme,” in which they are presented as surrealist, irrationalist, and vertigralist, while their spiritual or occult associations are glossed over. For example, when considering *Transition* magazine, Hoffman, Allen, and Ulrich refer to editor Eugene Jolas’s articulation of a “night mind” where the “wisdom of the ages” (qtd. in 178) reveals itself through “the dream, hypnosis, automatic writing, and in half-waking states” (178). Though stripped of their occult associations, such phenomena could be ripped straight from the pages of Yeats’s often misunderstood “occult” texts, *A Vision*, or “Per Amica Silentia Lunae.”

⁶ Morrisson’s article is rare for its thorough treatment of the occult connections to the material culture of modernism.

note of its “mixed politics, philosophy, and aesthetics with a socialist agenda inspired by the writings of Nietzsche” (408). Latham makes no mention of Orage’s “hardcore” occult beliefs, nor does he draw attention to the odd advertisements and reviews scattered among the pages of *The New Age*,⁷ even though he rightly argues that advertisements must be given due consideration in periodical studies rather than being dismissed as mere paratexts (412). He goes as far as to credit *The New Age* with playing a “key role in launching modernism in Britain and the larger English-speaking world” (410)—no small claim—but, as we see all too often, this “key role” is largely attributed to the political, never the spiritual, radicalism of this highly influential periodical.⁸ Latham’s great success in his

⁷ Martin Wallace notes in *The New Age under Orage: Chapters in English Cultural History* that Orage, a member of the Theosophical Society (286), became preoccupied with spiritualism after the Great War (285). Wallace describes Orage’s spiritualist phase as the “least successful... of the magazine’s history” (285). However, Orage’s heterodox beliefs eventually made great waves as they came to influence Ezra Pound. Leon Surette mentions in *The Birth of Modernism: Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats, and the Occult* that Orage introduced Pound to a much “‘harder’ brand of occultism” than what he would have seen while working with Yeats and, of equal importance, introduced him to the “political and economic radicalism” (34) that would result in his infamous affinity with fascism. While *The New Age* is not an explicitly occult publication like *Equinox* or *Lucifer*, Orage’s interest in such phenomena manifests on a number of occasions. In the inaugural 2 May 1907 issue of *The New Age* under Orage’s editorship, there is an advertisement for Harold Monro’s argument for the survival of the soul after bodily death, entitled “The Evolution of the Soul.” In the 7 December 1907 issue, Frederick Richardson negatively reviews it for its lack of originality and style (112-113). Later in the publication’s history, the anonymous medical contributor “M.B. Oxon” writes a sincere essay on the psychological and psychical implications of prophecy in dreams (347); later still, Otto Weininger waxes metaphysical (341-343), and an anonymous reviewer (perhaps Orage) mocks an agnostic book on self-healing in that same issue (346). While many reviews of heterodox literature in *The New Age* pan their subjects, the very fact of their inclusion and acknowledgment in this publication is significant in itself.

⁸ Later, Latham discusses *The Freewoman* and its emphasis on suffragism and feminist politics (410), yet makes no mention of Dora Marsden’s fascination with “the cosmic,” nor does he mention the occult in reference to May Sinclair when discussing *The Little Review* (410-411). Sinclair, whose works of fiction were influenced by pre-Freudian psychologists J.F. Herbart and William James, contain occurrences of supernormal phenomena such as mediumship, telepathy, possession, and distance healing. George Johnson notes in *Dynamic Psychology in Modernist British Fiction* that Sinclair was an active member of the Society for Psychical Research, and he goes on to criticize previous Sinclair

work, like Aijmer Rydsjö and Jonsson's essay, lies in its apt alignment of periodical studies with a less monolithic way of understanding modernism (as opposed to modernist book studies with its privileging of the almighty unitary "Author"). My intervention here is by way of expansion and not contradiction. I am simply trying to show that even when networks of little magazines are the subject of discussion, spiritual and/or religious networks are relegated to footnotes if they are mentioned at all. The occult is both a natural and necessary expansion in the project of recontextualizing the print history of modernism, for which Latham is a key voice, and to which Aijmer Rydsjö and Jonsson here make a vital contribution.

When we at last turn our attention directly back to those same networks considered by Aijmer Rydsjö and Jonsson, we will find that I have not been too arbitrary in dragging the discussion into the abyss of spirituality and religion *vis-à-vis* heterodoxy; interesting connections can be made here regarding *Booster/Delta*. In James Warne Monroe's consideration of the occult and automatic writing in his 2007 article, "The Way We Believe Now: Modernity and the Occult," he refers to the medium Héléne Smith's alleged channeling of a disembodied Martian spirit, who told a room of stunned observers tales of its language, civilization, and history. The experiences of Smith, and other mediums like her, attracted much attention throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. One such interested personality was the surrealist André Breton, who admired the raw creativity of Smith's process. While Breton remained ambivalent about the aesthetic value of Smith's creative products, he did publish her automatic scripts in his magazine *Le Minotaure* (Monroe 69). Breton's lasting interest in automatic writing is evident in his essay, "The Automatic Message," and his work was frequently translated by fellow surrealist, David Gascoyne. Both men contributed to *Booster/Delta*, the pages of which announce Gascoyne's authorship of "a book on surrealism," presumably *A Short Survey of Surrealism*.⁹ As we have seen several times now, treatments of avant-garde aesthetic movements (in this case, Surrealism) banish or forget outspoken occult figures like Smith yet praise and remember those like Breton and Gascoyne. This omis-

biographers for downplaying her interest in the Society in an alleged attempt to distance her from "an organization no longer considered reputable" despite its "impressive status in 1914" (106).

⁹ See *Booster* 3 (November 1937): 49.

sion, like so many others, could be attributed in part to masculinist biases in modernist studies, but it is apparent here that “ocultophobia” is another contributing factor. Monroe makes a similar connection when he states that “until the mid-1980s, historians of Europe generally associated ‘modernity’ with secularization, and hence have tended to perceive any social or cultural development indicating the continued health of religion in any form as retrograde or irrelevant” (70). He extends this observation to Smith directly, claiming that “cultural and intellectual historians have usually told the story of this period from the point of view of the avant-garde—they have paid close attention to Breton, while almost entirely ignoring Smith” (70).

There are still more pertinent connections between the occult, surrealism, *Booster/Delta*, and its editorial committee consisting of Alfred Perlès, Henry Miller, Anaïs Nin, Lawrence Durrell, Michael Fraenkel, and others. This ever-playful periodical cheekily features a “Department of Metaphysics and Metempsychosis,” edited by Fraenkel,¹⁰ and the Xmas 1938 issue contains an article on astrology by Conrad Moricand, entitled “Nijinsky Devant l’Astrologie,” that is written in Swiss French and accompanied by an esoteric diagram. There are no other submissions quite like this, but its strangeness suits *Booster/Delta* well. Moricand did, after all, perform astrological readings for most members of the editorial committee, and he even considered Miller an apprentice mage of sorts.¹¹ Suddenly, the “mystical vision of the inclusiveness of Paris life” (44) that Aijmer Rydsjö and Jonsson attribute to Henry Miller takes on a deeper meaning.

In fact, a close reading of Aijmer Rydsjö and Jonsson’s essay reveals several instances in which an occulted spiritual language in their subject matter struggles to emerge. However, it does so only in the context of little magazines and not that of spirituality itself: Sisley Huddleston describes *This Quarter* as a “parish magazine” (40); the editors of *Gargoyle* speak of the prejudices that must be

¹⁰ The Oxford English Dictionary defines *metempsychosis* as “transmigration of the soul, passage of the soul from one body to another; esp. (chiefly in Pythagoreanism and certain Eastern religions) the transmigration of the soul of a human being or animal at or after death into a new body of the same or a different species.”

¹¹ In Perlès’s book, *My Friend Henry Miller*, Moricand is quoted describing Miller as “a man of great culture, [who] had recently begun to take an interest in occultism, astrology and magic” (123). Moricand apparently “lost count of the number of horoscopes” he charted for Miller and his friends (123).

discarded “before the spirit is free to receive direct impressions of life” (46); the manifesto-writing collaborators of *The New Review* decry a decade filled with “pretenders, corpse-raisers, and cheap miracle men” (47); and Eugene Jolas of *Transition* asks if American youth are “worshipping false gods, as far as French literature is concerned” (56). While this undead vocabulary of spirituality and religion lingers on, the conversation has shifted to other topics. These references reach us like the light of doomed stars beckoning to us from the void. We see the glare, but not the source.

It seems to me that a resurrection is in order; the spiritual dimensions of periodical culture deserve their worthy mention in mainstream discussions of modernism. Most critics speak only of aesthetic and political movements while devaluing the occult face of these same movements. They forget the outspoken occult practitioners, ignore the strange beliefs of the writers or the unorthodox techniques they use, and they focus only on the aesthetic products, and not the processes, of these writers and movements. Too often, researchers must go to specialized (and often marginalized) sources for frank discussions of the impact of spirituality and religion on modernist periodicals, sometimes running the risk of the popular rather than the peer-reviewed. These unfashionable topics warrant their own concrete territory on cultural maps of modernism, present and future. After all, this territory is a synecdoche for modernism itself, and within it fluctuates the same tensions that ripple throughout New Modernist Studies as a whole: high versus low, elite versus mass, individuality versus collectivism, science versus religion, radicalism versus conservatism, and private versus public (or esoteric versus exoteric, if you prefer). “Retrograde” religions and the “kooky” occult ought not to be exiled to the Land of Dragons. Rather, these things *are* modernism—just like little magazines.

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