

MARIA JOSÉ CANELO

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AND FEMALE FATHER-FIGURES
IN *THE LITTLE REVIEW***

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I. Introduction

Modernism and Feminism

This study refers to the foundational years of modernism, a period between the decades of 1910 and 1920, and it focuses on the relationships between modernism and feminism. As a companion of the years preparing and following World War I, and to some extent growing out of its very nationalist atmosphere, modernism was a literary and social movement characterized by a claim to difference. Having coincided with a strong period of affirmation of the 'New Woman', one would expect that such an ambition to recognize the other would have implied the enlargement of the space of womanhood too. However, the relationship of literary modernism with the feminist movements in particular was very revealing about modernism's exclusivist and misogynist principles. Its intention to genderize the very concept of literature, a process which depended largely on the gendering of intellectualization, while putting the stress on objectivity and refusal of identification, allowed no place for the woman writer. This was part of modernism's project to reaffirm literature, but it was also, and possibly above all, a reflex of a more general concern with leaving cultural construction out of feminine minds, a scheme that resulted in the common appraisal of modernism as a movement made up and led by *men* alone.

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Such has been for many years the pervasive reading of modernism - a particular moment of creation when women were either sterile or silent, or else lost somewhere in the margins of artistic creation, after their own alliance with male modernists. Such shift of bounds, turning women artists into exiles within their own gender - femininity as constructed by male modernists - as well as inside the artistic milieu, brought about a shift of bonds, which may however have been more strategic than real. Indeed, recent feminist studies tend rather to reveal how modernist women artists engaged in strategies of negotiation, compromise and half-invisibility as a last resource to undermine the dominating male discourse and ultimately *break the gender categories imposed on them*. Such was the case - or the cause - of the literary and critical magazine *The Little Review*, where the father-figure shift illustrates the shift of bonds women had to endure in order to have a say in the editorial and cultural field of those days.

II. *The Little Review*

Why the choice for a relatively unknown magazine has to do with the gender moves it lets us observe within its editorial board, which end up being representative of men's attempt to regain control of the cultural scene, namely by seizing influent instruments such as the 'little magazines', in order to contain the spread of mass (feminine) culture.

The Little Review never really knew an easy life, always fighting against lack of funds, lack of sympathy or lack of a suitable market. From 1914, in Chicago, where it was founded, it underwent several moves, first to the Lake Bluff, then to San Francisco, then to New York and, finally, to Paris, so that its founder editor, Margaret Anderson, called it "the Migratory Magazine."¹ Another woman, Jane Heap, came to strengthen the editorial board in 1916 but the booming age of *The Little Review*, the period for which it has earned an

¹ *The Little Review* 3.4 (June-July 1916).

inscription in the literary history of modernism, was due to the intervention of a man, Ezra Pound, himself one of the main theorists of modernism. This happened despite the magazine's active cultural engagement previous to Pound's interference. Indeed, devoted to feminist matters since its early days, the credo of *The Little Review* had always been '*individualism in the feminine*'. This radicalism was taken to its last consequences when the two editors developed a lesbian relationship, which came to dramatize these women's continual challenge of gender formulae and certainly lays as a subtext of their editorial policies and writings. *The Little Review* was thus, since the beginning, a place of controversy and challenge, whose project of a renewal of artistic sensitivity ultimately veiled a desire for a reform of the whole model of society, in particular by redefining notions of femininity and masculinity at the basis of personal identity.

III. The Father-Figure Shift

I. When considering first the period previous to Pound's intervention, one sees that the magazine's foundational father-figures were actually two powerful male figures, Nietzsche and Walt Whitman. While Nietzsche inspires a claim to power in the individual affirmation, Walt Whitman expands the dimension of that gesture. But for some reason it was never because of the ideals borrowed from Nietzsche or Whitman that the magazine had troubles with the authorities.

For the father-figures in the sense of *providers* and *leading figures* were actually female - two living and very active women, who came to replace the two mere symbolic male figures and openly challenged the idea of feminine passivity. Those new father-figures were Emma Goldman and Margaret Sanger, both handled as marginals and persecuted by the authorities. Goldman and Sanger's fights made visible two of the New Woman's struggles: Goldman's anarchy implied woman's liberation from patriarchal order and called for her entitlement to individual freedoms, thus liberating her from the burdens of marriage and

maternity; Sanger's defence of contraception naturally complemented such a struggle for freedom. Finally, Anderson and Heap's challenge of gender definitions and their search for a revolution in sensitivity which acknowledged feminine intellectual capacities questioned the accepted assumption, as defended by male modernism, that culture was feminized, hence had to be fought against. As Margaret Anderson continually urged, it was essential for women to make *their own* minds, so as to reevaluate the feminine component of art. This would ultimately lead to a new understanding of femininity and masculinity, one allowing for an atmosphere freer from conventions, where no-matter-what-sex minds could create freely. Finally, such a gender revolution would bring about the explosion of the heterosexual paradigm, so that the sexual function, as Havelock Ellis was (in prison for) defending, came to be understood as the "major spiritual enterprise", or, as Anderson was to put it herself, as one's "gift of genius."² Margaret Anderson's project thus involved a reconnection of sexual energy with imaginative creativity, which implied the introduction in literature of an eroticism traditionally called feminine and which would most certainly disgust male modernist's conception of a purely intellectual art. On the other hand, Anderson's strong defence of intellectualization, putting the emphasis on the emergence of a critique of art which would complement it with an intellectual reflection, proves her intention to defy formulae of femininity which restricted women to the sphere of sentimentality.

The two women Anderson chose as female father-figures of the magazine embody that very challenging attitude: Margaret Sanger was a pioneer of the birth control movement, having been imprisoned several times because of her 'subversive action'. The editor of *The Little Review* dares to re-enact Sanger's 'subversion' by reprinting the words for whose supposed immorality Sanger had been arrested,³ while appealing to a mobilization of *The Little Review's* audience

² iSex and Eugenicsi, *The Little Review* 2.1 (March 1915):16.

³ *The Little Review* (January-February 1916): 21.

in favor of the activist's release. Anderson furthermore turns the magazine into an intermediary in the organization of Sanger's lectures, accepting registrations and announcing the events.

Still more outstanding a presence than Sanger's, Emma Goldman was a Russian immigrant in the United States. She was from the start taken as a 'dangerous' figure, in particular because she dared to combine her status as an outsider in terms of nationality with that of an outsider in terms of gender, managing such marginalities in her own figure as a woman who invaded the public sphere to criticize American internal and external politics and the American culture at large. In her lectures and essays, she reread foundational figures of American culture, such as Hawthorne, Thoreau, Emerson and Whitman, aiming at reassessing America's present and American individualism in particular, pointing out the nation's paradoxes and endangering the consensus, that is, ultimately making the bases of American culture, the familiar individualism, "reappear as something foreign, strange, uncanny."⁴ In other words, Goldman's critique threatened to instil anarchy in American individualism, too strong a menace for that other cherished cultural tradition as old as individualism - democracy, of course. So disturbing was Goldman's critique that she was finally deported.

As Suzanne Clark points out, Goldman "join[ed] in her person the revolt of the wife against marriage, of the mother against enforced childbirth, and of the free individual against the authority of church and state. She at once refused all the social roles of woman and took a place that defines a *womanly* relationship to the nonprivate world, the place of a teacher, a pedagogue, a nurse, of one who works directly on the subjectivity of her audience - whose mission is not to create a new world but to create *new subjects* fit to make a world for themselves."⁵

⁴ Suzanne Clark, *Sentimental Modernism. Women Writers and the Revolution of the Word*. (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1991) 43.

⁵ *Op. cit.*, 55.

The 'anarchic lesson' Margaret Anderson takes from Goldman is basically the attitude: the promise of self-awareness that will follow the process of reflection which anarchy, as deconstruction of society, makes possible. Connecting Goldman's apologized anarchism with "the sex question", Margaret Anderson eagerly announces Goldman's speeches and backs her theories, for anarchism, in the particular version Goldman defended, provided the magazine's main ideal - individualism - with its political basis, while showing how much the question of property and possession was also entrenched in "the woman question". Margaret Anderson thus succeeded in making clear that "the woman question", being a problem of self-fulfilment and liberation, was necessarily a political question too. In *The Little Review*, woman was thus claimed as an autonomous and creative subject.

II. This is therefore the magazine that Ezra Pound "inherits", rather than "takes over" - as used to be assumed; a magazine that attracts him because of its devotion to individualism and also of its established reputation of challenge and boldness. Pound can not therefore be said to have invented the magazine himself. He merely consolidated a reputation Anderson and Heap alone had established.

It is in 1917, when Pound starts contributing regularly to the magazine, as its foreign editor, that *The Little Review* undergoes its main turning point in literary and aesthetic terms. But the price for such a change in direction was the sacrifice of the feminist orientation. Female father-figures Emma Goldman and Margaret Sanger clearly lose ground, disappearing slowly from the magazine's pages, while a new father-figure shift takes place: Pound, Wyndham Lewis, T. S. Eliot and James Joyce occupy the women's places, at the same time that Pound's leadership forces Margaret Anderson and Jane Heap into exile inside their own magazine, causing the whole project to go underground.

IV. Revaluations

Yet, that is only the written history of the movement. The fact that Margaret Anderson was the first to acknowledge that with Pound's intervention the magazine had finally acquired the internationalist projection she herself had always desired shows that the male occupation, more than consented, may have been planned and ultimately used in favor of the magazine's own interests. In subtle and subterranean ways, feminist strife does remain, Anderson and Heap *are* around and alert.

Indeed, recent feminist studies' reappraisals of the period have uncovered the real participation of women in the movement. Take, for example, Jayne Marek's revision, in a book called *Women Editing Modernism*, of the role women editors played in the foundations and development of American modernism.⁶ Marek stresses that women's apparent shift of loyalties was in fact a well defined strategy of survival in a publishing market tightly controlled by men, a strategy which was furthermore designed to prove the inner compatibility and complementarity between the sexes. As Philip Cohen has also shown, open confrontation had proved to be a failed strategy.⁷

From the margins of their magazine and apparently limiting their action to publishing the materials Pound selected and sent from London, Anderson and Heap may well have been manoeuvring those texts themselves. Namely Wyndham Lewis' short story "Cattleman's Spring Mate"⁸ and some episodes of James Joyce's *Ulysses* (in particular, "Nausicaa") end up bringing back to the surface long-standing feminist fights.⁹ Very much against Ezra Pound's editing strategies, the publishing of such materials took the women editors to court,

⁶ Jayne Marek, *Women Editing Modernism*. *Little Magazines and Literary History* (Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 1995).

⁷ Philip N. Cohen, "Nationalism and Suffrage: Gender Struggle in Nation-Building America," *SIGNS* 21.3 (Spring 1996): 711.

⁸ *The Little Review* 4.6 (October 1917): 8-14.

⁹ The magazine starts publishing Joyce's novel in March 1918 (4.11). "Nausicaa" appears in April 1920 (6.11).

under accusations of immorality. As a matter of fact, the uses of sexuality in both works of literature were daring: while in Wyndham Lewis' story the sexual act was portrayed primarily as an act of physical pleasure, whereas procreation was seen as accidental and refusable, in Joyce's "Nausicaa" the suggestion of masturbation challenged the traditional understanding of the act as a deliberate waste of the sources of procreation, while again stressing the principle of pleasure. Marek's reading of the two episodes suggests that Anderson and Heap's silence in court, which has been assessed by literary history as a proof of total disempowerment, may on the contrary be understood as the complicitous attitude of two women who, moreover being lesbians, were probably the only ones in court who knew better. That is, only the two 'blind and silent' people in court understood the dimension of the ironies of the situation, namely of a verdict patronizingly stating that, being women, they could possibly have had no awareness of what was wrong with the censored passages.¹⁰

If this was the most outstanding moment of subterranean female power throughout Pound's 'managing' of *The Little Review*, it is still possible to isolate several other moments of female rebellion and undermining of male power, such as Jane Heap's anonymous critical articles, her ambiguous defences of Pound's participation in the magazine and her implicit criticism on his "foreignness". Her dissension, as well as the feminine editorial manoeuvring of the internationalist standard Pound helped the magazine to acquire, can ultimately be perceived in her editing of two unabashedly called "American Numbers" (5.2 e 5.8; June and December 1918), thrown not only against his much advertized internationalism, but also clearly making use of that internationalism to circulate national art Jane Heap alone considered worthwhile promoting.

¹⁰ Marek, 88.

V. Conclusion

All in all, the history of *The Little Review* yields not a thread of humiliations and subjugation, but rather a smart pattern of *negotiations*, in which women somehow conformed to writing in-between the lines and exercising influence in-between the editorial policies, primarily because they understood that the alternative was invisibility and silence, since they were aware that as women they were identified with the sentimental and mass culture. Siding with men, albeit in a kind of self-exile from the centre, was thus a clever strategy to insert the feminine voice in the critical discussions and literary creation of the time, interrupting male modernists' design for literature and questioning the *status quo* in important ways, while escaping the discriminating labels of femininity. Whether artistic creation growing out of such sites of exile within the imposed category of femininity ended up actually empowering women authors more than had the stage been all free for their intervention - is matter for further research.

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