

T.S. Eliot and the Modern Poetry: Big Role of Little Magazines

Bibhas Chand

Abstract

T. S. Eliot is the most important as well as popular figure in Modernist Poetry. Basically, it is Eliot's poetry which defines Modernism the most complex and diversified phenomenon of literature. But surprisingly, most of the ground-breaking poems of T.S. Eliot were published in the so-called Little Magazines of the West which played a significant role in publishing new experimental poems of the young and contemporary poets. Unless these new upcoming ideas were nourished by those little magazines, the Modern poetry movement would never shake the world so fast and steadily.

Keywords: *Little Magazine, Modernism, Modernist Poetry, literature.*

Modernism is one of the critical terms of the first part of the twentieth century. Ronald Carter writes, "Modernism is essentially...a search to explain mankind's place in the modern world, where religion, social stability and ethics are all called into question" (321). This resulted in the mind of the modernist writers a fashion for experimentation and a tradition of the new. "The workings of the unconscious mind become an important subject, and all traditional forms begin to lose their place" (Carter 321). It is often said that in the complex world of Modernism there is a beginning, a middle and an end, but not in that simple order. The positive change became rapidly discernable in all social and cultural spheres and of course, in the field of art and literature, particularly poetry which reached great heights of achievement through the hands of T.S. Eliot, T.E. Hulme, Ezra Pound who are three of most significant figures in the early twentieth-century literary phenomenon we have come to call modernism. "They revolutionized Anglo-American poetry arguing that traditional poetic forms and themes could no longer encapsulate the experience of the modern world" (Beasley 1).

However, with unique features of difficulty and obscurity deliberately cultivated in poetry, oblique expressions and images, use of symbols influenced by the French Symbolists like Rimbaud, Verlaine, Laforgue and Mallarme, T.S. Eliot becomes unsurpassed in Modernist phase. Eliot not only influenced the twentieth century English poetry, but cast remarkable impression on the whole scenario of world poetry including Bangla poetry where Buddhadev Basu, Sudhindranath Dutta, Bishnu Dey, Samar Sen were the prominent poets to cultivate the new poetic strains in

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Raja N. L. Khan Women's College, Paschim Medinipur

1930s onwards. Ronald Carter justifiably argues, “Eliot’s poetry breaks radically with much of the other poetry written during these years. ... He realized that the poetic idiom available to him was exhausted and had to be changed. ... His poetry was formally more experimental and innovative, and intellectually more complex and philosophical”(338). However, the experimental mood of the Modernist Poetry was predominantly nurtured by the little magazines which were born in the first two decades of the twentieth century; and more interestingly, most of the major poems of Eliot were published in those little magazines before they were anthologized as separate book of poetry. Eric Bulson in his book *Little Magazine, World Form* (Columbia University Press, 2017) precisely observes:

No little magazines, no modernism: it’s as simple as that. No Gertrude Stein, James Joyce, Ezra Pound, Marianne Moore, T.S. Eliot, Wyndham Lewis, Mina Loy, Hart Crane, Wallace Stevens, e.e. cummings, H. D., William Carlos Williams, or Ernest Hemingway. And what’s true of authors is true of titles: no *Ulysses*, no *Waste Land*, no *Tarr*, no *Love Songs*, no *Harmonium*, no *Making of the Americans*, no *Sea Garden*, no *Tulips* and *Chimneys*, no *Cantos*. The list, significantly longer than what is here, would also have to include the historical avant-gardes as well, all of them fanatical magazine makers: no Futurismo or Expressionismus, no Dada or Surréalisme, no Ultraísmo or Constructivism. And if you want to move beyond the more well-trod modernist and avant-garde itineraries, there’s Italy’s *secolo delle riviste* between the world wars, France’s *petites revues* during and after Symbolism, German’s *zeitschrift*, Russia’s post-Communist *zhurnal*, not to mention the *dōjinshi* in Japan following the Meiji Restoration, the *revista* or *periódico* in Argentina, the *patrika* in India under British colonial rule, or the Anglophone *little magazines* in the West Indies and Africa after decolonization. (Introduction)

It is needless to say that the high modernist poetry takes its birth in the pages of such Avant-garde magazines like the *Egoist*, the *Little Review*, the *Criterion*, and the *Dial* in the 1910s and into the 1920s. And any serious reader of Eliot’s poetry will find that his revolutionary poems were published in these magazines.

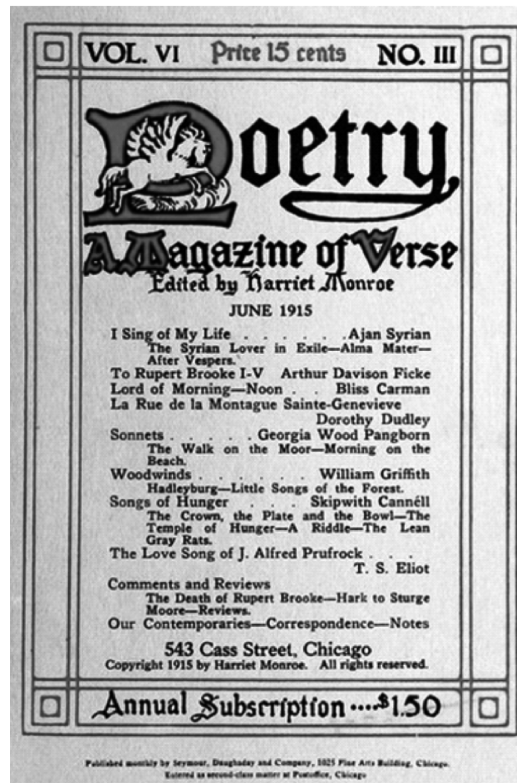
Little Magazine, even being ‘little’ (in the sense ‘small’ in comparison with big commercial magazine), is always significant, innovative and experimental. *Encyclopedia Britannica* defines

Little Magazine as “any of various small periodicals devoted to serious literary writings, usually avant-garde and noncommercial”. Most of the important little magazines under this study appeared in 1910s and 1920s in America and England. It is also applicable to the field of French and German literature. The little magazines which occupy the foremost positions in Modern period are *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* (founded 1912), the *Little Review* (1914-1929), the *Egoist* (1914-19), the *Blast* (1914-15). The unique nature of these magazines is remarkable:

“The name signifies most of all a noncommercial manner of editing, managing, and financing. A little magazine usually begins with the object of publishing literary work of some artistic merit that is unacceptable to commercial magazines for any one or all of three reasons—the writer is unknown and therefore not a good risk; the work itself is unconventional or experimental in form; or it violates one of several popular notions of moral, social, or aesthetic behavior” (*Britannica*).

Eliot’s first ground-breaking poem written in all experimental poetic patterns “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” was published in *Poetry* (Chicago, June 2015). His other significant poems also first saw the day of light in the pages of the little magazines, such as, “Portrait of a Lady” in *Others* (New York, Sept 1915), “Preludes” and “Rhapsody on a Windy Night” in *Blast* (London, July 2015), “The Hippopotamus” in *Little Review* (Chicago, July 1917), “Whispers of Immortality” and “Sweeney Among the Nightingales” in *Little Review* (Chicago, Sept 1918).

And the classic poem of T.S. Eliot *The Waste Land* was published in *The Criterion* (London, Oct 1922) and *The Dial* (New York, Nov 1922) simultaneously. It is to be noted



that Eliot himself was assistant editor of *The Egoist* (1917-19) and in 1923 he began his career as editor of *The Criterion*. As a matter of fact, the modernist poetry— in general and Eliot's ones in particular— which were unconventional and experimental in form and often violating existing age-old moral, social and religious values found their vivid acceptance in the pages of the little magazines which also reflected the same ideological values. With the passage of hundred years and the shifting of print culture to digital, one must remember that the Little Magazines had not missed their sharpness and avant-garde attitude even today, only we have a new product like “Digittle” Magazine side by side Little Magazine. Of course, Little, more often than not, plays big role.

References:

Albert, Edward. *History of English Literature* (New Delhi: OUP, 2003)

Bulson, Eric. *Little Magazine, World Form*. (New York: Columbia UP, 2017)

Carter, Ronald and John McRae. *The Routledge History of Literature in English* (London: Routledge, 2001)

Southam, B.C. *A Student's Guide to the Selected Poems of T.S. Eliot* (London: Faber and Faber, 1994)

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/little-magazine>