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SOMMARIO

MODERNIST LABORATORIES: THE PROSE POEM AND THE LITTLE MAGAZINES

Julia Nelsen

If people are writing for nothing they only do so on condition that they write as they dammmm please.

Ezra Pound may not have had the prose poem specifically in mind when he commented on contributors to the «Egoist» in a 1914 letter to Amy Lowell. Still, his remark underscores the randomness, playfulness and unorthodoxy of texts published by all of the so-called 'little magazines' of the early twentieth century. The prose poem was certainly among such works, enacting a quintessentially modernist sensibility for generic hybridity, multimodality and linguistic play. Throughout its history since Baudelaire, and especially during the modernist period, the prose poem has been used and understood as a means of questioning and rethinking the very notions of form and genre themselves, consistently searching for new forms of linguistic presentation, renewing itself and changing its shape. No accident, therefore, that such a highly experimental form should be so welcome on the pages of a wide variety of modernist little magazines. The vast majority of prose poetry composed in England and the United States during the 1910s and '20s in fact found its primary venue for publication and critical discussion in little magazines on both sides of the Atlantic, such as the «Egoist», «Coterie», «Blast» and the «Little Review», among others. In what follows, I examine the form's close affinity with the modernist climate as a whole, and the little magazines in particular. I see a strong and important link between the form of the prose poem and its forum. On the pages of independently published, small-budget journals, the prose poem played a key role in the promotion of a trans-artistic (and trans-Atlantic) modern aesthetic. Women modernists found the prose poem particularly fruitful, encoding in it a uniquely feminine voice and practicing the form as a suggestive sign of the spirited unorthodoxy that the little magazines championed. Form and forum also share a hybrid, collage aesthetic, as both enact the multimedial and cross-generic tendencies of modernism on a microcosmic scale. The very titles of many pieces published in the little magazines signal the prose poem's incorporation of the visual arts, from sketches to painting to cinema, mirroring the strong fusion of word and image that is a central feature of many modernist journals. Indeed, as a crucial site of modernist literary experimentation, the little magazines provide a solid framework for reassessing the prose poem's position in the Anglo-American avant-garde.

As British and American modernists discovered the experimental potential of

the prose poem, the literary world witnessed a mushrooming of independently run, small-budget magazines intent on publishing new, fresh works snubbed by the conservative commercial press. These publications, as the authors of *The Little Magazine: A History and a Bibliography* describe them, were «designed to print artistic work which for reasons of commercial expediency were not acceptable to the money-minded periodicals or presses», which appealed to «a limited group of intelligent readers» and expressed «a spirit of conscientious revolt against the guardians of public taste».[1] The prose poem represented just the right kind of unconventional literature for the little magazines. Editors likely responded favorably to the prose poem because the genre remained antagonistic to the literary mainstream, as did the journals themselves. Many had only a handful of subscribers, the majority being the very poets and critics who used the magazines as a mouthpiece for their ideas on the direction modern poetry should take. For its rebellious and alternative nature and its association with a literary counterculture, so to speak, the prose poem truly enacted such objectives and provided an attractive form in which to work these ideas out on paper. The fact that it, too, stood at the margins of literature made the genre perfectly appropriate for experimentation within the laboratory of the little magazines, and drew poets to explore its untapped possibilities.

The prose poem thus played a special part in the burgeoning development of modernism, which vibrantly came to life on the pages of the little magazines. Much research has been dedicated to the role of these publications in championing the modernist dictum to 'make it new'.[2] Critics have extensively addressed the free verse and short fiction experiments that took place there, but few have focused on the significant presence of the prose poem in these central spaces of innovation, even despite the recent renewal of critical interest in the genre.[3] Because so few published collections of prose poems appeared during the first decades of the twentieth century, it has been generally assumed that the form all but disappeared in Anglo-American literature not long after it emerged during the *fin*

[1] Frederick Hoffman, Charles Allen, Carolyn Ulrich, *The Little Magazine. A History and a Bibliography,* Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1946, pp. 2, 4.

[2] The authoritative reference remain Frederick Hoffman, Charles Allen, Carolyn Ulrich, *The Little Magazine,* cit.; Suzanne Churchill, *The Little Magazine "Others" and the Renovation of Modern American Poetry*, Burlington, Ashgate, 2006. For a more detailed discussion of the social, political and cultural contexts of the poetry published in these forums, cfr. *Little Magazines and Modernism: New Approaches*, edited by Suzanne Churchill, Adam McKible, Burlington, Ashgate, 2007; Mark S. Morrisson, *The Public Face of Modernism: Little Magazines, Audiences, and Reception, 1905-1920*, Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 2001.

[3] Cfr. Michel Delville, *The American Prose Poem: Poetic Form and the Boundaries of Genre*, Gainesville, University Press of Florida, 1998, which includes a chapter on Eugene Jolas' magazine *transition* (1927-38) and its connections with a renewed interest in prose poetry among Anglo-American expatriates; this is, to my knowledge, the only recent study of the prose poem in the context of modernist journals. Steven Monte mentions in passing the presence of prose poetry in «experimental, and often obscure» avant-garde magazines and notes that «most prose poems were generically ambiguous by virtue of the contexts in which they were published»; cfr. Steven Monte, *Invisible Fences: Prose Poetry as a Genre in French and American Literature*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 2000, p. 138.

de siècle with Ernest Dowson and Stuart Merrill. Especially in Britain, after Oscar Wilde and the *poème en prose* were put on trial in 1895, the form became 'stigmatized' with Decadent connotations and lost much of its popularity among readers and critics, most notably T.S. Eliot, who reacted somewhat aversely to the form in his 1917 essay *The Borderline of Prose*. In the wake of such negative publicity, the prose poem was apparently sidelined, a status attributed to it perhaps more by critics in later decades than was actually the case during those years. Many have taken for granted that Eliot's lack of interest in the prose poem kept it «at the margins of modernist poetry in English – in the hands of minor imagists […] and of iconoclasts like Gertrude Stein and William Carlos Williams», as Margueritte Murphy claims.[1] Michel Delville, for instance, has argued that, «besides [Richard] Aldington's rather undistinguished 'impressionistic' sketches'», modern British prose poetry «produced little more than a handful of neo-Ossianic hymns and Wildean 'poetic parables.' […] [M]ost modernist writers still regarded the prose poem as a rather marginal phenomenon and a mere curiosity for Francophiles».[2] Though the form did remain secondary to free verse in early twentieth-century English and American literature, it did not simply vanish after Wilde, but crept into a unique niche of the avant-garde where poets used it to put the genre-breaking tendencies of modernism to work.

1. Promoting innovation

Between 1910 and 1930, the prose poem found a home on the pages of nearly all the 'major' little magazines in Britain and the United States. The little magazines, in fact, provided essentially the only venue for writers to have their prose poems noticed and put in print, since so few book collections of prose poetry appeared during those years.[3] A thorough survey of these periodicals reveals that the prose poem was not as rare a bird as many critics have suggested, but a regular feature of most avant-garde journals. I will not attempt to list every prose poem ever published in the modernist little magazines, but the following overview should provide a good idea of the genre's presence there. A.R. Orage's pioneering review the «New Age» featured early prose poems by Katherine Mansfield, such as *Love Cycle* (October 1911), as well as Herbert Read's *Pastorals* (March 1915). In 1918, «Wheels», the avant-garde journal edited by Edith Sitwell, featured a series of prose poems by Aldous Huxley, whose sketch *Miss Zoe* also appeared in the «Egoist» (August 1917). Helen Rootham's translations of Rimbaud were published extensively in several little magazines, from «Wheels» (1916) to the «Little Review»

[1] Margueritte Murphy, *A Tradition of Subversion: The Prose Poem in English from Wilde to Ashbery*, Amherst, University of Massachusetts Press, 1992, p. 60.

[2] Michel Delville, *The American Prose Poem*, cit. pp. 6, 7.

[3] This was not always the case. At the turn of the century, when the genre enjoyed the height of its Decadent popularity, the prose poem appeared primarily in book collections and volumes of translations from the French. Only after the prose poem fell out of favor with the mainstream reading public, partly as a result of its socio-literary vicissitudes, did it leave the world of publishing houses for the niche of the little magazines.

(July 1918) to «Coterie» (September 1919), perhaps to stimulate English-speaking poets to carry out similarly innovative experiments with the genre. In each of its seven issues, «Coterie» published original prose poems by Russell Green, Aldous Huxley, Wilfred Childe and others, as well as critical articles on prose poetry.[1]

The prose poem was not an occasional experimental quirk, but figured centrally in important artistic currents that used certain little magazines as their main forums. Amy Lowell's polyphonic prose opus *Spring Day* was included in the special Imagist issue of the «Egoist» in May 1915, the first extended and collective survey of Imagist poetry. In 1914, one of Lowell's first experiments with the form, *The Forsaken*, also appeared in «Poetry», the primary organ for the Imagists in America. The «Egoist» also provided a stage for the prose poems of Richard Aldington, particularly those he wrote on the war front between 1917 and 1918 and later collected in the second edition of *The Love of Myrrhine and Konallis and Other Prose Poems* (1926), including *Our Hands*, *The Road* and *Dawns*.[2] The «Egoist» offers a unique and important record of the role of the prose poem in Aldington's literary career, since most of his prose poems never found their way from the periodicals to his books.[3] The variety of prose poems published in the «Egoist», from the polyphonic prose of Lowell and John Gould Fletcher, to William Carlos Williams's revolutionary prose sketches, to the impressionistic fragments of Allen Upward's *Scented Leaves from a Chinese Jar*, justified the subtitle of the magazine as «An Individualist Review» that opened its doors to innovative work outside of traditional metrics.

The «Egoist»'s commitment to poetic individualism reached new heights across the Atlantic in the «Little Review», edited by Margaret Anderson and Jane Heap. Anderson founded the magazine in 1914 based on the principle of fostering «untrammeled liberty» and «inspired conversation» on the value of art and the roles of the modern artist and critic.[4] The aesthetic freedom at the core of the «Little Review»'s agenda is especially visible in the variety of original prose

[1] Cfr. R. Green, *Defeat*, «Coterie», 1, May 1919, pp. 40-41, *Indian Summer*, «Coterie», 3, December 1919, p. 64; Aldous Huxley, *Beauty*, «Coterie», 1, May 1919, pp. 21-28; F. Manning, *Three Fables*, «Coterie», 3, December 1919, pp. 17-19; D. Roberts, *Blea Tarn*, «Coterie», 6/7, December 1920, p. 87.

[2] Eight of Aldington's prose poems also appeared in «Poetry» under the title *Prayers and Fantasies* in November 1918. Aldington always found a welcoming venue for his prose poems in other little magazines such as the «Anglo-French Review», the «Poetry Journal» (where *Night Piece* and *Dawn* were first published before their inclusion in *Images: 1910-1915*) and the «Little Review».

[3] Aldington decided against including these texts in his collected works, most likely as a result of his contemporaries' negative criticism of the prose poem. Despite his strong defense of the genre against Eliot and others, Aldington seems to have backed down by the time he selected the poems for the final surveys of his work, though he did consider them a valuable part of his creative practice. Had his prose poems been published more broadly, Aldington could have elevated the form to a higher stature, being one of its most well-known practitioners in English during the 1910s. The little magazines, however, attest to the artistic variety and versatility of Aldington's prose poetry, which ultimately surpasses the narrow-minded criticism that has unfortunately overshadowed his contributions to the genre. Cfr. *The Poetry of Richard Aldington: A Critical Evaluation and an Anthology of Uncollected Poems*, edited by Norman T. Gates, University Park, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1975, esp. pp. 165-166.

[4] Margaret Anderson, *Announcement*, «The Little Review», 1, 1, March 1914, pp. 1-2: 1.

poetry that appeared there. An article by Maxwell Bodenheim in the December 1914 number summarized the editors' keenness to break away from *The Decorative Straight-Jacket: Rhymed Verse*, by publishing texts that did not adhere to precise formal limitations and avoided traditional genre categorizations. The magazine was thus particularly receptive to innovative prose poetry from both inside and outside the Imagist circle. Lowell's *Malmaison* appeared there in June 1916, and William Carlos Williams' revolutionary *Improvisations* were published serially in 1917 and 1918. Williams recognized the importance of experimental magazines like the «Little Review» for his own career: «The little magazine is something I have always fostered; for without it, I myself would have been early silenced».[1] In July 1917, the journal featured John Rodker's *Three Nightpieces*, following Pound's positive reception of the British poet's «interesting stuff», which he considered representative of the kind of fresh, experimental work that the magazine needed.[2] Rodker's collaboration with the «Little Review» continued with the prose sketch *Incidents in the Life of a Poet* (January 1918) and three *Prose Poems* (October 1918).

The prose poem also played a role in the Vorticist project initiated on the pages of *Blast*. As Marjorie Perloff outlines in her detailed analysis of «the prose tradition in verse», the Vorticists launched an entirely «new prosodic order» in their little magazine, breaking off from the traditional stanza forms of the *fin de siècle* as well as the formal, strophic free verse the Imagists were writing in the early 1910s.[3] What Pound, Wyndham Lewis and their fellow Vorticists wished to promote was not simply free verse, but a ground-breaking amalgam of verse and prose, following Futurism's concept of *parole in libertà*. The notion of «words-in-freedom», by which an energetic and dynamic «multilinear lyricism» would supplant static *vers libre*, called for a «typographical revolution» that would not only model poetry on the flux and «vibration» of prose, but overcome versification entirely with fragmentary, geometric textual collages.[4] This dynamic prose style would be put into practice in «Blast», both in the *Poems and Notes* of Jessica "Jessie" Dismorr (published in July 1915), and the Vorticist manifestos, which are essentially explosive prose poems themselves.

Evidently, there was no typical kind of prose poetry, but many different varieties that attest to what Suzanne Churchill has called the «heterodox character of the

[1] Quoted in Robert Boyers, *The Little Magazine in its Place: Literary Culture and Anarchy*, in *The Little Magazine in America: A Modern Documentary History*, edited by Elliott Anderson, Marie Kinzie, Yonkers, Pushcart Press, 1978, pp. 50-70: 53.

[2] In a letter to Margaret Anderson, Pound celebrated the work of Rodker and Iris Barry: «Rodker is a different proposition. […] He will go farther than Richard [Aldington], though I don't expect anyone to believe that statement for some time. He has more invention, more guts. […] I don't believe the things will do any real harm, AND I want the future of the two *jeunes*». Quoted in *Pound/The Little Review: The Letters of Ezra Pound to Margaret Anderson*, edited by Thomas Scott, Melvin J. Friedman, London, Faber & Faber, 1988, pp. 63, 67.

[3] Cfr. Marjorie Perloff, *The Futurist Moment: Avant-Garde, Avant Guerre and the Language of Rupture*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1986, pp. 162-193.

[4] *Ibidem*, p. 177.

avant-garde before it was reduced to and aggrandized as Modernism».[1] Besides early texts that continued the Decadent style of the *poème en prose* in the tradition of Merrill and Dowson (such as Skipwith Cannell's *Nocturnes* in the August 1913 issue of «Poetry»), prose poetry represented one of the most significant departures from the traditional Edwardian-inspired stanzas and calligraphic Imagist verse that many avant-garde reviews were still publishing in the 1910s. The prose poem offered its practitioners and its readers something new and unexpected, a form that corresponded to the magazines' editorial policies of individuality and nonconformity.

The variety of prose poetry in the little magazines parallels the diversity of critical treatment it received. Editors and contributors continually engaged with the question of what kind of writing could best convey contemporary artistic and cultural sensibilities. Usually, prose poetry was not addressed explicitly, but referred to as a tangential topic in broader discussions regarding the need for new rhythms in verse and prose. Most critics were less concerned with treating the prose poem as a genre than with discussing it in relation to other forms and addressing the experiments of individual poets. Alice Corbin Henderson touched on the prose poem in *Poetic Prose and Vers Libre* («Poetry», May 1913), claiming that the difference between the two forms rests «in the quality of the rhythmic phrase» of free verse.[2] Emphasizing the need for precise metrical analysis, Henderson argued that free verse has more specific patterns of stresses and variations than prose. Any attempt to turn a verse poem into prose by omitting line divisions would prove unsuccessful, since one can discern «inherent, scientific divisions of the rhythmic wave lengths» in *vers libre.*[3] In 1914, Ezra Pound defended *The Prose Tradition in Verse* on the pages of «Poetry», praising Ford Madox Hueffer for teaching poets that «prose is as precious and as much to be sought after as verse, even its shreds and patches».[4] Between 1913 and 1914, Pound also contributed to the «New Age» a series of articles called *The Approach to Paris*, in which he often cited the prose poetry of Rémy de Gourmont and Rimbaud as representative of the kind of literature the English modernists should emulate.

A practitioner and critic of the genre, Richard Aldington used the platform of the little magazines to give important exposure to modern prose poetry. In the November 1914 «Egoist», he expressed special admiration for *In a Castle* and *The Basket*, two of Amy Lowell's polyphonic prose poems, and encouraged greater practice of the form:

> I would recommend all young poets to study these poems attentively; I think they open up considerable chances for development in English. I am not a bit ashamed to confess that I have myself imitated Miss Lowell in this, and produced a couple of works in the same style.[5]

[1] Suzanne Churchill, *The Little Magazine "Others" and the Renovation of Modern American Poetry*, cit., p. 8.

[2] A. C. Henderson, *Poetic Prose and Vers Libre*, «Poetry», 2, 2, May 1913, pp. 70-72: 70.

[3] *Ibidem*, p. 71.

[4] Ezra Pound, *Mr. Hueffer and the Prose Tradition in Verse*, «Poetry», 4, 3, June 1914, pp. 111-120: 113-114.

[5] Richard Aldington, *Two Poets*, «The Egoist», 1, 22, November 1914, pp. 422-423.

In the «Little Review», Aldington also celebrated the work of Lowell's predecessor in the polyphonic prose form, Paul Fort.[1] Later, in 1921, Aldington contributed to the monthly «Chapbook» issue dedicated to «Poetry in Prose» with *A Note on Poetry in Prose*, accompanying two other critical articles by Eliot and Frederic Manning.[2]

The prose poem took part in the little magazines' very active and very public conversation on what it meant to be modern. The fact that it was not normally granted exclusive attention should not signify that it was overlooked, but attests to the "openness" of the genre, which was widely practiced as part of the little magazines' commitment to new voices and new forms.

2. Sites of subversion

We have just seen that the prose poem was centrally present in the important and productive venue of the little magazines, where it gained greater visibility and became more attractive to poets and readers who wished to test its formal possibilities. But why was the prose poem so favored by the little magazines, as opposed to other areas of publication? What makes prose poetry such an appropriate form for this literary forum?

The special affinity between the prose poem and the little magazine may be explained, in the first place, from a social perspective. Both the prose poem and the little magazine stood on the margins of literature, and the poetic rebelliousness each enacted also had a strong social resonance. Since the French Symbolists, the prose poem has been linked with a subversion of social and aesthetic conventions, developing not only to react against the rigid prosody of the alexandrine, but mainly as a mode of reaction against the status quo, summarized in the metaphysical quest for *l'Inconnu*.[3] As Richard Terdiman and others have argued, the prose poem is «absolute counter-discourse» to dominant culture.[4] It not only responds to traditional versification through its formal hybridity; it also questions the political and cultural authority that establishes such a system of conventions. The prose poem thus engages with a series of struggles, both aesthetic and social: it is the place where «aesthetic conflicts between and among literary genres manifest themselves concisely and concretely as a displacement, projection, and symbolic reenactment of more broadly based social struggles», mainly the clash between marginalized voices and dominant culture.[5]

[1] Cfr. Richard Aldington, *The Poetry of Paul Fort*, «The Little Review», 2, 2, April 1915, pp. 8-11.

[2] Cfr. Thomas S. Eliot, *Prose and Verse*, «The Chapbook: A Monthly Miscellany», 22, April 1921, pp. 3-10; *Poetry in Prose*, «The Chapbook: A Monthly Miscellany», 22, April 1921, pp. 11-15; Richard Aldington, *A Note on Poetry in Prose*, «The Chapbook: A Monthly Miscellany», 22, April 1921, pp. 16-24.

[3] Suzanne Bernard, *Le poème en prose de Baudelaire jusqu'à nos jours*, Paris, Nizet, 1959, p. 445.

[4] Richard Terdiman, *Discourse/Counter Discourse: The Theory and Practice of Symbolic Resistance in Nineteenth-Century France*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1985, p. 265.

[5] Jonathan Monroe, *A Poverty of Objects: The Prose Poem and the Politics of Genre*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1987, p. 18.

The prose poem foregrounds the subversive rhetoric of the little magazines and their contributors in a particularly effective way. In the little magazines, in Suzanne Churchill's words, «form [...] lies at the intersection of social discourse and aesthetic design».[1] The formal experiments these avant-garde journals fostered were a visible sign of the controversial discourse they themselves actively engaged in and earned them a reputation for disobeying social as well as literary conventions. Like many writers and artists, little magazine editors often espoused rebellious political and sexual attitudes that emerged in the radically individual and unorthodox works they accepted for publication. These figures were also social pioneers who pursued feminist and suffragist issues and often embraced extreme political views and homosexuality. The little magazines housed the marginalized voices of many prose poets and *vers libristes* and gave them space to participate in an artistic and social endeavor of renewal. Yet in the broader context of the modernist movement, it is precisely in the little magazines that «the marginal reveals itself as central» in the making of the English avant-garde, to quote Richard Terdiman.[2] Similarly, in the important space of the little magazines, the prose poem does not represent a mere scribble in the margins of modernist poetry, an anomaly unworthy of critical attention, nor is it an illustration of the artistic 'immaturity' or 'frivolity' of editors accused of selecting texts based on personal caprices and quirks, as some critics have insinuated.[3] As we have seen, the prose poem forms a significant part of the little magazines, where editors and poets were powerful and influential arbiters of the modernist aesthetic.

A distinctive sign of the link between form, forum, and social import is the work of women prose poets on the pages of avant-garde journals. Women who composed prose poems and free verse saw formal freedom as a step towards female emancipation, or «the Elimination of Corsets in Versifying», as one critic quipped.[4] By challenging aesthetic restrictions through their linguistic play, these women undermined the patriarchal establishment and revealed a deep dissatisfaction with traditional authoritarian structures. As Jayne Marek notes, women's open defiance of tradition signaled a protest through which viable new definitions of culture could arise during modernism.[5] The fact that many women composed prose poetry in these magazines is suggestive of such spirited controversy

[1] Suzanne Churchill, *The Little Magazine "Others" and the Renovation of Modern American Poetry*, cit., p. 5.

[2] Richard Terdiman, *Discourse/Counter Discourse*, cit., p. 342.

[3] Cfr. Frederick Hoffman, Charles Allen, Carolyn Ulrich, *The Little Magazine,* cit. In their assessment of the «Little Review», the authors give little credit to Margaret Anderson and her collaborator Jane Heap for their achievements in publishing radical new literature, treating the magazine as a «personal» publication that reflected Anderson's «breathless racing with life» from interest to interest: «It was an exciting magazine, quixotic, sometimes immature, but always radiating the blue sparks of highly charged feeling», pp. 20, 52.

[4] A 1915 article by Emanuel Julius for the «New York Call» was titled *This Summer's Style in Poetry, or the Elimination of Corsets in Versifying*; cfr. Suzanne Churchill, *The Little Magazine "Others" and the Renovation of Modern American Poetry*, cit, p. 6.

[5] Jayne E. Marek, *Women Editing Modernism: "Little" Magazines and Literary History*, Lexington, University Press of Kentucky, 1995, p. 20.

and unorthodoxy. An examination of their social aims reveals the deeply radical nature of their poetry, which breaks the «sentence» and «sequence» of traditional language and literature to better allow for women's experience.[1]

Margaret Anderson's «Little Review» provided a fruitful space for women poets to give voice to their personal and social experiences. Indeed, the magazine's editors and contributors engendered the liberated "New Woman" figure of the time, for their support of feminist issues in society and politics and their open lesbianism or unconventional private lives. The many women who wrote for the «Little Review» encoded their feminine individuality in the unconventional, free form of prose poetry. Assistant editor Harriet Dean experimented with the prose poem to convey female identity in relation to poetic composition in *Barn-Yarding*, one of her *Silhouettes* in the June-July 1916 issue. The narrator imagines herself as one of many hens in a coop, a metaphor for being a part of a group of women artists going about their work:

I cannot joyously write little things. Perhaps that is why I write none at all. The little people about me fill me with disgust. They are cocksure bantam hens, loose and fertile, laying egg-thoughts carelessly. The crack of shells is loud, but tiny wet chicks roll out, smaller than the rest. God forbid that I am of the same breed! If I must linger in the barn-yard for a few days, studying the swagger of these hens and silently measuring my own, may I in the end fly away to my mountain top –alone in the night. Strut, if I must, but quite alone.[2]

The independent "swagger" of the hen in this passage may be read as the female poet's choice to compose something unique and different from the work of her colleagues. By selecting the form of prose poetry, the speaker measures her poetry against what she considers to be trivial 'egg-thoughts' laid out in clichéd expressive modes.

In *Sketches* («Little Review», November 1917), Jane Heap makes a similar use of the prose poem to single the female artist out from the crowd. Heap fuses verbal and visual expression to explore different variants of the color white. Each of the white figures the female speaker describes represents something atypical and eccentric with whom she can identify as she wanders the city alone:

I go to the animals in the park. Within their enclosures black shadows of camels lie in the darkness. A great white camel broods in the moonlight, apart from the rest. His lonely eyes are closed and he moves his head slowly from side to side on his long neck, searching in a dream for his lost world. I have seen a Norwegian ship carrying its carved head through the waters of a fjord with such a movement …

Now the high clouds cover the moon. Out on the lake a wind assails the layers of heat. A white peacock sits in a tree, aloof, elegant, incorruptible … A light green spirit … Across the first thunder he lifts his long white laugh at us like a maniac.[3]

[1] *Ibidem*, p. 19.

[2] H. Dean, *Silhouettes*, «The Little Review», 3, 4, June-July 1916, p. 13; see also *Blue-Prints*, «The Little Review», 2, 10, January-February 1916, p. 7.

[3] Jane Heap, *Sketches*, «The Little Review», 4, 7, November 1917, p. 5.

Feeling herself apart from the rest, the narrator relates to the white camel and white peacock. On a formal level, the prose poem itself reflects the uncanny quality of these white animals, as it is an unusual, out of the ordinary text that readers would not expect to encounter. Its sense of in-betweenness, hovering between an anecdote, a dream narrative, or even verbal painting, also reflects the feeling of the female poet who does not quite know where she belongs in the generic canon and in society at large. This 'otherness' is precisely what makes the prose poem – especially the prose poem by women artists – so imaginative.

In *June Night* («Blast», July 1915), Jessie Dismorr employs the prose poem to illustrate the female narrator's process of finding her voice as a modern artist. From the beginning, the speaker is conscious of making poetry, as she describes her nighttime bus ride through London with vivid imagery and similes:

> No. 43 bus; its advertisements all lit from within, floats towards us like a luminous balloon. […] The Park, to our left, glimmers through strips of iron. Its lawns of antique satin are brocaded with elaborate parterres, whose dyes are faded beyond recognition. Dark as onyx with rims of silver are the little pools that suck in the dew. […] The bus is really too top-heavy. It must look like a great nodding bouquet, made up of absurd flowers and moths and birds with sharp beaks.[1]

The speaker's companion on this journey is Rodengo, her lover and poetic counterpart. Throughout the poem, Rodengo caricaturizes a Romantic lyric tradition that the modern poet must constantly confront and distinguish herself from.[2] Rodengo expresses his passion by «warbling infuriating love songs» in such a way that makes him an «indispensable adjunct» of a lavish operatic scene. Like the «rose in his ear», his declarations of love are an absolute cliché which the narrator has grown tired of. She finally escapes his «unmannerly throbbing» and «accelerated pulse» and immerses herself in the city's quiet by-ways.[3]

This solitary venture may be read as a specifically feminine exploration of individuality. As the narrator wanders alone through the «unplumbable depths» of the city, she discovers the intimate, private sphere of her identity:

> I take refuge in mews and by-ways. […] Creeping through them I become temporarily disgraced, an outcast, a shadow that clings to walls. At least here I breathe my own breath.[4]

This reading is supported by Peter Brooker, who argues that «the sense in this text of places out of reach or out of bounds […] genders the city's feminine»; in these hidden spots, «the speaker and the figures are embodied in sexualised urban landscapes in ways that combine Modernist form with more overt expressions of

[1] Jessie Dismorr, *Poems and Notes*, «Blast», 2, July 1915, pp. 65-69: 67.

[2] Rodengo's Mediterranean origins also suggest a specific critique of the «Southern Art» opposed by the Vorticists, who criticized Marinetti and the Italian Futurists for representing «a sensational and sentimental mixture of the aesthete of 1890 and the realist of 1870» in the pilot issue of «Blast», 1, p. 8.

[3] Jessie Dismorr, *Poems and Notes*, cit., p. 67.

[4] *Ibidem*, p. 68.

female sexuality».[1] The woman finds her own way on side streets, far from the dominant and explicitly male poetic tradition. Though she feels like an outcast, she finds freedom in this adventure, and this sense of freedom is translated into her poetry.

It is significant that this experience should be rendered in the form of the prose poem, itself an outsider on the margins of the canon, yet unfixed, free and creatively fruitful. Dismorr reinforces the connection between female experience in the hidden urban space and a hybrid, fluid form such as the prose poem:

> I do not know why I should be here, I am a strayed Bohemian, a villa-resident, a native of conditions, half-sordid, half-fantastic. I am the style of a feuilleton cherishing a hopeless passion for Latin prose.[2]

The 'Bohemian' sense of drifting among different identities and voices is paralleled in the malleability of Dismorr's text itself, which moves between styles and forms with equal ease: part narrative, part lyrical reflection, part verbal painting. The text challenges a rigid concept of genre and resists being codified in a static poetic tradition. In turn, the narrator herself escapes the constraints of Rodengo's Romantic conventions and finds a unique poetic voice of her own, mirroring Dismorr's own experimentation with a variety of forms. At the same time, the prose poem enacts the tension between the marginal voice of the woman artist and the dominant voice personified by Rodengo. As Margueritte Murphy argues, the prose poem may also be seen as a subversive «battlefield where conventional prose of some sort appears and is defeated by the text's drive to innovate and to differentiate itself, to construct a self-defining 'poeticity'».[3]

The idea of constructing a self-defining poeticity through the free form of the prose poem is explicitly textualized in *Matilda*, the last of Dismorr's *Poems and Notes*. This piece, which begins in prose and shifts to verse, is the poet's commentary on a woman's limiting choice:

> Strange that a beauty so dangerously near perfection should choose life without happenings and hedged in completely
>
> By habits and hand-labours
> Set in an ordered and commonplace rightness.
> It is certain that she has no sense of play at all,
> Coveting neither delight nor risk, nor the uses of her supreme gift:
> So that within a homespun sobriety
> The dread thing passes unperceived by most comers,

[1] Peter Brooker, *"Our London, my London, your London": the Modernist Moment in the Metropolis*, in *The Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century English Literature*, edited by Laura Marcus, Peter Nicholls, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp. 117-131: 125. Cfr. Jane Beckett, Deborah Cherry, *Reconceptualizing Vorticism: Women, Modernity, Modernism*, in *Blast: Vorticism 1914-1918*, edited by Peter Edwards, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2000, pp. 59-72: 67-68, for another interesting feminist reading of *June Night*.

[2] Jessie Dismorr, *Poems and Notes*, cit., p. 68.

[3] Margueritte Murphy, *A Tradition of Subversion: The Prose Poem in English from Wilde to Ashbery*, Amherst, University of Massachusetts Press, 1992, p. 3.

> And chiefly secure from self-recognition
> By strait bonds of chastity and duties ardently cherished.[1]

Though Dismorr's references to "habits and hand-labours" and "chastity" suggest the decision to become a nun, the poem may be read as a critical comment on the restrictive domestic life of women in general. Here, as in *June Night*, Dismorr uses the woman's story as the basis for a feminine reflection on writing. The choice of domesticity comes to signify a creative choice that eschews formal freedom and resorts to the 'strait bonds' of traditional discourse. In fact, Dismorr moves to verse precisely as she begins to describe a lifestyle 'hedged in completely': like Matilda's daily routine, the poem itself becomes 'hedged in' by line divisions which preclude the 'sense of play' permitted by the free form of prose. Less 'ordered and commonplace' prose allows for complex and varied formal possibilities of modern expression. This artistic freedom is also associated with a specifically feminine process of self-recognition and self-expression. In this case, the 'delight and risk' of prose writing suggests an uninhibited exploration of female sexuality, the 'dread thing' from which Matilda has shielded herself.

Yet the binaries of tradition and innovation, freedom and constraint are not so clear-cut. Dismorr complicates these oppositions by writing the verse portion of her poem in free verse, which itself opposes traditional lyric modes. To write free verse in 1915 was to express oneself in a radically individual way, especially for a woman. As Carolyn Burke notes, the free verse movement, especially in the milieu of little magazines, demonstrates «a clear connection between the politics of the new woman and the poetics of the new poetry».[2] Dismorr takes the emancipated self-expression of women modernists one step further by composing a text that is even freer than free verse in its fusion of two modes of poetic discourse. This hybrid of prose and verse exhibits the total sense of play of modernist aesthetics, permitting a formal openness that allows for a highly individualized and uniquely feminine mode of poetic expression.

Significantly, the prose poem was an important form in women's contributions to the development of modernist literature on the pages of the little magazines. What these texts have in common is their encoding of other modes of discourse, using a radical form that lies outside the bounds of conventional poetry. The difference of the prose poem in terms of genre suits the perceived *différence* of women's writing (described variously in feminist literary criticism), characterized as taking a multitude of unconventional forms. The prose poem thus makes explicit what the avant-garde poets collectively wished to achieve – resisting genres, breaking down boundaries, finding new ways to express female experience – in an even more radical way than free verse.

[1] Jessie Dismorr, *Poems and Notes*, cit., p. 69.

[2] Carolyn Burke, *The New Poetry and the New Woman: Mina Loy*, in *Coming to Light: American Women Poets in the Twentieth Century*, edited by Diane Wood Middlebrook, Marilyn Yalom, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1985, pp. 37-57: 55.

3. The collage aesthetic

If the prose poem represents an "othered" form of discourse, it also does so through a strong fusion of word and image, making it a distinctive kind of text. The mixture of verbal and visual art present in these texts leads us to a second significant element of affinity between the little magazine and the prose poem, namely their artistically hybrid, collage aesthetic.

Assuming that the prose poem in general takes part in the dissolution of genres, the modernist prose poem in English does so to an even greater extent, for it signals the dissolution of the generic construct of the prose poem itself. Perhaps one of the reasons why many critics have claimed that the form went missing in the early 1900s is because the term *prose poem* itself largely disappeared. Those writing prose poems for the little magazines rarely employed that label, preferring more ambiguous, inclusive terms to set their texts apart from the *poème en prose* and reflect the pluralistic artistic possibilities of the medium. The titles of the vast majority of prose poems appearing in modernist journals evoke other forms of the language arts, as well as painting and music: Fragments, Impressions, Sketches, Etchings, Prints, Notes, Improvisations.

Typically, the little magazines were just as generically hybrid as the prose poem itself. These reviews did not limit themselves to literature and cultural commentary, but often included illustrations, woodcuts and photographic reproductions of avant-garde paintings and sculptures. The variety and breadth of the works featured in the little magazines illustrate what W.L. George described as *The Esperanto of Art* in a 1913 article for the «Blue Review», highlighting the fundamental unity between different art forms that together determined the modernist revolution. «There is, there must be a link between the painter, the sculptor, the writer, the musician, the actor, between the poet in words and the one, to-day most common, who wishes to express himself in the deeds of his own life», George writes; «For art is, we are assured thereof, all of one stuff».[1] The little magazines were committed to speaking this common artistic language, affording a productive studio for poets, critics, painters, sculptors and musicians to collaborate and mutually enrich each other's work. Many journals anticipated important movements in the art world. «Le Petit Journal des Réfusés», for instance, offered hints of Dada and Surrealism before these modes of modernism actually developed. «Rhythm» and its successor the «Blue Review» also provided a preliminary meeting ground for the artists and poets who would later develop Vorticism, such as Jessie Dismorr, who was involved with the English Fauves in the circle of contributors to those magazines in 1911 and 1912.[2]

The prose poem certainly fits well in the artistically cosmopolitan space of the little magazines. The 'miscellany' format of many reviews amplifies the already

[1] W. L. George, *The Esperanto of Art*, «The Blue Review», 1, 1, May 1913, pp. 28-36: 28.

[2] Cfr. *Modernist Journals Project*, Brown University, <http://dl.lib.brown.edu:8081/ exist/mjp/mjp_journals.xq>, accessed 20 September 2008.

strong link between prose poem and the figurative arts. Especially in nineteenth-century France, the prose poem was closely associated with the art of print, such as lithography and etching, and both forms found their common locus and medium in the album or art book, which may be considered a precursor of the modern little magazine.[1] The pictorial aspect of the prose poem is not only implied in the titles of many texts but also in their highly visual poetics, whereby language is converted into what Pound dubbed «splotches of colour», ideal for the impressionistic expression of a painting. Textual "pictures" thus complement the illustrations that appear beside them in the little magazines, attesting to the fluid crossing of artistic boundaries that both the prose poem and the reviews enact. The fact that the prose poem did not appear in isolation in exclusive collections or anthologies, but was juxtaposed to illustrations, manifestos, or even musical scores in the little magazines demonstrates the strong link between the prose poem and concurrent art forms. It is valuable to read the prose poem in this original context, which highlights the generic fusion and mutual artistic influences of which its practitioners appear to have been quite conscious.

The assemblage of various literary and art forms in the prose poem and the little magazines makes them both collage pieces. The dominant mode in avant-garde art since its adoption by Picasso and Georges Braque around 1910, collage had become the radical organizing principle of many modernist works, involving a juxtaposition and reorganization of textual and visual fragments to create a new art object. As a site where different genres come together to form a single work of art, the little magazine is certainly governed by a collage aesthetic, which also emerges on a microcosmic level in the prose poem.[2]

A good example of the prose poem's role in the collage aesthetic of the little magazine may be found in the «New Age». As part of its commitment to promote new literature, Orage's journal often included prose poetry in a section called *Pastiche*, which had become a regular feature by 1912. The column showcased a variety of "improvisational" writings in verse and prose and snippets of literary criticism, oscillating between traditional forms and more oblique modernist texts. The prose poems that appeared there aptly reflect the hodgepodge and varied medley implied by the term *pastiche*. A series of prose poems by Katherine Mansfield, entitled *Fragments*, appeared in one *Pastiche* section in 1917. Mansfield's poems are a mix of lyrical reflections and one-line aphoristic remarks on such varied topics as living alone, proper etiquette according to the «Book of Female Conversations», reading E. M. Forster, and the falling rain. Set off in distinct blocks, these disparate thoughts, episodes and impressions come together

[1] Cfr. Michel Beaujour, *Short Epiphanies: Two Contextual Approaches to the French Prose Poem*, in *The Prose Poem in France: Theory and Practice*, edited by Mary Ann Caws, Hermine Riffaterre, New York, Columbia University Press, 1983, pp. 39-59: 46-47.

[2] Baudelaire's *petits poèmes en prose* originally participated in the collage aspect of Parisian newspapers and *feuilletons*, representing a textual reflection of the heterogeneous modern metropolis. Cfr. Nikki Santilli, *Such Rare Citings: The Prose Poem in English Literature*, Madison, N.J., Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2002, pp. 204-205.

to form a textual collage with one unitary shape, governed by an overarching theme of feminine quotidian life. The 'pastiche' quality of Mansfield's poetry was anticipated in an earlier issue of the «New Age», when her prose poem *Along the Gray's Inn Road* appeared in the section of letters to the editor. The text begins like a letter before becoming an impressionistic prose lyric.[1]

A similar alternation between part and whole, broken images and cohesive art work may be seen in L. Pearsall Smith's prose poem *Trivia*, published in «Form: A Quarterly of the Arts» (April 1917). The progression of the six text-blocks that make up the poem seems to reflect the evolution of the poet's 'trivial' musings, as he considers a series of apparently disconnected incidents and attempts to make some sense of them by the end. The final section, in fact, sums up the creative process through which the poet gives some shape to his reflections:

> VI. A Fancy
> More than once I have pleased myself with the notion that somewhere there is Good Company which will like these sketches; these thoughts (if I may call them so) dipped up from that phantasmagoria or phosphorescence which, by some unexplained process of combustion, flickers over the large lump of soft grey matter in the bowl of my skull.[2]

In this passage, Smith basically condenses the practice of creating a textual collage by molding the 'lump of soft grey matter' of the speaker's ideas into an art object. Each fragment of thought may be conceived of as a miniature work of art in itself, framed by the white margins of the page and set off in separate blocks with stylized headings. The poet's collage work essentially involves cutting, pasting and arranging each fragment into a coherent whole. Moreover, the fact that «Form» was printed on oversized sheets resembling drawing paper increases the multimedial collage aesthetic of Smith's prose poem, an effect heightened by the illustrations interspersed among the various blocks of textual 'sketches'. Linguistic and visual fragments thus come together on the page and participate in the creation of a new artistic whole.

Like *Trivia*, a number of prose poems published in various little magazines include images of amorphous shapes and shadowy outlines, which could hold metapoetic significance. Aldous Huxley introduces the random, enigmatic phrases and images of *Fatigue* («Wheels», 1918), for instance, with a reference to formlessness: «The mind has lost its Aristotelian elegance of shape: there is only a darkness where bubbles and inconsequent balloons float up to burst their luminous cheeks and vanish».[3] Similarly, in *Three Nightpieces* («Little Review», July 1917), John Rodker imagines a series of nightmarish visions invaded by shadowy forms, which may be read as mirroring the vague, unstructured form of the prose poem itself. The act of writing thus translates into the poet's attempt to give shape to his thoughts on paper and transform the disparate matter of the mind into a work of art.

[1] Cfr. Katherine Mansfield, *Fragments*, «The New Age», 20, 25, 19 April 1917, p. 595; *Along the Gray's Inn Road*, «The New Age», 9, 23, 5 October 1911, p. 551.

[2] Logan Pearsall Smith, *Trivia*, «Form: A Quarterly of the Arts», 1, 2, April 1917, pp. 21-22: 22.

[3] Aldous Huxley, *Fatigue*, «Wheels», 3, 1918, p. 20.

In these modernist texts, the prose poem's transformative, indeterminate nature drives poets to engage directly with their craft and to reflect on the act of writing itself. Stephen Fredman has noted that much of the «poet's prose» in American literature «evidence[s] a fascination with language» and stimulates its practitioners to put discursive strategies and methods to work in new ways.[1] In Michel Delville's words, though the prose poem's in-betweenness seems to result in a «shapeless polymodal jumble» of text, its constant negotiation between genres actually emerges as «a self-conscious and creative compromise between two or among several conflicting sets of linguistic codes and conventions».[2] A recurrent feature of modern prose poetry in English, according to Delville, is in fact the poet's visible «desire to turn the act of writing and the workings of consciousness itself into objects of investigation».[3] A great deal of the experimental quality of these modernist prose poems has to do with the poet's active effort to find new ways to *write* the modern experience, and to reflect on the poet's role in the construction of modernity. The prose poem offers a particularly fruitful space in which to address these questions, since poets need not be too concerned with fitting their ideas into a pre-set form, but may give free rein to their creativity and explore the process of the poem's evolution from imagination to text.

In an even more innovative way, the multimodal aesthetic of the modernist collage burst onto the pages of «Blast». With is radically hybrid layout and geometrically-arranged typeface, the «Review of the Great English Vortex» set itself apart from other avant-garde journals of the time as an explosive collage in itself. The magazine's first number featured a shocking pink cover crossed diagonally by the single word *BLAST* in three-inch high block capitals, echoed on the back. On its unusually large pages, loud black lettering was cut in various sizes, from small bold print to all-capitals, and organized vertically and horizontally in different blocks of text resembling Apollinaire's *L'Antitradition Futuriste* (1913).

Jessie Dismorr's *London Notes*, one of the *Poems and Notes* published in issue 2, represents a collage within the collage of the magazine. Dismorr's textual rendering of the metropolis is tinged with the style of a Vorticist canvas, characterized by primary colors, overlapping planes, geometric shapes, angular lines and mechanical figures. The poet does not view London as a formless, chaotic whirlwind, but defines the contours of landmarks and people against the «useless delightful motion» of the city ,[4] according to Vorticism's principle of ordered abstraction. This geometric technique is also applied to Dismorr's descriptions of the urban space. Each distinct location is rendered in rectangular frames, individual "canvases" of the metropolis:

IN PARK LANE.
Long necked feminine structures support almost without grimacing the elegant discomfort of restricted elbows.

[1] Stephen Fredman, *Poet's Prose: The Crisis in American Verse*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990, p. 1.

[2] Michel Delville, *The American Prose Poem*, cit. p. 13.

[3] *Ibidem*, p. 14.

[4] Jessie Dismorr, *Poems and Notes*, cit., p. 66.

[…]
BRITISH MUSEUM.
Gigantic cubes of iron rock are set in a parallelogram of orange sand.
Ranks of black columns of immense weight and immobility are threaded by a stream of angular volatile shapes. Their trunks shrink quickly in retreat towards the cavernous roof.
[…]
EGYPTIAN GALLERY.
In a rectangular channel of space light drops in oblique layers upon rows of polished cubes sustaining gods and fragments.
[…]
PICCADILLY.
The embankment of brick and stone is fancifully devised and stuck with flowers and flags.
Towers of scaffolding draw their criss-cross pattern of bars upon the sky, a monstrous tartan.[1]

Dismorr's descriptions of London are like *ekphrasis* of a Vorticist painting that renders the city's turbulence through dynamic angles and shapes: «Curiously exciting are so many perspective lines, withdrawing, converging».[2] For its highly visual language, *London Notes* could easily be transformed into a multimedial collage of cut-outs and images, portraying women as construction cranes, marble columns as elephants with trunks, and flowers and flags on the Piccadilly embankment. By examining this prose poem alongside Dismorr's illustrations featured in the same issue, the reader can essentially see a visual translation of what is depicted in words.

Finally, the prose poem fulfills the collage aesthetic of the little magazines with a specific kind of visual patchwork: the filmic montage. To the April 1918 issue of the «Little Review», American poet, novelist and screenwriter Ben Hecht contributed the long prose poem *Fragments*. The narrator of this text resembles a modern version of the Symbolist *flâneur* who rambles through «the curious and monotonous mystery of the city» in an attempt to collect «fragment[s] of the unknown».[3] Yet this roaming observer is also a filmmaker who «makes pictures» of what he sees. Hence, the narrator's eye may be read as a camera which records photographic fragments in a series of frames, quickly alternating between panoramic shots and close-ups. Like the camera lens, the eye has a limited visual field; it can only focus on one shot at a time, though it may constantly shift perspective: «A vista lacking infinitude and lacking finalities».[4] Having taken static snapshots of each scene, the narrator proceeds to mentally "edit" them into a motion picture:

The man walking here. The woman walking there. The crowd. The old horse and the cab which rushes by and carries away the oval-tinted face. They become a part of my thought.

[1] *Ibidem*.
[2] *Ibidem*.
[3] Ben Hecht, *Fragments*, «The Little Review», 5, 12, April 1918, pp. 45-49: 45.
[4] *Ibidem*, p. 47.

Multiplied by a million they shift and move within my brain, the simple and insufferable parts of chaos.[1]

The cityscape, in turn, mirrors the film reel. Each window is like a photogram – «Windows through which people sometimes catch cinematographic glimpses of each other» – and the «geometrical smear» of windows and houses is analogous to the continuous projection of rectangular frames of the film reel.[2]

The act of writing itself is understood in filmic terms. As the narrator observes two men standing by a fire made from soap boxes, he not only 'makes a picture' of the image but renders the scene poetically, in writing:

The flames caught by the wind twist like the scarves of a dancer.
The flames loosed by the wind stretch their innumerable little yellow claws upward in a deft and undulant scratching.
I take a note book from my pocket and write down the line.
The fire is like a little golden fir tree in the night.
If I had time I would also jot down a line about the grave faces of the Dago and the Swede as they look at the soap boxes changing into flame.
Of such things I can make pictures.[3]

The prose poem is thus a textual rendition of the cinematic montage, a constant projection of the cityscape in which «fragments of the monstrous multiple»[4] constantly scroll by. For their regular length and rectangular typographical arrangement, the sentences mirror a succession of photograms strung together on the film reel. The various refrains and motifs interspersed throughout the poem underline the dual quality of the filmic collage, a visual text which alternates between uniformity and complexity: repetitive, constant frame-by-frame motion, versus the complex juxtaposition of images spliced together in the montage. Accordingly, text, cityscape and film reel are one and the same: all are made up of «a million simplicities tangled into vastness», an «intricate monotony».[5]

The collage aesthetic of the modernist little magazines eschews the conventional construction and presentation of books and works of art. Rather than the final product, emphasis is placed more upon the creative procedure, the act of putting things together and shaping different media into a new art object. As Marjorie Perloff notes, in these journals, «Product gave way to process: collage and montage acted to undercut the reproduction of the "real" and to foreground the constructive impulse itself – the making of a work rather than the work itself».[6] Like the collage aesthetic, the editorial focus on «inspired conversation» and interactive artistic production foregrounds the importance of *process* in the little magazines. These laboratories of modernism avoided promoting restrictive artistic agendas, but were open to a vast range of innovative art and literature – even the most marginal – that would actively build and continually renovate the

[1] *Ibidem*, p. 46.
[2] *Ibidem*, p. 45.
[3] *Ibidem*, p. 47-48.
[4] *Ibidem*, p. 48.
[5] *Ibidem*, p. 46.
[6] Marjorie Perloff, *The Futurist Moment: Avant-Garde, Avant Guerre and the Language of Rupture*, cit., p. 191.

modern aesthetic. This active process of experimentation represents a special link between the form of the prose poem and its forum. Itself a generic hybrid, an active site of social ferment, a verbal analogy to the pictorial collage, the modernist prose poem is a free form in evolution, like the little magazines themselves.

Abstract

By embodying crucial spaces of experimentation and innovation, the «little magazines» provide an important context for re-examining the role of the prose poem in Anglo-American modernism. This article explores the strong affinity the prose poem shares with its primary venue for publication from both a social and aesthetic perspective. Prose poem and little magazines represent sites of artistic subversion that fall outside the literary mainstream. The prose poem makes a «counter-discourse» possible which also emerges in the collage aesthetic it shares with many modernist journals. Enacting the cross-artistic, genre-breaking tendencies of the avant-garde on a microcosmic scale, form and forum represent important laboratories for the making of the modern.

Le cosiddette piccole riviste, nel loro porsi come spazio decisivo per la sperimentazione e l'innovazione, offrono un significativo contesto per il riesame del ruolo del *prose poem* nel modernismo anglo-americano. Questo intervento esamina la forte affinità che il *prose poem* condivide con i luoghi della sua originaria pubblicazione da un punto di vista sociale non meno che estetico. Le piccole riviste rappresentano luoghi in cui matura il cambiamento al di fuori della letteratura artistica riconosciuta, e il *prose poem* sviluppa un discorso alternativo che è possibile accomunare al *collage* estetico che caratterizza molti fogli del modernismo. Realizzando su una scala 'minima' la contaminazione artistica e le tendenze dell'avanguardia a rompere i confini dei generi, forma e àmbito di questa poesia costituiscono un importante laboratorio per la costruzione del moderno.

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