

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Little Review: Early Years and Avant-Garde Ideas

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The Little Review, the longest lasting of the experimental little magazines of early twentieth-century America,¹ first emerged in Chicago as part of a larger climate of experiment and change in literature, poetry, politics, theater, music, and the visual arts. Founded in mid-1913 by Margaret Anderson, who was at that time an idealistic and little-known book reviewer and editor, the magazine provided an important outlet for the early avant-garde scene in Chicago. *The Little Review* has traditionally been famous for its pioneering publication of James Joyce's *Ulysses* in the late teens, but it first achieved significance for its presentation of early works by such soon-to-be-honored writers as Sherwood Anderson and Edgar Lee Masters, as well as for its reviews and reports on other radical activities in Chicago in the early teens. Margaret Anderson and her magazine emerged in the midst of this experimental group of writers as a result of a particular conjunction of individuals and events. The first of these events was the controversial Chicago showing of the International Exhibition of Modern Art, known in New York as the Armory Show.

In the early spring of 1913 the Armory Show, usually called the Post-Impressionist Exhibition, invaded the staid cultural circles of the city. At the beginning of its run, the director of the Art Institute of Chicago, William French, who had gone to California for the duration of the exhibition, heard from a self-respecting matron and mother that a distinguished "alienist" (expert in insanity) had visited the exhibition and declared the art to be the work of distortionists, psychopathologists, and geometric puzzle artists. The matron was concerned, she confided to Mr. French, for the moral and mental well being of her daughter.²

Yet, even as some members of the bourgeois sector of Chicago

saw the exhibition as a threat to their moral security and tranquility, the literary, political, and artistic avant-garde responded eagerly to its challenge. The radical art of Paul Gauguin, Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, and Wassily Kandinsky invigorated and inspired an alert group of painters, writers, poets, and playwrights who had converged on Chicago in the years just before World War I. The central figure in this radical scene in early 1913 was Floyd Dell, a socialist and the editor of the *Friday Literary Review*, the book review supplement of the *Chicago Evening Post*. Dell, who made a sketch of himself naked as Adam (fig. 8.1) around the same time that he launched the new world of culture in Chicago, championed the Post-Impressionist Exhibition in his newspaper supplement during March and early April 1913. He claimed that it

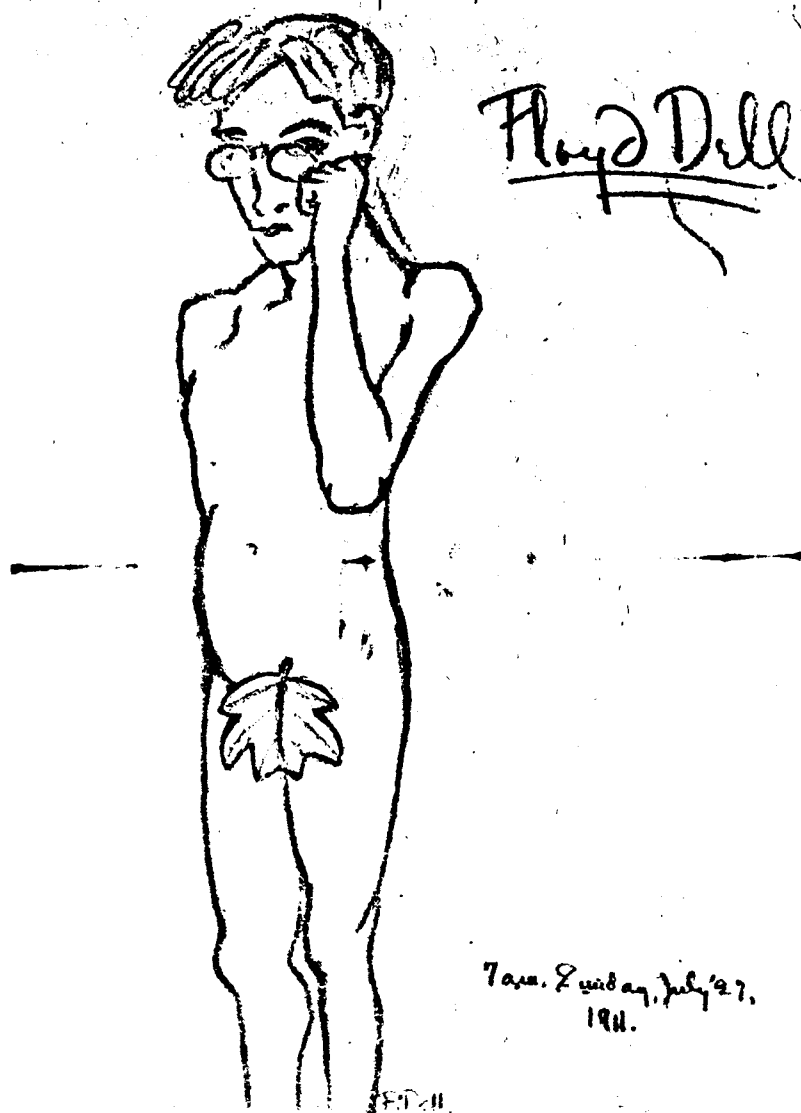
exploded like a bombshell within the minds of everybody who could be said to have minds. For Americans it could not be merely an aesthetic experience, it was an emotional experience which led to a philosophical and moral revaluation of life. But it brought not one gospel, it brought a half-dozen at least and from these one could choose what one needed.³

Dell bravely opted for the art of Gauguin because of its "bold color and primitive simplicity and serene vitality."⁴ In doing so he won the praise of Harriet Monroe (see fig. 6.2), the only informed local art critic, as well as one of the few veterans of cultural concerns in Chicago who was responsive to the exhibition. She herself celebrated the experimental art repeatedly in order to offset the ridicule that it received from the rest of the press.⁵ As the focal point for new ideas and issues in 1913, Dell received praise from established writers like Monroe, as well as vigorous complaints from other radical thinkers about the hopeless ignorance of the general public:

A man with a grievance was in our office the other day. "Why," he demanded, with a bitter gesture, "do the people who go to the Art Institute to see the new pictures boast so loudly of their ignorance? Why do they so proudly parade the fact that they cannot understand what they see? One would think that ignorance was a rare and valuable thing, instead of being really quite common. They seem to imagine that it is they who are being put on public exhibition, instead of the pictures."

He said other things too, with bitter gestures, but we will let it go at this.⁶

Such a complaint to Dell reflected the attitude of the nascent avant-garde artists and writers in Chicago. One member of that avant-garde was B. J. O. Nordfeldt, who, as one of the few post-impressionist painters in Chicago, educated Dell to the new vi-



8.1 Floyd Dell, *Self-Portrait (with Fig Leaf)*, sketch, 1911. Floyd Dell Papers, Newberry Library, Chicago.

sual art. As early as November 1912 Dell enthusiastically reviewed Nordfeldt's work in an exhibition at Thurber's gallery. He suggested a theme of freedom:

Of course the main virtue of Nordfeldt's work is in his ability to paint what he wants to paint, freely, with a minimum of brush strokes and a maximum of effectiveness. . . . He has put his colors where he wanted them to go with a sure stroke, and that is the modern understanding of the word "art."⁷

During the week of the Post-Impressionist Exhibition, about five months later, Nordfeldt painted Dell's portrait, the artist's

own most experimental work to that time, using a flattened background, asymmetry, and slightly fauve colors such as an acidic yellowish-pink in the background and a touch of green in Dell's face (plate 18). Dell was dressed in what was seen then as a modern look: a "high collar and black stock . . . a stick and gloves," a look suggested by the feminist Charlotte Perkins Gilman.⁸ Dell was transfixed by the experience of being painted by a post impressionist and commented that "the arts do fertilize each other; they liberate each other from their own tradition. . . . The artistic effects characteristic of one medium of expression awakens a fruitful envy in the imagination of workers in another medium."⁹

Such a concept of the interdisciplinary stimulation and exchange of new ideas among creative thinkers was the crux of the avant-garde scene in Chicago in 1913. Dell, a socialist primarily involved with literature and politics (as suggested by his recently completed book *Women as World Builders*,¹⁰) was responsive to and fostered radical ideas in painting, poetry, theater, philosophy, and even his own personal life. In the spring of 1913, shortly after the Post-Impressionist Exhibition, Dell moved to a small interdisciplinary art community located in the storefronts at 57th Street and Stony Island Avenue, near Jackson Park (fig. 8.2). First erected for the Chicago Columbian Exposition of 1893, the storefronts had become a center for artists and intellectuals as early as 1903 when Nordfeldt and Thorstein Veblen first had studios there.¹¹ Dell expressed his radical social attitudes by having a separate studio from his wife, Margery Currey. He wrote of his bohemian life on 57th Street in a letter to a poet friend, Arthur Davison Ficke, who still lived in Dell's hometown of Davenport, Iowa:

I have just returned to my ice cold studio, where I have built a fire with scraps of linoleum, a piece of wainscotting and the contents of an elaborate filing system of four years creation. . . . My room contains one bookcase and nine Fels-naphtha soap boxes full of books . . . a typewriter stand, a fireless cooker . . . and a couch with a mattress and a blanket.¹²

The austerity of his environment paired with the burning of his filing system marked a watershed in Dell's life as well as, metaphorically, in the avant-garde culture of Chicago. His catalytic ideas were a major stimulus for the emergence of Chicago's experimental scene. That scene first came into focus at the Jackson Park Colony in 1913 under the stimulus of Dell and Currey. It included Maurice and Ellen Browne, founders of one of the earliest avant-garde repertory theaters in America, who had been attracted to Chicago by Dell's writing in the *Literary Review*.¹³ Several visual artists in addition to Nordfeldt, as well as various political and academic figures, also participated in the



8.2 B. J. O. Nordfeldt, *The Corner 57th Street Chicago*, 1912, etching, 1912. Photo courtesy Paul Kruty.

parties at Jackson Park given in the spring and summer of 1913 by Margery Currey.¹⁴ Some of the visitors included Edgar Lee Masters, who was about to begin his classic book *Spoon River Anthology*, Vachel Lindsay, who was at that time gaining prominence after exchanging his poems for bread across the country, and Carl Sandburg, who was also just starting his career. Harriet Monroe and Henry Blake Fuller occasionally appeared, providing a link to the older generation of the cultural establishment known as the "genteel tradition."¹⁵ Theodore Dreiser, by then settled in New York but revered by the Chicago community for his role in developing a new realism in literature, occasionally dropped in.

Margaret Anderson (fig. 8.3), the founder and editor of *The Little Review*, emerged from this scene of socialist politics, experimentation in literature, and liberal ethics not long after the furor of the Post-Impressionist Exhibition of 1913. She began her career as a peripheral part of the scene at the *Friday Literary Review* and subsequently at the 57th Street Studio.¹⁶ Born in 1886, Anderson came to Chicago in 1908 from Columbus, Indiana to escape her suffocating family life, a life she had been rebelling against since her early childhood. After a series of escapades, she obtained regular employment as a literary editor of the *Continental*, a religious weekly; she also wrote reviews for Floyd Dell at the *Friday Literary Review*. She described Dell's entourage in her autobiography:

Floyd Dell was surrounded by a literary group that gave promise of being the only one of interest in Chicago. I have always felt a horror, a fear and a complete lack of attraction for any group, of any kind. . . . But I was willing sometimes to see this one because Floyd Dell was in it—was it, rather.¹⁷

Dell was surprised by the idealism and enthusiasm of his young reviewer. He found her views to be so extreme that he sometimes ran a second review of the same book in order to balance her enthusiasm:

her views, as expressed in 1911, had been, in fact, austere idealistic, matching her starry-eyed, unearthly young loveliness, which was just too saint-like. She wrote well, if more enthusiastically than anybody had ever written before in the whole history of book-reviewing; an editor could not argue with her, for she stared him down with young limpid blue eyes which knew better than all his crass cynical wisdom.¹⁸

Dell brought Anderson to the 57th Street scene. In the late summer of 1913, inspired by the creative energy generated by Dell and his environment, Margaret Anderson officially announced her intention to found an interdisciplinary magazine that would report on the newest tendencies in art, drama, literature, and dance. Her decision was partially based on her feeling that her life had been entirely uninspired. In the midst of a sleepless night she suddenly had the inspiration to create a magazine and "to fill . . . it up with the best conversation the world has to offer."¹⁹ That "conversation" initially was to be that of the Jackson Park artists, writers, and poets.

On the evening of Anderson's official announcement, a large

8.3 Margaret Anderson, photograph, n.d. *The Little Review Archives*, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee.

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group of these young modernists gathered at Currey's studio.²⁰ After an intense discussion *The Little Review* was born, borrowing its title from both the Little Theatre and the *Friday Literary Review*. Not long afterwards, Dell departed for New York where he would become the controversial managing editor of *The Masses* in Greenwich Village during the mid-teens. Partly due to Dell's departure, which resulted in the loss of publishing outlets for the avant-garde scene which he had stimulated, Anderson's small magazine became an important publication and supporter of what later scholars have come to call the Chicago Liberation.

One new arrival to Jackson Park, who responded vigorously to both the Post-Impressionist Exhibition and Margaret Anderson's magazine was Sherwood Anderson. Anderson came to Chicago in the spring of 1913 with his brother Karl who was on the organizing committee for the Art Institute show. Sherwood Anderson was deeply impressed by the radical art; years later he described his writing in terms that recalled post-impressionist painting.²¹ As a newcomer to the avant-garde scene in Chicago,²² Anderson viewed Margaret Anderson as a pivotal figure:

In Chicago when you [Margaret Anderson] came, you were most needed. . . . I saw men and women of our unreal world become real to each other for a time. I saw men and women standing together. I saw belief springing up. . . .

You gave a lot of queer isolated people a quick and sudden sense of each other. Something started. You walked about, being personally beautiful, as I dare say you are now. You talked with a quick rush of words. . . .

You got us all together.²³

Margaret Anderson emerged, thus, as one of the most charismatic visitors to the Jackson Street colony. She responded vigorously to the polemics of Dell in his *Literary Review* which favored a new world order. She rebelled against her bourgeois roots in the midwest, against the traditional life she saw around her, and made a stand for art as if it were a matter of life and death. Her enthusiasm and beauty, more than her intellectual sophistication, created *The Little Review*. The magazine supported the causes Dell championed: feminism, anarchism, socialism, modernism. It addressed futurism, the Little Theatre, and ultimately even poetry. As it began including poetry, *The Little Review* placed itself in competition with Harriet Monroe's magazine, *Poetry*, which was founded in 1912 as the pioneering publication of the early avant-garde poets in Chicago. A comparison of the two publications clarifies the unique nature of *The Little Review*.

Margaret Anderson could not have been more different from Harriet Monroe, a denizen of Chicago culture. Although both women founded little magazines, Monroe was over forty years old by the early teens and a veteran from another era of Chicago

culture, that of the Little Room of the 1890s. The Little Room encompassed Lorado Taft, Ralph Clarkson, and Charles Francis Browne, all professors at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago who by 1912 were considered entrenched academics. Among the literary figures the Little Room included were Hamlin Garland and Henry Blake Fuller.²⁴ Monroe had become famous in Chicago while still a young woman by composing her "Columbian Ode," which was sung by five thousand voices at the Columbian Exposition of 1893. She was an informed art critic and had undertaken the brave project of publishing *Poetry* by the responsible means of subscriptions. Margaret Anderson was casual, youthful, and idealistic. She practically hypnotized her contributors into writing for *The Little Review*. Mark Turbyfill, a poet, dancer, and artist, described Anderson in his unpublished memoirs:

I saw her hair glowing like a Burne-Jones aureole, her eyes opening wider in sapphire astonishment at my blindness. . . . She lifted her hand creatively into the air, brushing lightly the flower that nested on her blouse, and in that moment I saw the space above us gleaming, replete with the effulgence of the archetypal rose. It was the secret, the vision I longed for.²⁵

In the same memoir, Turbyfill characterized Monroe as business-like when she offered him a contract to sign.²⁶ Anderson operated her magazine mainly on charm and sporadic donations; writers already established by *Poetry* magazine such as Vachel Lindsay donated their prize money to *The Little Review*; Eunice Tietjens, a poet who helped Harriet Monroe at *Poetry*, donated her diamond ring.²⁷ Although both Anderson and Monroe were important as editors of Chicago's experimental literature, and Monroe's courage to publish a magazine devoted to poetry was widely respected and supported, Anderson's radical editorial style made her magazine more eccentric and experimental as well as more exciting.

Initially solvent, Anderson rented an office in the Fine Arts Building on Michigan Avenue. A few floors below *The Little Review* office was Maurice Browne's Little Theatre, another focal point of avant-garde activities in downtown Chicago. The first issue of *The Little Review* appeared in March 1914. Anderson's opening editorial reflected her effusive energy and youthful belief that she could change the world:

If you've ever read poetry, with a feeling that it was your religion, your very life; if you've ever come suddenly upon the whiteness of a Venus in a dim, deep room; if you've ever felt music replacing your shabby soul with a new one of shining gold; . . . if these things have happened to you and continue to happen till you're left quite speechless with the wonder of it all, then you'll understand our hope to bring them

nearer to the common experience of the people who read us.²⁸

She also wrote an article on Ignace Paderewski that reflected her avid interest in music and piano playing. The opening issue included articles by participants in the Jackson Park colony such as Cornelia Anderson (Sherwood's wife), Margery Currey, Floyd Dell (by then already in New York), Vachel Lindsay, and Eunice Tietjens. It also published a letter solicited from John Galsworthy and included a long article by the magazine's primary backer, Dewitt C. Wing. Most significantly, it ran an article by Sherwood Anderson which harkened back to the inspiration of the Post-Impressionist Exhibition in calling for a "New Note" of "truth and honesty" rather than merely adapting the effects of the new:

A cult of the new has sprung up, and doddering old fellows, yellow with their sins, run here and there crying out that they are true prophets of the new just as following last year's exhibit, every age-sick American painter began hastily to inject into his own work something clutched out of the seething mass of new forms and new effects scrawled upon the canvases by the living young cubists and futurists. . . .

Something has happened in the world. . . . Old standards and old ideas tumble about our heads. In the dust and confusion of the falling of the timbers of the temple many voices are raised.²⁹

The first issue set the tone of change and excitement, signifying a receptiveness to a new order that writers and artists felt emerging in Chicago in 1913-14. Although the leading post-impressionist painter, Nordfeldt, had left Chicago, Margaret Anderson reproduced the post-impressionist work of Jerome Blum and Raymond Jonson. Then emerging as a radical set designer for the Little Theatre,³⁰ Jonson would later become a central artist of the group known as the Transcendental Painters. Anderson also introduced the work of the recently arrived Polish sculptor Stanislaus Szukalski.³¹ The Russian emigré Alexander Kaun, another member of the Jackson Park art colony and a friend of Margaret Anderson, wrote an article on "Futurism and Pseudo-Futurism." The magazine even printed Marinetti's futurist manifesto "War, the Only Hygiene of the World."³² Quotes and an advertisement for the newly translated book by Wassily Kandinsky, *The Art of Spiritual Harmony*, appeared (fig. 8.4), along with pithy remarks by the popular art critic, Clive Bell. Margaret Anderson's campaign was to make a stand for intensity and authenticity in art and life. She wrote in the seventh issue:

Our culture—or what little we have of such a thing—is clogged by masses of dead people who have no

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The Art of Spiritual Harmony

By

WASSILI KANDINSKY

Translated from the German by M. T. H. Sadler

**A criticism and interpretation of the new
art by Gauguin's foremost disciple.**

"Kandinsky is painting music. That is to say, he has broken down the barrier between music and painting, and has isolated the pure emotion, which, for want of a better name, we call the artistic emotion."

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8.4 An advertisement for the English translation of Wassily Kandinsky's book, *The Art of Spiritual Harmony* (known in later translations as *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*), appeared in *The Little Review*, November 1914, p. 70.

conscious inner life . . . after one has chosen highly . . . his real struggle—and his real joy—begins. And only on such a basis is built up that intensity of inner life which is the sole compensation one can wrest from a world of mysterious terrors . . . of ecstasies too dazzling to be shared.³³

The "inner life" to which Anderson referred may have been inspired partially by the ideas of Wassily Kandinsky. Anderson's choice of the culture of the "inner life" was based on the writings

of poets such as Vachel Lindsay, Eunice Tietjens, and Edgar Lee Masters who appeared several times in the first few years of the magazine.

Yet to consider the "new note" of modernism only in the context of familiar names from the visual and literary arts is a violation of the spirit of Margaret Anderson's enterprise. Modernism also appeared in other forms. Political ideas such as anarchism were certainly an important part of modernism in Chicago in the early teens. The anarchist Emma Goldman was a favorite of the magazine; Anderson saw her ideas as applicable to the arts, as she expressed in an important editorial titled "Art and Anarchism" (fig. 8.5):

An anarchist is a person who realizes the gulf that lies between government and life; an artist is a person who realizes the gulf that lies between life and love. The former knows that he can never get from the government what he really needs for life; the latter knows that he can never get from life the love he really dreams of.³⁴

The Little Review also supported the idea of birth control and gave prominent coverage to the feminist Margaret Sanger's visit to Chicago.³⁵ Margaret Anderson described her commitment to feminism in general in the first issue: "Feminism? A clear thinking magazine can have only one attitude; the degree of ours is ardent."³⁶ In an early issue, *The Little Review* advertised Floyd Dell's book *Women as World Builders* and supported the feminists he wrote about such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Editorials promoted the ideal of a new world alive with change, even after the outbreak of World War I.

Anderson's initial success with *The Little Review* was the result of both the supportive and talented group of writers and political activists in Chicago as well as her own eccentric, spontaneous style. She fascinated the Chicago avant-garde with her antics such as publishing the magazine from the shores of Lake Michigan when she could no longer pay the rent for an office (partly because she had lost advertising revenues as a result of her public stand in support of Emma Goldman). When advertisers refused to buy space, she created ads in which she wrote "Carson, Pirie, Scott and Company ought to advertise something, though I don't know just what. . . . I think they resent even having to keep pace with the change in fashions."³⁷

For two years the Chicago avant-garde modern scene sustained *The Little Review*. During this time it also began to publish the work of a group of experimental poets in Massachusetts and London such as Hilda Doolittle, Richard Aldington, and Amy Lowell. By the spring of 1916, though, many of the original members of the Chicago avant-garde associated with *The Little Review* had moved to Greenwich Village or otherwise dispersed.

Art and Anarchism

MARGARET C. ANDERSON

WHEN "they" ask you what anarchism is, and you scuffle around for the most convincing definition, why don't you merely ask instead: "What is art?" Because anarchism and art are in the world for exactly the same kind of reason.

An anarchist is a person who realizes the gulf that lies between government and life; an artist is a person who realizes the gulf that lies between life and love. The former knows that he can never get from the government what he really needs for life; the latter knows that he can never get from life the love he really dreams of.

Now there is only one class of people—among the very rich or the very poor or the very middling—that doesn't know about these things. It is the uneducated class. It is composed of housewives, business men, church-goers, family egoists, club women, politicians, detectives, debutantes, drummers, Christian Scientists, policemen, demagogues, social climbers, ministers who recommend plays like *Experience*, etc., etc. It even includes some who may be educated—journalists, professors, philanthropists, patriots, "artistic" people, sentimentalists, cowards, and the insane. It is the great middle-class mind of America. It is the kind of mind that either doesn't think at all or that thinks like this: "Without the violence and the plotting there would be nothing left of anarchism but a dead theory. Without the romance of it anarchism would be nothing but a theory which will not work and never can until nature has evolved something very different out of man. It is cops and robbers, hare and hounds, Ivanhoe and E. Phillips Oppenheim all acted out in life. It is not really dangerous to society, but only to some members of it, because unless every one is against it there is no fun in it."

There is no fun talking about anarchism to people who understand it. But it would be great fun to make the middle-class mind understand it. This is the way I should go about it:

What things do you need in order to live? Food, clothing, shelter. What things *must* you have to get life out of the process of living? Love, work, recreation. All right.

Does the government give you the first three things? Not at all. It isn't the government or law or anything of that sort that gives you food or clothes. It's the efficient organization between those who produce these things and those who sell them to you. And it isn't government that keeps

8.5 Margaret Anderson, "Art and Anarchism," article that appeared in *The Little Review*, March 1916.

Anderson began to think her cause was faltering. She commented despairingly: "I have been realizing the ridiculous tragedy of *The Little Review*. It has been published for over two years without coming near its idea."³⁸

Precisely at this juncture Jane Heap appeared, the person who would be the mainstay of the magazine for the rest of its exis-

tence (fig. 8.6). The daughter of a supervisor at an insane asylum in Kansas, Heap had moved to Chicago around 1900 and completed an art degree at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1905. Although Heap had been a participant in Little Theatre performances as early as 1912, she first met Margaret Anderson in the spring of 1916.³⁹ Her impact on the magazine was drastic and immediate. A brilliant and ascerbic conversationalist on any topic, she entranced Anderson. They became lovers (an early example of open lesbianism) and spent a summer talking about art and life in California, an experience recorded in some flamboyant cartoons that appeared in the September 1916 issue (fig. 8.7). That same issue contained the famous twelve blank pages in response to Margaret Anderson's declaration that she would rather print nothing than fall short of being fully creative: "*The Little Review* hopes to become a magazine of Art. The September issue is offered as a Want Ad."⁴⁰ Her intense interaction with Heap was at least partly responsible for her sense that the magazine was not sufficiently creative. At this same time, under the stimulus of Heap's art background, the magazine changed from its drab brown cover to brilliantly colored jackets and bolder typefaces.

In the winter of 1917 another editor joined the magazine and also wrought a radical change in *The Little Review*. Ezra Pound, who had been affiliated with *Poetry* magazine almost since its inception, decided to transfer to *The Little Review* in March 1917.⁴¹ With Pound as foreign editor from London, the magazine began to publish the next generation of modern writing—the work of T. S. Eliot, Wyndham Lewis, and James Joyce. In that same winter *The Little Review* moved to New York, thus ending the Chicago history of the magazine, even though its own best-known chapter was just beginning. During the New York years the magazine was censured, suppressed, and even burned for publishing excerpts of James Joyce's *Ulysses* that were considered obscene; ultimately the editors were led into court and fined.⁴² By 1921, with Pound's continued support and as a rebuttal to its repression, *The Little Review* became a conduit for avant-garde European painters and poets such as Jean Cocteau, Constantin Brancusi, and Fernand Léger.

From a naively enthusiastic protest against the status quo supported by the youthful modern thinkers in politics, art, and literature in Chicago in 1913, *The Little Review* became an important magazine of the international avant-garde by the early 1920s. From mirroring the post impressionism, futurism, and expressionism of the nascent Chicago modernist scene in the visual arts, theater, and literature, *The Little Review* ultimately en-

8.6 E. O. Hoppe, *Jane Heap*, photograph, n.d. *The Little Review* Archives, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee.

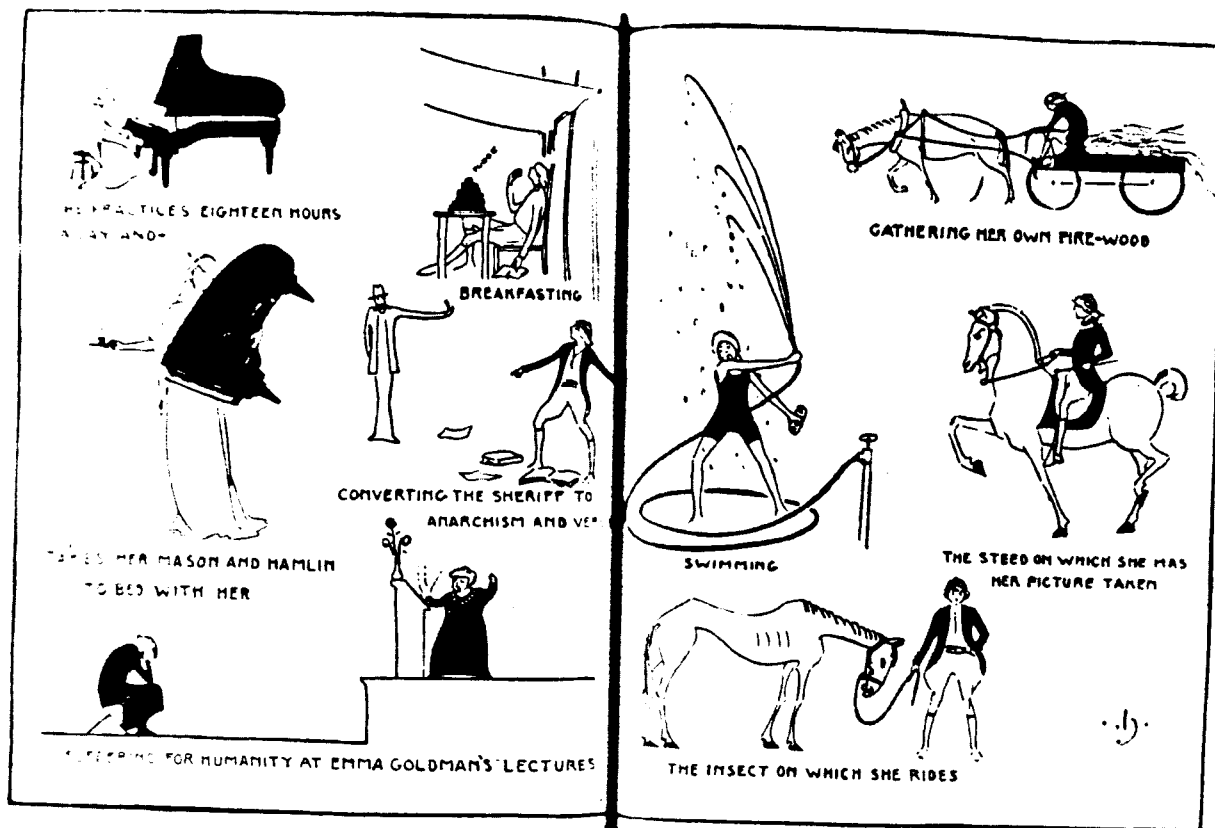
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Light occupations of the day. There is nothing to edit.

8.7 Jane Heap, cartoons from *The Little Review*, September 1916.

gaged the central issues of the avant-garde literary and visual arts scene of London and Paris.⁴³ *The Little Review* had a longer, more complex history than most of the other "little" magazines of the early twentieth century, but its lasting roots were in the Chicago avant-garde scene of the early teens. Those roots emerged one last time in the numerous tributes from the early contributors in the final issue of the magazine published in Paris in May 1929. It was a long, exciting journey, but without the exuberant idealism spawned in Chicago in 1913, it never would have even begun.