LECTURE

"Early Years and Avant Garde Ideas The Little Review in Chicago"

While severe floods created widespread disaster in Illinois in the Spring of 1913 established cultural circles in Chicago battled a flood of another type, coming not from natural forces, but from the artistic world of New York: the International Exhibition of Modern Painting, known in Chicago as the Post Impressionist Exhibition, invaded the staid bourgeois cultural circles of the city. A self respecting matron and mother, reported to the director of the Chicago Art Institute, Mr. WIlliam French, who had left town for the duration of the fracas, that a distinguished "alienist,." (expert in insanity) had visited the exhibition declared the art to be the work of a. distortionists b. psychopathologists and c. geometric puzzle artists. Of the three threats to society the least frightening appeared to be the last. The matron was concerned, she confided in Mr. French, for the moral and mental well being of her daughter.

Yet even as the bourgeois sector of Chicago feared for their lives and those of their offspring, another dimension of Chicago's cultural scene was enlivened and invigorated by this same exhibition. I refer not to the students at the Art Institute (many of whom violently opposed the exhibition as suggested by their burning of Henri Matisse in effigy) but to the literary and political avant-garde of Chicago in 1913. The avant garde art of the Post Impressionist exhibition invigorated and inspired this alert group of writers, poets, and playwrights, led by the radical, socialist editor of the Friday Literary Review, Floyd Dell, 1911 symbolically naked as Adam as he launched the new world of culture in Chicago.

Floyd Dell, confident, young editor and focal point for new ideas in Chicago in the Spring of 1913, wrote of the Post Impressionist show 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. "(p.238-Homecoming)

In his newspaper supplement, Dell remarked

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. (April 4, 1913)

Dell was encouraged in his support for the exhibition by one of the few post impressionist artists in Chicago, B.J.O. Nordfeldt. Nordfeldt painted this portrait of Dell around the time of the exhibition, his most avant garde work to that time, showing a suggestion of a fauve palette in its green face . Dell was transfixed by the experience of being painted by a post-impressionist commenting 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." (Apr. 4, 1913) .

Another enthusiastic response to the Post Impressionist exhibition was from the writer, Sherwood Anderson then newly arrived in Chicago, from the small Ohio town from which he had broken away to find himself as a writer. Anderson soon to be famous as a major modernist wrote
of the exhibition a year later in an article called "The New Note,"
"... 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, 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. (p. 23 *Little Review* March 1914)... 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.

Thus Anderson, like Dell, considered the exhibition as a sign of upheaval in all areas, not just painting. Sherwood Anderson attended the exhibition accompanied by his brother Karl, who was one of its sponsors as well as an artist himself. Karl was holding a one person show simultaneously with the Post Impressionist exhibition at a nearby gallery. An image reproduced from a review reveals that the artists' work was mild and academic. The impact of the exhibition was stronger on his writer brother. Not long after Sherwood Anderson began writing Wineburg,Ohio his first great modern short story employing the expressive psychological realism that would be characteristic of his work for the rest of his career..

Shortly after the exhibition, and with the encouragement of Floyd Dell, Sherwood Anderson began participating in a small interdisciplinary avant-garde community. Located in old storefronts remaining from the Chicago Columbian Exposition of 1893 at 57thst and Stoney Island Avenue (they were demolished in the 1960s) it had since the fair been used by artists, including B.J.O. Nordfeldt as early as 1903. In the Spring of1913 , just after the Post Impressionist exhibition, the community centered around Dell and his wife Margery Currey who moved there in April for an amicable separation. It also included Maurice and Ellen Browne, founders of the first little theatre in America. Dell has left a description of his bohemian life on 57th st. : " I have just returned ... to my ice cold studio, where I have built a fire with scraps of linoleum , a piece of wainscoting and the contents of an elaborate filing system of four years creation. ... My room contains one bookcase and nine Fels -Naptha soap boxes full of books... a typewriter stand, a fireless cooker, . . . and a couch with a mattress and a blanket." Others who visited the community, although they did not live in its ascetic ruggedness, were various professors from the University of Chicago, as well as the poets, Edgar Lee Masters, who was about to embark on his classic book Spoon River

Anthology, Vachel Lindsay, just emerging into prominence after selling his poems for bread across the country, Carl Sandburg, whose brother in law Edward Steichen was active in the visual arts scene, and Alexander Kaun, émigré Russian writer and sometime futurist. Also on the scene were Cornelia Anderson, Sherwood's wife, and Tennessee Mitchell who started as Master's wife, later became Sherwood's. She also achieved some prominence as a sculptor in the 1920s, particularly in an introductory portfolio for Sherwood Anderson's Triumph of the Egg. Other peripheral figures included Theodore Dreiser, who, although settled in New York, frequently returned to Chicago and Harriet Monroe, founder of Poetry magazine the year before. She was a veteran of the advanced cultural circles of Chicago since the World's Columbian Exposition of 1892 for which she had composed an ode sung with a chorus of a thousand voices. In 1913 Monroe was a supporter and writer of avant-garde poetry as well as one of the few informed critics in Chicago, the latter career pursued purely for income. Also joining this informal avant-garde of the Spring of 1913, and also brought there by Floyd Dell was Margaret Anderson . (no relation of Sherwood). It was Margaret Anderson who would take up the torch lighted by Dell and create a focus for the avant-garde energy that Dell had supported , particularly after his departure for New York later in the summer of 1913.

In the lively, freewheeling and responsive environment of the 57the St. colony, brought to a frenzy of excitement by the Post Impressionist exhibition, Margaret Anderson announced plans to found a Little Review that would present the newest tendencies in art, drama, literature and dance. On the night when she announced her magazine, in Margery Currey's studio most of the members of the group who would contribute to her review were present to cheer her on and support her endeavor.

The *Little Review* was to become the publication of the youth of modernism in the arts in Chicago in 1913-1914. The magazine would be a permanent record of the first ephemeral outpouring of exuberant creativity which later scholars have come to call the Chicago liberation, also dubbed the "Robin's Egg Renaissance" by Sherwood Anderson (p. 199 *Memoirs*),because it ended so quickly.

Margaret Anderson emerged as among the most charismatic people who participated in the 57th st. colony; she responded to the vigorous polemics in favor of the need for a new order of the world. Her extraordinary personality and style enabled her to launch the magazine. Rebelling against bourgeois roots in the Midwest, rebelling against the dead, traditional life she saw around her Margaret Anderson made a stand for art and life, as a matter of life and death. In the Spring of 1913 Margaret Anderson had been in Chicago since 1908. Like Sherwood Anderson she had come there to break away from a boring, staid life, in her case in a small city in Indiana. Since 1909 she had worked as literary editor for The Continent, a religious magazine for which she sometimes was asked to write almost four hundred and seventy five reviews in one fall, worked for the Dial where she had been chased by its editor, and been an occasional reviewer for the Friday *Literary Review*, the publication edited by Floyd Dell. In addition to literary reviewing, Margaret Anderson was also an avid piano player: throughout the *Little Review* years, no matter how impoverished she always wangled a grand piano to play, even if she had no other furniture. Sherwood Anderson later described Margaret Anderson's arrival on the avant-garde scene somewhat fancifully:

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In Chicago, when you came there, you were most needed. You came. You appeared out of the most absurd of all possible places. I think it was Floyd Dell who first told me of you . "She exists," he said," a woman who will start a magazine here. " ... But she will be taken up by some particular crowd here. ..."Wait and See" Floyd. said. And so I did wait and see. 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 got us all together.(*The New Republic*, June 11, 1930, p. 104)

And so the *Little Review* was spawned, taking up the vital interdisciplinary focus of Floyd Dell's *Literary Review*. It supported feminism, post impressionism, anarchism, socialism and every other manifestation of the new order. Its title echoed the avant-garde experimental "Little Theatre" of Maurice Browne which was creating a new stage,)and set design, a new modernity in the theatre that would impact on a whole generation of theatrical experiment. Similarly, the *Little Review* of Margaret Anderson would have an impact on a generation of writers and artists. In contrast to *Poetry,* the magazine of Harriet Monroe, the *Little Review* always had a casual, but flamboyant style. Monroe and Anderson have both been characterized by the poet, dancer, artist Mark Turbyfill in his unpublished memoirs. He was transfixed by Margaret Anderson:

“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 “(p. 15)

Monroe, on the other hand, according to Turbyfill, spoke only of business "Now Mark," she was saying, almost impatiently," will you please sign this agreement at once.?" (p. 22). Monroe obtained subscribers before launching her magazine, Anderson had sporadic individual donors, with consequently erratic finances. She worked primarily on charm and enthusiasm. This contrast of personalities in no sense discounts the importance of Monroe's magazine, a major contribution to the publication of poetry in America. But it does suggest that Margaret Anderson's extraordinary personality, enthusiasm and intensity, resulted in a magazine to which all the avant-garde thinkers of the Chicago scene gladly donated their ideas, and writings , prize money from Poetry magazine, and even in one case, Eunice Tietjens, a diamond ring. (p. 68).. The conclusion of Margaret Anderson's editorial in the first issue of the Little Review suggests her effusive energy and youthful belief that she could change the world. Her particular, emotional style emerges most clearly in the conclusion of her editorial:
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 in the early morning, you've watched a bird with great white wings fly from the edge of the sea straight up into the rose-colored sun- 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." (March 1914)

Margaret Anderson took an office in the Fine Arts Building not far from the Little Theatre. Modernism appeared in the pages of the Little Review in many formats: reproductions of art by post impressionists like Jerome Blum, the young Raymond Jonson, then working for the Little Theatre and Stanislaw Szukalski . A futurist manifesto by Marinetti titled "War, the Only Hygiene of the world" appeared in the Fall of 1914 as well as an essay by Alexander Kaun, on "Futurism and Pseudo-Futurism," . It also celebrated the writing of Kandinsky, both overtly, by advertising The Art of Spiritual Harmony just translated into English in November 1914, and more subtly in essays by Anderson which celebrate the "innermost". Anderson wrote: "Our culture -or what little we have of such a thing-is clogged by masses of dead people who have no 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... and of ecstasies too dazzling to be shared." (p. 3,5, Oct. 1914). In addition quotes from Clive Bell's recently available book Art, appear occasionally. These quotes are provocative and in tune with Margaret Anderson's program of cultural revolution." The least that the state can do is to protect people who have something to say that may cause a riot. What will not cause a riot is probably not worth saying-" (p.\ 31 - Oct. 1914 ck)

In addition, all the poets, and writers of the 57th St. colony, Sherwood Anderson, Vachel Lindsay, Eunice Tietjens, and even Cornelia Anderson, Sherwood's wife, who had no previous literary experience contributed their work. Also in the literary area Anderson supported the poets known as "Imagists", a brief transitional movement sponsored by Ezra Pound and Amy Lowell that reacted against the traditional cadences and content of nineteenth century poetry, proclaiming free verse and immediate images instead. Yet, to consider modernism only in the context of familiar names from the visual and literary arts is a radical violation of the spirit of Margaret Anderson's enterprise at the Little Review . Modernism also appeared in other guises.

An important part of modernism in Chicago in the early teens (as it was part of the German expressionist scene in Germany in the early twentieth century as demonstrated recently by Rose Carol Washton Long)were certainly the ideas of the anarchist Emma Goldman. Goldman was heavily supported in the magazine, both in editorials and essays, her ideas seen as applicable to the arts by Margaret Anderson in an article titled "Art and Anarchism":

"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. " (p. 3 March 1916, Floyd Dell had also supported)

The *Little Review* also supported the idea of birth control, giving prominent coverage to Margaret Sanger's visit to Chicago. Margaret Anderson described her commitment in the first issue: "Feminism? A clear thinking magazine can have only one

attitude; the degree of ours is ardent!" (March 1914) In an early issue she ran an ad for Floyd Dell's first book of 1912, Women as World Builders: Studies in Modern Feminism in which he promoted the most prominent feminists of the day, such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Isadora Duncan, Emmeline Pankhurst, Jane Addams and of course, Emma Goldman, most of whom were taken up by Margaret Anderson. In every editorial Anderson demonstrated her full commitment to the idea of a new, alive world. Her flamboyant style, moreover, fascinated the Chicago avant-garde scene, with such antics as publishing the magazine from the shores of Lake Michigan because she ran out of money to pay the rent on her office of the Fine Arts Building (partly because of her public stand in favor of Emma Goldman.) When advertisers refused to buy space, she created spaces in which she wrote: "Carson, Pirie, Scott and Company ought to advertise something, though I don't know just what. The man I interviewed made such a face when I told him we were "radical" that I haven't had the courage to go back and pester him for the desired full-page. I think they resent even having to keep pace with the change in fashions." (Little Mag, p. 56)

By the spring of 1916 as she wrote the words on anarchism her desire for an even greater sense of change led to the second stage of the magazine, a stage which has only a brief history in Chicago. That second stage ultimately led to the *Little Review*'s historic activities in New York from 1917-1929.

Yet, the second stage of the *Little Review* does also have its roots in the Chicago cultural scene of 57th st.. One of the participants of the Little Theatre performances was an art tudent named Jane HeapHeap had attended the Art Institute School at the turn of the century studying most frequently with the academic, but proficient and well respected painter Carolyn Wade. Heap had come to the Art Institute from Kansas, where she had grown up on the grounds of an insane asylum, where her father had been an engineer. Thus her inclinations were unique, her training traditional and her commitment in the mid teens was to the avant-garde.

Margaret Anderson met Jane Heap in the Spring of 1916; she was immediately fascinated by her conversation. Heap's impact on the magazine was drastic and immediate. She and Margaret spent a summer talking in California, an experience recorded in some flamboyant cartoon like drawings by Heap that appeared in the Fall l9l6 issue. That same issue contained the famous blank pages, in response to Anderson's desire for a more meaningful tone for the magazine in response to Margaret Anderson's decision to print nothing, rather than fall short of being creative. The appearance of the magazine changed immediately from its drab brown cover, to brilliantly colored jackets, and bolder typefaces as well as photographically reproduced art. More quotes from Bell and Kandinsky appeared, and the contents of the magazine were often written by Heap either with the initials jh or anonymously.

In addition, in the winter of 1917 and of profound long term importance, the magazine acquired a foreign editor, Ezra Pound. Pound had been affiliated with Poetry magazine since its inception in 1912, but frustrated with Harriet Monroe's style, he went over to the Little Review in 1917. In the spring of 1917 Heap and Anderson also decided to move to New York. Much of the activity of the 57th St. group had already dissipated by then, many of the writers moving to New York and, clearly, the magazine needed a new base of creative input in order to survive . With Pound as foreign editor and its new location in New York the Little Review began a new phase, that of the first

publication of Ulysses, by James Joyce . This publication, a courageous and almost unbelievable act on the part of the editors made the Little Review the center of a controversy, first in the courts, where it was censured for publishing obscenity and the magazine seized by burned by the Post Office and then, by way of support, from the avant-garde community of Paris. By 1921, the *Little Review* became the conduit for the avant-garde community in Paris into New York, publishing frequently for the first time the work of Picabia, Breton, Chirico, the Russian Constructivists and many others during the 1920s. So what began as a protest to the status quo supported by the interdisciplinary and youthful avant garde of Chicago , ultimately became an important magazine of the international avant-garde. From mirroring the post impressionism
futurism and expressionism of the nascent Chicago modernist scene in the visual arts, theatre and literature, the *Little Review* ultimately engaged the central issues of the avant-garde literary and visual arts scene of Paris in the 1920s.bringing those issues to the attention of its American audience. The last issue of the *Little Review* appeared in 1929 with a series of letters from all of its subscribers in response to a complex catechism about what the *Little Review* meant to them. It was a long and exciting journey, but without the exuberant idealism spawned in Chicago in 1912, it never would have even begun.