

Donal Harris. *On Company Time: American Modernism in the Big Magazines*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2016. 304 pp. \$60.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-231-17772-6.

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The story of literary modernism is a familiar one: in the pages of the so-called little magazines—small, noncommercial, experimental publications like *Blast* (1914-15), *The Little Review* (1914-22), *The Masses* (1911-17), and others with limited circulation and radical perspectives—the movement took shape. James Joyce's *Ulysses*, T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, Ezra Pound's poetry, and the works of other modernist writers found homes in the pages of publications that challenged established literary forms, promoted an aesthetics of the avant-garde, and circulated across the Atlantic and internationally. Without a commercial imperative, high aesthetics prevailed.

Donal Harris's *On Company Time: American Modernism in the Big Magazines* adds to that story. A nuanced and provocative study, *On Company Time* examines American literary modernism from the perspective of the twentieth-century's "big" magazines—newsmagazines like Henry Luce's and Britton Hadden's *Time* and its sister publications *Fortune* and *Life*; men's fashion magazines like *Esquire*; even the African American monthly *The Crisis* and the Progressive-era journal *McClure's*. As Harris, an assistant professor of English at the University of Memphis, explains, such magazines were eclectic, but unlike their "little" counterparts, all were "unapologetically" commercial. They also distinguished themselves

with their shared goal of expanding their readership "by way of their textual and visual styles rather than their content" (p. 6). For Harris, that focus on style—on a distinctive editorial voice and visual aesthetics—set them apart from their content-focused counterparts like the *Ladies' Home Journal* and *Saturday Evening Post* in the late nineteenth century, and even the quality monthlies like *Harper's* and the *Atlantic*. With their emphasis on profit, big magazines made it possible for many modernist writers to earn their living as staff writers and editors—something periodical history has long acknowledged. More important, though, Harris contends, these mass-culture magazines were not simply foils to modernism but played a role in the movement's evolution (p. 8). Rejecting any reductive binary (little magazines vs. big, elite vs. popular), Harris shows the complex ways in which big magazines were part of the larger dialectic of culture from which literary modernism emerged.

Harris explores that relationship in five chapters that together chart the rise of modernism in mass culture, pairing substantial close reading and literary analysis with details from periodical history. Chapter 1, "Willa Cather's Promiscuous Fiction," focuses on Cather's experiences as managing editor of *McClure's* (1906-11), a period that followed the well-known national monthly's loss

of its best-known muckrakers who left to found their own magazine. With his focus on Cather as both novelist and editor, Harris shows how Cather's aesthetic of the "unfurnished novel"—of the impersonality of the author—developed in tandem with her belief that the editor is one whose work itself goes undetected. Chapter 2, "Printing the Color Line in *The Crisis*," details the ways in which new magazine technologies—the stereotype, the halftone, and the multigraph—intersected with the larger efforts on the part of the African American monthly's editor, W. E. B. DuBois, to shape the public discourse around race. Harris's close analysis of cover art, especially the covers that artist Frank Walts produced for the magazine, delineates the visual strategies and racialized aesthetic that DuBois cultivated to counter stereotypes of the black body.

Harris continues to focus on the interaction between commercial magazines and literary modernism in the book's final three chapters. Modernism remains notoriously difficult to define, and this book's introduction and its early chapters do much to establish the theoretical context for Harris's argument. The book's final chapters, though, have less heavy lifting to do in terms of theory and rely less substantially on literary analysis. Most important, these chapters focus on some of the most unequivocally profit-driven magazines of the period—long-running and influential magazines that defined the medium for much of the century.

Chapter 3, "On the Clock: Rewriting Literary Work at Time Inc.," takes on *Time* magazine, Henry Luce's and Britton Hadden's "overtly masculine" newsmagazine, which the two men launched in 1923 (p. 24). Faced with the "superabundance" of information that came increasingly with modern life (p. 116) and a robust print culture that threatened to overwhelm harried readers, *Time* offered its readers compression in both style and content. As an early prospectus for the magazine notes, no story in the magazine would

be longer than seven inches of type (p. 119). To fulfill that objective, Luce and Hadden privileged editing over reporting and sought staff members who could repackage information from daily newspapers for its otherwise overwhelmed readers. Notable for the absence of bylines—a practice that downplayed individual authorship and cultivated authorial distance—*Time* also developed a uniform and idiosyncratic style comprised of portmanteau words, inverted sentences, brevity, and a "chatty" tone.

The strength of this chapter, though, is not its discussion of *Time*'s "inventive" style (p. 110) but its examination of the way in which one of the twentieth-century's best-known writers, James Agee, interacted with the ethos of Time Inc. One of several novelists and poets who worked for *Time* and its later offshoots, *Fortune* (1930) and *Life* (1936), Agee mastered *Time*'s corporate voice—he even parodied it as an undergraduate. But he battled with the limits of compression and the anonymity of *Time* style in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, his celebrated account of the lives of Southern sharecroppers, which he produced with photographer Walker Evans. First undertaken as an assignment for *Fortune*, which killed the story, Agee's groundbreaking work of narrative nonfiction—a precursor of the New Journalism of the 1960s published in book form in 1941 by Houghton Mifflin—drew on aesthetic values of authorship at odds with *Time*'s corporate style.

Turning from style to discourse, chapter 4, "Our Eliot," and chapter 5, "Hemingway's Disappearing Style," address the ways which the big magazines framed literary modernism as a cultural movement. As early as the 1920s, Harris points out, literary modernism had become news. The first issue of *Time*, for example, derided T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, which *The Dial* literary magazine had recently honored with its annual prize. Describing Eliot's poem "a new kind of literature ... whose only obvious fault is that no one can understand it," *Time* dubbed the *The Waste*

Land a hoax (p. 141). Such criticism receded, though, in the 1940s and 1950s when *Time* reclaimed Eliot as an American writer and “a symbol of American internationalism” (p. 149). That reframing of Eliot from an elite and abstruse European aesthete to an American poet with international reach began to emerge in 1948 with *Time*’s coverage of Eliot as a Nobel Prize-winner and continued in March 1950 with the poet’s appearance on the magazine’s cover. The cover story for that issue in fact repatriated Eliot, who had been a British citizen for more than thirty years, emphasizing his American roots along with his penchant for baseball, bourbon, and the Bible. Faced with the decay of European culture—a development that *Time* now read into *The Waste Land*—the newsmagazine embraced Eliot’s poetry as an American cultural export—a kind of soft power that played into Luce’s celebrated “American Century.” *Time*, in other words, validated the poet rather than the poetry, making Eliot the subject of a masscult reframing at odds with the complexities and ambiguities of his poetic work.

Big magazines of the 1950s helped revive the reputation of Ernest Hemingway as well. *Time*, for example, dismissed Hemingway as dated and noted that he had “written himself into a corner” with the publication of *To Have and Have Not* in 1937 (p. 173). The magazine embraced the novelist again, however, with the publication in 1952 of *The Old Man and the Sea*. Like Eliot, Hemingway appeared on *Time*’s cover. Harris likewise recounts Hemingway’s rise to celebrity status in the big magazines of midcentury with Arnold Gingrich’s fledgling *Esquire* courting the author—and his hypermasculine persona—as it built its own reputation as a site of fashionable masculinity. *The Old Man and the Sea* in fact originated in a column for *Esquire*, and the novel first appeared in its entirety in *Life* magazine, where it sold 5.3 million copies in its first two days.

On Company Time is not the first book to look beyond the little magazines credited with giving

voice to the movement. The late Robert Scholes called for the rejection of such easy binaries in “Small Magazines, Large Ones, and Those In-Between,” his afterward to *Little Magazines and Modernism: New Approaches* (2007). Nor is *On Company Time* alone in examining marketplace pressures. Mark Morrisson’s *The Public Face of Modernism: Little Magazines, Audiences, and Reception, 1905-1920* (2001) explores the commercial publishing dynamics of the early years of the modernist movement. But in its sustained analysis of the connections between modernist voices and commercial print culture, *On Company Time* offers new perspectives on some of the twentieth century’s most important writers and their relationship with some of the period’s most storied publications. Instead of a hard-and-fast binary of big versus little, Harris finds a productive interaction between writers and the periodicals that not only published their work but dominated American culture.

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