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The “Moderns” and the Formation of an American Political Avant-Garde at the Turn of the 1920s and 1930s (*transition*, *New Masses*, *Contact*)

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In his book published in 1996, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century*, Michael Denning delineates three groups of intellectuals who participate in the formation of a proletarian avant-garde in the United States at the end of the 1920s and through the 1930s. These groups are the “plebeians” (such as Mike Gold, Richard Wright, Tillie Olsen, or Clifford Odets), the “immigrates” (like Fritz Lang, Bertolt Brecht, André Breton or Philip Rahv) and the previous generation of the “moderns”, i.e. “the artists whose careers had begun under the sign of an oppositional European modernism, the “exiles” who returned.”¹ (and we can think of Edmund Wilson, Malcolm Cowley, Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Sherwood Anderson or Langston Hughes, among many others).

I would like to shed light on the role of these “moderns” in the formation of a distinctly American political avant-garde, by visiting three magazines that I will argue encapsulate three major moments of this collective history.

The first magazine I will evoke is *transition*, the American exile magazine published in Paris between 1927 and 1938 by poet and journalist Eugene Jolas. I will try to show that *transition* reveals an acute crisis for the moderns, partly because Europe no longer meets the exiles’ expectations while the United States is still considered as synonymous with puritanism, conformism, and materialism. The second magazine I will deal with is *New Masses*. *New Masses*, I will argue, gathers during its first years many of the “exiles who returned” and crystallizes in this way a physical and symbolical return to the United States marked by open political commitment and party affiliation. I will then focus on the second series of *Contact*, also published in New York and edited in 1932 by William Carlos Williams, Robert McAlmon and Nathanael West. *Contact* constitutes a third moment in this collective history of the moderns, a moment characterized by the notion that literature alone is

¹ Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century*, London and New York, Verso, 1996, 121.

able to express political commitment, inasmuch as “great poetry” involves for Williams “contact with a vulgar world”².

I am not suggesting here that all moderns went from *transition* to *New Masses* and then *Contact*, or even that there is a strict chronological or intellectual progression from one magazine to another. These magazines overlapped, partially at least, they did not share exactly the same contributors, and even more importantly they had larger perspectives than the ones I am going to focus on.

1927, the year when *transition* started publication in Paris, represents a turning point for the American exiles, since it is the year when the American community in Paris peaked at 40,000. What could appear at first as the mere happy continuation of a trend initiated at the beginning of the 1920s, when the Americans started sailing massively to Europe, turns out to be the symptom of a deep crisis. In an essay written in 1931 for *Scribner's Magazine*, F. S. Fitzgerald writes: “by 1928 Paris had grown suffocating. With each new shipment of Americans spewed up by the boom the quality fell off, until toward the end there was something sinister about the crazy boatloads.”³ Times have changed, and expatriation to Europe, once considered as a joyous and sane avant-garde rebellion against the Prohibition, has become somehow “sinister” and “crazy”. But what most probably is truly sinister at the time is not the crazy boatloads themselves, as Fitzgerald confusedly suggests, but the apocalyptic atmosphere that prevails in Europe. Even *transition*, the last important exile magazine of its time, and one that globally keeps on celebrating Europe when no other magazine does anymore, starts suggesting that the old continent is dying. To take just one example, in the Fall of 1928, Jolas asks in a questionnaire entitled “Why do Americans live in Europe?”: “How do you envisage the spiritual future of America in the face of a dying Europe (...)?”⁴ This apocalyptic undertone reveals the impact on Jolas, but also on the Anglo-American intelligentsia at large, of Oswald Spengler's best-seller *The Decline of the West*. *The Decline of the West*, interestingly, was first published in German between 1916 and 1920, but it was only translated into English between 1926 and 1928, taking on at the time new significance. *The Decline of the West* at the end of the 1920s of course resonates with the painful memory of WW1, but it also comes to crystallize present-day uneasiness, which for

² William Carlos Williams, “Comment”, *Contact*, vol. I, n°3, February 1932, 131.

³ F. S. Fitzgerald, “Echoes of the Jazz Age”, *Scribner's Magazine*, n°90, November 1931, 459-65, reprinted in *The Crack-Up*, ed. Edmund Wilson, New York, New Directions Paperbook, 1956 [1945], 20.

⁴ Eugene Jolas, “Why do Americans live in Europe?”, *transition*, n°14, Fall 1928, 97.

the intellectuals based in Europe, partly derived from the disintegration of the historical avant-gardes. What we have at the end of the 1920s is in fact a double crisis. The United States is still considered as synonymous with puritanism, conformism and materialism, in the wake of Harold Stearn's 1922 landmark study, *Civilization in the United States*, which, according to critics, "inspired many dissatisfied young Americans to go abroad"⁵. This negative outlook on the U. S. is very clear in the editorials published in *transition*. The first anniversary editorial of *transition* in March 1928 is a case in point: "We are disappointed to find the creative vision at such a low ebb in North America. Where are the college men, the obscure amateurs, the cynics, the rebels, the gadflies? Where are the poets? Where are the weavers of legends?"⁶ The U. S. is still seen in a negative light, but Europe is not considered as a solution anymore. There is a double bind here which is best exemplified in *transition* by a manifesto entitled "New York: 1928". In January 1928, Matthew Josephson, Kenneth Burke, William Slater Brown, Malcolm Cowley, Robert Myron Coates and Nathan Asch gather in a Broadway hotel to write up an eclectic manifesto denouncing both the materialism of the United States and the exiles' pretentiousness and supposed lack of virility. Among other texts, the first two poems of the manifesto were written by William Slater Brown, the third one is by Malcolm Cowley:

Wanton Prejudice

I'd rather live in Oregon and pack salmon
Than live in Nice and write like Robert McAlmon.

Fry Two!

The vulgarity of these United States
Is something every Exile hates.
In Paris, though, they turn the table
And act as vulgar as they are able.

Young Mr. Androgyne the talented poet
writes verse on the beauty of his soul
– my body is as lovely as my verse
big truckdriver if you like this verse of mine
take me, big truckdriver.⁷

⁵ Kerin R. Sarason & Ruth L. Strickland, "Harold E. Stearns", *American Writers in Paris, 1920-1939, Dictionary of Literary Biography*, vol. IV, Detroit, Gale Research, 1980, 358.

⁶ Elliot Paul and Eugene Jolas, "A Review", *transition*, n°12, March 1928, 141-2.

⁷ "New York: 1928", *transition*, n°13, June 1928, 96.

The other text I would like to quote is about Americans at home, and it is equally sarcastic. Entitled “SHE BOUGHT THE WRONG BOOK!”, it is anonymous:

The evening was over. And she knew that what she had intended to be a brilliant success, not only for herself, but for her husband, had turned out a dismal failure. To be sure, John’s boss had come – both Mr. Cartwright and his wife had been there. The dinner had been perfect. But afterwards, when the conversation shifted to CULTURE, her humiliation had been complete. For SHE HAD BOUGHT THE WRONG BOOK. There on the table lay the offending volume, written by a nobody – whereas not only Mr. Cartwright and his wife, but also the other men from the office (clerks getting the same salary as John himself) had read a different book. For every one of them, except John and his wife, subscribed to the BOOK OF THE YEAR ASSOCIATION. They had bought the right book.⁸

Even though both the aestheticism of the exiles and the materialism of the United States are equally ridiculed, the conclusion of the manifesto calls for a return to the United States.

We may become centurions of Soap for a time, pro-consuls of hydro-electricity; we may sing before the microphone; dance before the television box. A period of training, a phase of discipline will elapse, and in the end the force of mind will leaven this society which has known only material preoccupations.⁹

It is not clear in this conclusion to which extent materialism and mass culture should be accepted, but the authors of this manifesto seem confident that the society can be reformed, and interestingly, whether it be Josephson, Cowley, William Slater Brown, Kenneth Burke or Nathan Asch, all of them will shortly afterwards turn to communism. What I am suggesting here is that the moderns’ political commitment in the United States is going to be a way out of the double bind I was mentioning earlier. This is not to say that the moderns discover political commitment only at the end of the 1920s – if only because the *Masses* or the *Liberator* date back to the 1910s – but it is in this moment at the end of the 1920s that political commitment takes on a new dimension among American intellectuals that eventually allows it to become the basis for a new avant-garde. In this respect I totally agree with Michael Denning who writes that: “Though a few had ties to the Greenwich Village radicalism of the *Masses*, most of the moderns were apolitical. If they were critical of the commercialism and Babbitry of US culture, their alienation was expressed in expatriation to Europe and avant-garde formal experiment. The turning point came in the late 1920s”¹⁰, with the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti in 1927, or the 1929 crash. There is a marked turning point in those years 1927-1928-1929, which correspond both to a growing cultural and political uneasiness towards Europe and to the emergence of massive political awareness in the United States.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 94.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 102.

¹⁰ Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front*, *op. cit.*, 59.

New Masses, founded in New York in 1926, at least four years before the bulk of the proletarian magazines of its generation, attracted an important number of the moderns and in particular of the exiles who used to contribute to European-based magazines, such as of course *transition*, but also *Broom*, *Secession* or the *transatlantic review*. Among the moderns who move physically and/or symbolically from Europe to the United States, from interest in the European avant-gardes to political commitment in the United States, from exile magazines to committed magazines back home, and, in many cases, from *transition* to *New Masses*, one can think for example of Matthew Josephson, Malcolm Cowley, John Herrmann, Josephine Herbst, Herman Spector, Norman Macleod, William Carlos Williams, Kenneth Fearing, Louis Lozowick, William Slater Brown, Sherwood Anderson, James Agee, Stanley Burnshaw, Bob Brown, Isidor Schneider, Alfred Kreyborg, Katherine Ann Porter, William Closson Emory, Bernard Smith, and many others. The editorial board of the first issues of *New Masses* also suggests the extent to which the magazine crystallizes a revolution in the intellectual landscape of the United States. Among the first editors of *New Masses*, we unsurprisingly find the ex editors of *Masses* and the *Liberator* (like Eastman, Freeman, Gold, Gropper, Art Young), but we also find writers like Waldo Frank (who is the first editor in chief of *New Masses*), Lewis Mumford, Van Wyck Brooks, or Gorham B. Munson, who were all influential a decade earlier in denouncing the “civilization in America”, to quote again the title of Harold Stearn’s book, to which both Lewis Mumford and Van Wyck Brooks contributed. Even though these personalities sometimes come from very different backgrounds, if only because some of them actually emigrated while others stayed home, they all share the sense that the future now lies in America and in political commitment. As Bernard Smith writes in the American issue of *transition* in 1928: “*transition* must look again to the west and forget Europe. The continent is well able to take care of itself, but America needs help.”¹¹ *transition* will never forget Europe, and *New Masses* will take care of America. The transition between the two magazines is all the easier for the contributors since *transition* and *New Masses* do not consider each other as enemies, at least until 1929; on the contrary, they read, respect and even admire each other, with *transition* periodically quoting and discussing *New Masses*, while *New Masses* pays homage to *transition*’s constant enthusiasm and bold editorial choices. 1929 marks a break in the friendly relationships between the two

¹¹ Bernard Smith, “American Letter”, *transition*, n°13, June 1928, 247.

magazines, with *transition* ironically reacting to *New Masses'* rampant criticism that the exiles and their literature are effeminate:

The new artist of Mr Gold's is going to hop out of his cot in the morning full of vigor, don his work-stained clothes and dash off to the job to work shoulder to shoulder with other Reds who are doing big vital things, things that count. At night he will return reeking with sweat, heavy with fatigue, but happily drunk with inspiration. He will sit down at his bare table and, writing at top speed, turn out page after page of virile lyric literature – the real stuff. His words will come straight from the guts and he will scorn that attention to form and polish that those dilettantes over in Paris think so important. Here, says Mr Gold, is the future artist of America, the coming Jack London or Walt Whitman!¹²

From then on, the relationship between both magazines only worsens, with *New Masses* reacting by condemning *transition's* “old experimentalism” and abstractions from which young writers should quickly disassociate themselves, “as many have long ago done from Pound, the dean of corpses that promenade in graveyards.”¹³ Interestingly, this evolution in the relations between *transition* and *New Masses* echoes a drastic change in *New Masses'* editorial line. With Michael Gold's appointment as editor in chief of *New Masses* in 1928, and the official affiliation of the magazine with the Communist Party in 1930, literature slowly disappears from the pages of *New Masses*, with the notable exceptions however of a few writers such as John Dos Passos and Langston Hughes. Contrasting a few quotes from the magazine allows for a sketch of this major editorial evolution. The first quote is from a 1926 editorial by Michael Gold entitled “Let It Be Really New”. Gold explains that *New Masses* is “not a magazine of Communism or Moscow, but a magazine of American experiment.”¹⁴ In 1928, Gold's perspective has become slightly different. He now asserts that “EVERYONE knows how to write”¹⁵, and that “less literature, and more life is to be our slogan.”¹⁶ Virginia Hagelstein Marquardt points out in an insightful paper on the evolution of *New Masses* and John Reed Club artists between 1926 and 1936, how Gold in 1928 undertakes a program to transform *New Masses* into a magazine exclusively produced for and by workers. Strikingly, the biographical sketches of contributors that used to emphasize contributors' professional standings now insist on their working-class backgrounds and associations. Similarly, “Gold urged the revolutionary writer to report on working-class life and industry “from first hand contacts” by spending several years in an industry, enabling him to write “like an insider, not

¹² Robert Sage, “Mr Gold's Spring Model”, *transition*, n°15, February 1929, 185.

¹³ Joseph Vogel, “Literary Graveyards”, *New Masses*, vol. V, n°5, October 1929, 30.

¹⁴ Michael Gold, “Let It Be Really New”, *New Masses*, June 1926, 20.

¹⁵ Michael Gold, “Brisbane, We Are Still Here!”, *New Masses*, August 1928, 2, quoted by Virginia Hagelstein Marquardt, “New Masses and John Reed Club Artists, 1926-1936: Evolution of Ideology, Subject Matter and Style”, *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts*, vol. XII, Spring 1989, 65.

¹⁶ Michael Gold, “Editorial Notes”, *New Masses*, June 1928, 17, quoted by Virginia Hagelstein Marquardt, *idem*.

like a bourgeois intellectual observer” and looked forward to a time when the *New Masses*’ board of contributing editors, who were “vague, rootless people known as writers”, would be replaced by “a staff of industrial correspondents”¹⁷. With the magazine’s official affiliation to the communist party in 1930, Gold’s editorial line only became more rigid. In a 1932 issue, a short story by Meridel Lesueur, entitled “Women on the Breadlines”, is followed by an “Editorial Note” in which an ideological standard for literary contributions to *New Masses* is implicitly defined :

This presentation of the plight of the unemployed woman, able as it is, and informative, is defeatist in attitude, lacking in revolutionary spirit and direction which characterize the usual contribution to *New Masses*. We feel it our duty to add, that there is a place for the unemployed woman, as well as man, in the ranks of the unemployed councils and in all branches of the organized revolutionary movement. Fight for your class, read *The Working Woman*, join the Communist Party.¹⁸

In the light of such a comment, one can only assume that the next step into this aggressive editorial policy might have been sheer censorship. This editorial note is also stimulating in the light of Denning’s thesis. In *The Cultural Front*, Denning brilliantly goes against the idea that the Popular Front was all politics and no art. He shows on the contrary that the art and literature of the 1930s were a continuation of historical modernism, and he suggests that the prevailing notion that the 1930s was the era of social realism is mainly a product of the 1960s and 1970s, and in particular of William Stott’s very influential 1973 study, entitled “Documentary Expression and Thirties America.” Much as I admire Denning’s very convincing demonstration, I think, in the light of this editorial note in particular, that he tries a little too hard to rehabilitate Mike Gold, by introducing us only to the “good guy” who was friends with Dos Passos and Hughes, who was aware of William Carlos Williams’ value for proletarian literature, and who was instrumental in creating a new form of writing that Denning calls the ghetto pastoral. In fact, as early as the end of the 1920s, Gold is criticized for his conception of the relationships between literature and politics. This criticism is demonstrated by the *transition*’s editorial in 1929, where the editor makes fun of Gold’s new proletarian writer, and is further developed by V. F. Calverton, the communist editor in chief of the *Modern Quarterly*, in a 1931 essay opening the first issue of *The Left*, and entitled “The Need for Revolutionary Criticism”. In this essay, Calverton, who was a communist, and who was also deeply concerned with literary criticism, regrets the way Gold analyzed Thornton

¹⁷ Virginia Hagelstein Marquardt, *idem*. First internal quote by Michael Gold, “Go Left, Young Writers”, *New Masses*, January 1929, 3; following internal quotes by Michael Gold, “A New Program for Writers”, *New Masses*, January 1930, 21.

¹⁸ Michael Gold, “Editorial Note”, *New Masses*, January 1932, 7.

Wilder's *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*. Calverton writes: "the literary qualities involved in Wilder's novels are scarcely touched upon at all. Mr Gold's criticism consequently is moral criticism, with a social emphasis (...)"¹⁹. Calverton adds: "Eisenstein's and Pudovkin's films are great not because they are Communist – there are many Communist films that are not great – but because they are great first in their formal organization, and then greater still because of the social purpose which they serve."²⁰

This line of thought is carried on in William Carlos Williams' second series of *Contact* magazine in 1932. *Contact* should not be seen as a historical continuation of *New Masses*, if only because the two magazines usually do not share the same contributors; but from a critical perspective, *Contact* represents an alternative to *New Masses*, especially on the question of the relationships between literature and politics. Williams is even more radical than Calverton who said that a film is great first because of its formal organization, and then because of its ideological contents. For Williams, there is no possible division between form and contents. The editorial line of *Contact* is based on the idea that the spirit of American writing is "contact with a vulgar world"²¹, and this broad political message works both for form and content, as the excellent contributions of the first issue suggest.

Ben Hecht, S. J. Perelman, who were both scriptwriters, Charles Reznikoff, Diego Rivera, Nathanael West and Williams himself work on closer "contact with a vulgar world", through content and form. With Reznikoff's supposedly historical testimonies made by slaves and southerners, *Contact* challenges the notion that American history is an oxymoron *per se*. The magazine also pays "serious" attention to mass culture²², and I am thinking here of Diego Rivera's essay on "Mickey Mouse and American Art", whose clear-cut, positive statements on mass culture sharply contrast with *transition*'s ambivalent position on the subject in "New York: 1928". *Contact* also considers experimental ways of writing mass culture, for example with S. J. Perelman's collage scenario taking place in a movie production office. In almost all contributions, "contact with a vulgar world" is also established through a recurring conception of violence as a truly American theme and writing form, thanks to the use of a vernacular and "virile"²³ language. Violence is even theorized as America's "idiomatic"²⁴ expression in

¹⁹ V. F. Calverton, "The Need for Revolutionary Criticism", *The Left*, n°1, Spring 1931, 8.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.

²¹ William Carlos Williams, "Comment", *Contact*, vol. I, n°3, October 1932, 131.

²² According to Rivera, those things "are not taken seriously, not even by those who make them." Diego Rivera, "Mickey Mouse and American Art", *Contact*, vol. I, n°1, February 1932, 37.

²³ See in particular William Carlos Williams' introductory note to his bibliography on "The Advance Guard Magazine": "The great national monthlies, under which heading all commercial magazines may well be grouped,

Nathanel West's famous essay "Some Notes on Violence" published in the last issue of the magazine.

Interestingly, *Contact* does not only oppose *transition*'s Eurocentrism, even though, as Jay Martin rightly suggests, "both [Nathanael West] and Williams (...) regarded [their magazine] as the legitimate successor to *transition*"²⁵. *Contact*'s subtitle "An American Quarterly Review" and slogan "*Contact* will attempt to cut a trail through the American jungle without the use of a European compass" clearly reveal the editors' will to separate from the then long tradition of American exile magazines and in particular from *transition* whose interruption in June 1930 directly prompts Williams to launch *Contact*. But far from sticking to these rebellious slogans, *Contact* integrates the exiles' European experience into a rich combination of cultures: S. J. Perelman's interpretation of the surrealist film scenario genre, a form of writing developed in English in *transition*; Parker Tyler's poem "idiot of love", whose peculiar portmanteau words are based on *transition*'s "Revolution of the Word"; Cummings' bilingual poems; McAlmon's archetypal exile short story about the tribulations of a lesbian in Montparnasse; all point to *Contact*'s close links with Europe, France, Paris, and more specifically *transition* to which Williams was a regular and enthusiastic contributor. In other words, *Contact* did not attempt to cut a trail through the American jungle without the use of a European compass as much as it did so WITH the use of a European compass.

Conveying its political message only through the distinctive forms of writing it wants to promote, *Contact* differs both from *transition* and *New Masses*. Politics for Williams is first and foremost the politics of literature, to quote the title of a recent essay by Jacques Rancière, *Politique de la littérature*²⁶. This organic link between politics and literature probably explains these otherwise enigmatic sentences in the third and last editorial of *Contact*:

I cannot swallow the half-alive poetry which knows nothing of totality. It is one of the reasons to welcome communism. Never, may it be said, has there ever been great poetry that was not born out of a communist intelligence. They have all been rebels, against nothing so much as scism that would have the spirit a lop sided affair of high and low. The unchristian sweep of Shakespeare, the cantless, unsectarian bitterness of Dante against his time, this is what is best in communism. The same for the words of St. Francis. The spirit is one. It is also one with the imagination. It will not down nor speak its piece to please, not even to please "communism". Nothing is beyond poetry. (...)²⁷

have had at least this virtue that by the disgust they occasioned in certain minds they stimulated the writing of more virile stuff than they could find it convenient to publish." (*Contact*, vol. I, n°1, February 1932, 86).

²⁴ "In America violence is idiomatic." Nathanael West, "Some Notes on Violence", *Contact*, vol. I, n°3, October 1932, 132.

²⁵ Jay Martin, *Nathanael West: The Art of His Life*, London, Secker and Warburg, 1971, 144.

²⁶ Jacques Rancière, *Politique de la littérature*, Paris, Galilée, 2007.

²⁷ William Carlos Williams, "Comment", *Contact*, vol. I, n°3, February 1932, 131.

transition, *New Masses* and *Contact* encapsulate three different conceptions of the relationship between literature and politics. *transition* is mostly apolitical and clearly chooses a revolution of the word over a revolution of the world; *New Masses* carries two separate agendas, literature on the one hand, and politics on the other hand, until politics eventually prevails on literature; *Contact* on the contrary intertwines the two notions in an almost organic way. Moreover, all three magazines reveal that the political avant-garde developing at the end of the 1920s and in the 1930s in the U. S. seems to take shape in reaction to Europe and as a means of building a specifically American identity. This is clear in the “New York: 1928” manifesto, as well as in the shift of many intellectuals from *transition* to *New Masses*, but it is also visible in *Contact*’s aggressive subtitle and slogan. What is also interesting is that both *New Masses* and *Contact* partially define this Americanness through a common concern for mass culture and “virility”, against *transition*’s editorial line. In the final analysis though, these oppositions are not as clear-cut as they first seem to be. I have mentioned *New Masses*’ interest in *transition*, at least until 1929. Similarly, *Contact* does use the European compass, and Parker Tyler’s poem, or Perelman’s scenario or Cummings’ poems in the first issue of the magazine are evidence of this. Eventually, the exiles’ European experience in the 1920s is not just a foil to their American political adventure in the 1930s: there is on the contrary between both avant-gardes a thread that speaks for the value of cultural exchanges.