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Mainstreaming the Avant-Garde: Modernism in *Life* Magazine (New York, 1883–1936)

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the relationship between literary modernism and mainstream culture within a little-studied American magazine, *Life* (New York, 1884-1936). It does so by looking at three ways in which *Life* presented modernism to its readers: by quoting modernist writing, and, above all, by satirizing modernist art, and by offering didactic explanations of modernist art and literature. By reconsidering some of the long-established divisions between high and low culture, and between 'little' and 'bigger' magazines, this paper contributes to a better understanding of what modernism was and meant. It also suggests that the double agenda observed in *Life* — both satirical and didactic — might be a way of defining middlebrow magazines.

KEYWORDS

literary modernism, mainstream, *Life*, American periodicals, avant-garde, middlebrow

Research Issues and *Life*

In order to better understand what modernism was and meant, current periodical research is turning more and more towards non-modernist, big-circulation magazines, looking at the complex ways modernism is represented beyond the well-studied circles of its 'natural' audiences — namely experimental, low-circulation, 'little' magazine producers and readers. Since around 2008 critics such as Sharon Hamilton, Faye Hammill, Karen Leick, and Daniel Tracy have drawn attention to important 'middle ground' publications such as the *Smart Set*, *Vanity Fair*, the *American Mercury*, the *New Yorker*, and *Esquire*, magazines which are 'neither [...] major mass-market magazine[s], like the *Saturday Evening Post* with an audience in the millions, nor [...] "little magazine[s]" with a circulation in the hundreds'.¹ The study of these 'middle ground' magazines has run parallel with a growing interest in middlebrow cultures, already implicitly or explicitly discussed in the late 1980s and early 1990s by critics such as Lawrence Levine (in *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*) and Joan Shelley Rubin (in *The Making of Middlebrow Culture*), and further developed in the late 2000s by the Middlebrow Network Project.²

Studying middlebrow magazines, and in particular the representations of modernism in those magazines, allows us to reconsider some of the traditional hierarchies and divisions that have marked the history of modernist studies. The main notion that the consideration of middlebrow magazines puts into question is the reality of a dividing line that would separate high and low culture, 'little' and 'bigger' magazines. Middlebrow magazines were instrumental in creating a powerful, long-lasting bond between some major modernist writers, like James Joyce, Gertrude Stein, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, and others, and an audience of a considerable size. As Leick put it, thanks to these magazines, 'there was an intimate relationship between literary modernism and mainstream culture and [...] modernist writers and texts were much more well-known than has been previously acknowledged'.³ This paper explores this 'intimate relationship' within the important yet little-studied magazine *Life* (New York, 1884–1936), which managed to combine a 'double agenda' of satirical and didactic writing for its readers in relation to modernism. It does so by studying three ways in which the magazine presented modernism to its readers: by quoting modernist writing, by satirizing modernist art, and by offering didactic explanations of modernist art and literature.

Among middlebrow magazines, *Life* has an interesting status. This article will not discuss the better-known *Life*, the photojournalism magazine published from 1936 to 1972. The only link between this *Life* and the subject of this article is the name, 'Life', which appealed to *Time* founder Henry Luce so much that he decided to buy the first *Life* in 1936 solely in order to acquire the rights to its name. The first *Life*, founded in New York, ran from 1883 to 1936, and was essentially a weekly (it became a monthly in 1932). Mostly headed — at least at first — by young college men recently graduated from Harvard, *Life* was a magazine of general interest treating topics such as politics, social questions, and artistic matters — mainly literature, drama, and the cinema — from

- 1 Sharon Hamilton, 'American Manners: *The Smart Set* (1900–29); *American Parade* (1926)', in *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines*, ed. by Peter Brooker and Andrew Thacker, 3 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009–2013), II (2012), 224–48 (p. 226).
- 2 The Middlebrow Network Project is an international research network created by Mary Grover, Erica Brown, and Faye Hammill, whose first publication was Brown and Grover's groundbreaking collection of essays *Middlebrow Literary Cultures, The Battle of the Brows, 1920–1960* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).
- 3 Karen Leick, *Gertrude Stein and the Making of an American Celebrity* (New York: Routledge, 2009), p. 4.

a gently satirical point of view. *Life's* circulation figures (50,000 in 1890, 150,000 in its heyday, 1916, when it was 'the most successful ten-cent weekly', and above 100,000 in the early 1930s) compare with, and even tend to be slightly higher than those of magazines such as *Vanity Fair* (between about 86,000 and 99,000) and the *New Yorker* (just over 100,000 in 1930).⁴

I will argue that an important reason *Life* occupies an interesting position in the field of middlebrow magazines is that it is not, strictly speaking, a genteel magazine in the way *Harper's Bazaar* was a genteel magazine; nor is it a 'smart' magazine in the way *Vanity Fair* and the *New Yorker*, both founded later (1914 and 1925 respectively), were. In other words, it is more modern than *Harper's Bazaar*, but less so, from a general perspective at least, than *Vanity Fair* or the *New Yorker*. An indication of its ambiguous status might be the difficulty the critic may have deciding whether *Life's* audience was mainly upper-middle-class, as, for example, the magazine's quality ads (for cars in particular) would suggest, or more broadly speaking middle-class, as its very popular Gibson girl and Gibson man reveal.⁵

Founded in 1883, *Life* belongs to a different generation of periodicals from the *New Yorker* or even *Vanity Fair*, and can be more closely associated with what Mott and others have described as the 'Golden Age of the Magazine': the popular magazine boom that characterized the second half of the nineteenth century in the United States and corresponded to the democratization of the access to culture. However, *Life* was a long-lived magazine, and was still in existence when the *New Yorker*, for example, came onto the scene. As a matter of fact, *Life* can be seen as a crucial link between old-fashioned American humour magazines such as *Puck* and *Judge*, and a smart magazine such as the *New Yorker*. *Life's* 'smart' addition to *Puck* and *Judge* consisted mainly in *Life's* project to be a 'higher grade and far more artistic' publication than its predecessors.⁶ And when Harold Ross founded the *New Yorker* in February 1925, he copied some of the features of *Life* and recruited editors previously associated with the magazine, such as Dorothy Parker, Robert Benchley, and Rea Irvin. *Life* thus spans at least two different literary generations, which raises interesting questions about the way(s) it handled modernism from 1913 on, when modernism emerged at the forefront of the 'big' magazine scene, in the wake of the much-discussed (and much-criticized) Armory Show.

One consequence of *Life's* 'lack of smartness' within the field of middlebrow magazines dealing with modernism, and, in other terms, one consequence of *Life's* rather discreet handling of modernism, might be the little critical attention that it has received recently among modernist scholars. In 1972, *Life* was the subject of a monograph by John Flautz entitled *Life: The Gentle Satirist*. But Flautz decided not to study the magazine after the death of its founder-editor, John Ames Mitchell, in 1918, because, according to him, after this date, '*Life* actually improved in some departments, but its vigor dissipated'.⁷ Flautz's rather confusing argument for not discussing *Life* after 1918, and actually avoiding some aspects of the magazine before that date, is revived some sixty pages into his study when he discusses John Barrett Kerfoot, '*Life's* book reviewer and literary editor from 1900 to 1918'. Flautz acknowledges that Kerfoot

4 The figures for *Vanity Fair* and the *New Yorker* are quoted from Faye Hammill and Karen Leick, 'Modernism and the Quality Magazines: *Vanity Fair* (1914–36); *American Mercury* (1924–81); *New Yorker* (1925–); *Esquire* (1933–)', in Brooker and Thacker, eds, 11 (2012), pp. 176–96 (pp. 181 and 186)

5 Daniel Tracy also makes this point in 'Investing in "Modernism": Smart Magazines, Parody, and Middlebrow Professional Judgment', *The Journal of Modern Periodical Studies*, 1.1 (2010), 38–63 (pp. 45–44).

6 Therese L. Lueck, 'John Ames Mitchell', in *American Magazine Journalists, 1850–1900*, ed. by Sam Riley (Detroit: Gale, 1989), p. 223.

7 John Flautz, *Life: The Gentle Satirist* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1972), p. 2.

‘accurately gauged new and relatively difficult work’ and goes on to say that he praised Carl Sandburg, James Joyce, Theodore Dreiser, Sherwood Anderson, and Oscar Wilde. However, he dismisses him as quickly as he can because of ‘the difference between his outlook and *Life*’.⁸ Flautz overlooks modern or modernist writers, and does not consider periodical productions when he believes that they step away from the magazine’s original project. That speaks volumes about the critical ground that has been covered since 1972 in the fields of both modernist and periodical studies. But it also means that such a critical oversight needs to be addressed. For these reasons, a critical reconsideration of *Life* is long overdue, especially a reconsideration that addresses its implications for our understanding of the reception of modernism.

Modernism in *Life*: An Early, Wide, and Critical Presentation

Critics such as Karen Leick have pointed out the importance of modernism in mainstream publications such as the *Saturday Evening Post*, *Vogue*, *Collier’s*, the *American Mercury*, *Vanity Fair*, *Time*, *Life*, and the *New Yorker*. According to Leick, the early presence of modernist writers in mainstream periodicals, whether in the form of actual writings or criticism, explains why ‘James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and Gertrude Stein all produced bestsellers in the United States in a six-month period (1933–1934)’.⁹ Among many other periodicals, *Life* participated in the ‘mainstreaming of modernism’, with numerous references to Gertrude Stein, as Leick suggests, but also to other writers and artists. Richard Aldington, Louis Aragon, Robert Myron Coates, Jean Cocteau, E. E. Cummings, John Dos Passos, Mabel Dodge, Marcel Duchamp, T. S. Eliot, William Faulkner, Kenneth Fearing, F. Scott Fitzgerald, George Gershwin, Michael Gold, Ernest Hemingway, Josephine Herbst, Langston Hughes, Wyndham Lewis, Amy Lowell, James Joyce, D. H. Lawrence, Katherine Mansfield, Harriet Monroe, Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein, John Steinbeck, Thomas Wolfe, and Virginia Woolf were among the modernist figures who received attention in *Life*, some of them — Dos Passos, Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Joyce, Lawrence, Lowell, Stein, and Woolf in particular — even received ten or more references.¹⁰

As early as March 1913, modernism at large (including numerous references to cubism, futurism, and imagism) was the subject of dozens of comments. To give but one example, an unsigned poem published in the 3 April 1914 issue entitled ‘Art’, written in the wake of the Armory Show — which took place in New York between 17 February and 15 March 1913 — reflects on the violence that the new art was imposing on the American public.

Art

(with curtsies to R. K. and the Post-Luneists)

When Earth’s last critic has fainted and Cubists are modern no more,
 When the weirdest colors have faded and Futurist Art is a bore,
 We shall rest — Ye Gods, we shall need it — ‘lay low’ for a season or two
 For Fear that some Art Creations shall drive us insane anew.

For those that are ‘Nouveaux’ are happy; they sit in a Modernist chair
 And splash at a muddled canvas with brushes of elephant hair,

8 Flautz, *Life: The Gentle Satirist*, pp. 68–69.

9 Leick, *Gertrude Stein and the Making of an American Celebrity*, p. 2.

10 Leick, *Gertrude Stein and the Making of an American Celebrity*, p. 2.

They find strange models to draw from — Pogany, Stairs, Nudes,
They work with their hands behind them so that only their soul intrudes.

But if only Monet shall praise them, if only Manet shall blame,
If Cezanne shall be their master, with Duchamp to guard their fame,
We shall never know what they are painting, but they will continue to paint,
Upon the least provocation, their notion of Things as they Ain't.¹¹

In this poem, new art, whether cubist, futurist or 'post-lunecist' — a neologism revealing the confusion created by the profusion of several avant-garde movements at the time — is associated with a deep cultural anxiety: by questioning mimesis, the poem states how the new art 'shall drive us insane'. Cultural anxiety goes hand in hand with social anxiety as 'we' and 'they' are irreconcilably separated; indeed, the basis of communication between the two is ruled out: 'We shall never know what they are painting.' Social differences are highlighted: the new artists are not workers, 'they work with their hands behind them'. In this respect, the traditional form of the poem can be read as a cultural and social pushback against the emergence of new cultural movements.

Many texts and cartoons in *Life* lumped together various avant-gardes (cubism, futurism, vorticism, imagism, etc.), often mentioning them interchangeably. This is a recurrent characteristic of the understanding of the avant-gardes in *Life* and other mainstream magazines, as Leonard Diepeveen shows in his introduction to *Mock Modernism: An Anthology of Parodies, Travesties, Frauds, 1910–1935*. This can be explained in several ways: first, as Heinz Ickstadt suggests, 'the perspective from outside not simply made the contrasts and antagonisms of the different European avant-gardes shrink to a single gesture of rebellion, it also swept together in a simultaneous reception a temporal sequence of manifestos and events'.¹² Second, the mingling of the various avant-gardes had a satirical effect, as it implied that they were interchangeable, and therefore mere meaningless labels. The confusion of the avant-gardes in mainstream magazines could also be explained as a reflection of the definitional instability of the term modernism at the time, i.e. the doubt existing about the possibility of its survival, and therefore the questions about the necessity of taking it seriously.

Life was far from the only mainstream magazine to react to the Armory Show. As 'The Armory Show at 100' website shows, many reactions came in the form of satirical cartoons in New York-based publications such as the *New York American*, *New York Evening Mail*, *New York Evening Sun*, *New York World*, *New York Tribune*, the *Masses*, the *Century*, and *Puck*.¹³ *Life* also mocked the show by publishing at least six cartoons between March and July 1913. One of them, by Power O'Malley, was even used for the cover of the 27 March 1913 'Awful Number' issue.¹⁴ Similar to 'Art', the cartoons in *Life* usually mocked the break of modernist movements from mimesis. For example, one of the cartoons represents a painting mixing four different scenes: a 'Portrait of Mrs Grundy', 'Napoleon Crossing the D'la'ware', 'Girl with a Cheese Sandwich', and 'Sunset on the Canarsie River'. Published on 8 May 1913, it is entitled 'Suggestion to Futurists: Why Not Paint Four Pictures on One Canvas?'¹⁵

11 'Art', *Life* (3 April 1913), p. 678.

12 Heinz Ickstadt, 'Deconstructing/Reconstructing Order: The Faces of Transatlantic Modernism', in *Transatlantic Modernism*, ed. by Martin Klepper and Joseph C. Schöpp (Heidelberg: C. Winter, 2001), pp. 15–34 (p. 19).

13 See The Armory Show at 100, armory.nyhistory.org [accessed 19 February 2016].

14 Power O'Malley, cover for the 'Awful Number' issue, *Life* (27 March 1913), p. 1.

15 'Suggestion to Futurists: Why Not Paint Four Pictures on One Canvas?', *Life* (8 May 1913), p. 934.

The classic comic device that creates a bond between the reader and the cartoonist at the expense of modern artist, in this case over the supposedly shared notion that art should be mimetic, was used repeatedly in the pages of *Life* from the 1910s to the 1930s. In the 23 May 1930 issue, a cartoon by Gardner Rea shows a ‘successful modernist’ who introduces his model to a crowd gathered in an art gallery where his paintings hang. The caption reads: ‘I owe it all, gentlemen, to the little woman!’¹⁶ Much to the crowd’s surprise, the ‘little woman’ herself is twisted, has a crazy look, and no feet. This absurd transformation of a supposedly real-life person into a modernist, twisted model suggests both the danger and the impossibility of art’s break from mimesis, and reveals the strong anxiety surrounding such transgression.

Although the criticism based on the idea that art should be referential dominated, other types of criticism emerged at the same time. Modernist writing was occasionally depicted as pure style with no content, for example in Grant M. Overton’s 1920 review of Virginia Woolf’s *Night and Day*:

We should call it a protracted study of the intellectualized emotions of five externally uninteresting English people. Outwardly, nothing whatever happens [...]. The book is only for those who will enjoy the author’s very fine art, caring nothing for the material upon which it is expended.¹⁷

Modernists’ supposed lack of work was also the butt of much criticism, for example in a 1913 cartoon by R. W. Manning representing ‘the first futurist’, as the caption read, as a caveman, or in a 1915 satirical poem entitled ‘Free Verse’, in which Ellis O. Jones wrote that ‘The Free Versite wants to | Have all the | Credit of writing good poetry | Without having any | Of the trouble’.¹⁸ Modern art’s lack of referentiality and modernist artists’ lack of work are criticized; through this criticism, the aesthetic quality and the cultural legitimacy of modernism are put into question.

Modernism in *Life*: A Complex and Ambivalent Circulation

As could be expected, the representations of modernism in *Life* tended to evolve over time, as the modernist avant-garde developed and left the unstable ground on which it was born to reach the firmer ground of institutionalized cultural movement. In this light, the many complex and ambivalent representations of modernism found in *Life* from 1913 onward are striking. Right from the start, modernism was both criticized and promoted. Criticizing modernism, an intellectually difficult cultural movement, in a satirical mainstream magazine seems quite logical. Promoting multifaceted, undefined, difficult artworks that call into question firmly established aesthetic notions such as mimesis and realism seems less obvious. The very first comment on the Armory Show, on 13 March 1913, was mostly negative. However, the anonymous author of this analysis was aware that it was too early to dismiss ‘this Futurist nostrum’: ‘Of course there is something in it, and though it is not art, it may be a kind of new birth that will lead to art.’¹⁹ This ambivalent early comment on modernist art paved the way for complex representations of modernism in the magazine. Modernism in *Life* is present under three main forms: quotations, parodies, and critical reviews.

16 Gardner Rea, ‘Successful Modernist’, *Life* (23 May 1930), p. 13.

17 Grant M. Overton, ‘Books’, *Life* (25 November 1920), p. 966.

18 R. W. Manning, ‘The First Futurist’, *Life* (22 May 1913), p. 1026; Ellis O. Jones, ‘Free Verse’, *Life* (16 December 1915), p. 214.

19 *Life* (13 March 1913), p. 521.

The Use of Quotation

A first modality of the presence of modernism in *Life* is the quotation or full publication of texts by modernist writers. Several excerpts from James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* (then still called *Work in Progress*) can be found in *Life* between September 1928 and February 1931. These quotes are located in two columns whose ambivalence, between mockery and genuine admiration, appears in their very titles: 'Great Minds at Work' and 'Little Rambles with Serious Thinkers'. To take but one example, in May 1929, Joyce's quote from *Finnegans Wake* appeared in the 'Little Rambles with Serious Thinkers' column along with other quotes for which it is hard to decide whether they were meant to be taken at face value or with a grain of salt: do we really have 'great minds at work' here, or is the editor of the column being ironic? The first quote, by William R. Castle, Assistant Secretary of State, seems to reflect *Life's* stance on Prohibition: 'It is true that under prohibition much that is deplorable has occurred.' However, there seems to be more irony in following quotes such as Senator Heflin's '[m]y course has been marked by destiny' or Benito Mussolini's '[t]he day's work must be done in the day'.²⁰ Therefore, the context of *Finnegans Wake's* appearance in the pages of *Life* only strengthens the undecidability of its status. The same applies to Gertrude Stein, whose work was quoted six times in 'Little Rambles with Serious Thinkers' between March 1929 and September 1930 and appeared along with some apparently non-ironic aphorisms such as Ford Madox Ford's '[a] man should never write a novel until he is forty' and three in 'Great Minds at Work' (also called 'Great Minds') between 1931 and 1935.²¹ A difference with Joyce is that Stein also contributed to *Life*, apparently on her own initiative, as is suggested by the small paratexts for 'Relief Work in France', published on 27 December 1917, and for 'A League', published on 18 September 1919.²²

However, quotations and publications from modernist writers remained limited in *Life*. Apart from Gertrude Stein and James Joyce, they concerned very few writers, one of them being Amy Lowell whose poem 'Fireworks' was reprinted from the *Atlantic* in May 1915.²³ Of course, this raises the question why certain modernist actors, like Stein and Joyce, were quoted, while others were ignored. Can the countless mockeries (and at the same time the extraordinary promotion) they experienced be accounted for merely by stylistic reasons (because they are more 'incomprehensible' than others, for example)? Do we need to take into account other, strategic reasons linked to self-promotional techniques?

In *Gertrude Stein and the Making of an American Celebrity*, Karen Leick shows how Stein skilfully promoted herself in 'little' as well as mainstream magazines. In *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, the writer herself describes her interest in popular magazines: 'I had said I always wanted two things to happen to be printed in the *Atlantic Monthly* and in the *Saturday Evening Post*.'²⁴ *Life* is also mentioned in *The Autobiography*, as Stein explains that she found some of the parodies of her texts so bad that she decided to send in some of her poems. Writing about Thomas Lansing Masson (not 'Mason'), one of the literary editors of *Life*, she adds: 'To her astonishment she received a very nice letter from Mr Mason saying that he would be glad to do so. And they did ... Mr Mason had more courage than most.'²⁵ It would be interesting to compare this strategy

20 'Little Rambles with Serious Thinkers', *Life* (31 May 1929), p. 8.

21 'Little Rambles with Serious Thinkers', p. 23.

22 See respectively *Life* (27 December 1917), p. 1075, and *Life* (18 September 1919), p. 496.

23 Amy Lowell, 'Fireworks', *Life* (13 May 1915), p. 868.

24 Gertrude Stein, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1933), p. 46, quoted by Leick, *Gertrude Stein and the Making of an American Celebrity*, p. 21.

25 Stein, p. 186, quoted by Leick, *Gertrude Stein*, pp. 59–60.

of self-promotion to that of other modernist actors who also displayed a particular talent in this field, such as F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ezra Pound, William Faulkner, John Dos Passos, E. E. Cummings, or, taking a step away from modernism, Jack London. Indeed, all of them understood the magazine field and knew how to mobilize support, sometimes from 'little' magazines and sometimes from commercial magazines, according to their various editorial and financial strategies.

The Use of Parody and Other Forms of Satirical Comments

In contrast to the small number of text and excerpts in *Life*, the magazine published many humouristic and satirical comments on modernist works. As Diepeveen shows, an important modality of the satire in *Life*, as in other mainstream magazines, was the publication of parodic texts, which implied that the writers parodied were known, at least vaguely, to the readers. In the case of *Life*, which did not publish many original modernist texts, the use of parody tends to suggest that the readers of *Life* knew at least some modernist writers, maybe by reading the novels, short stories, and poems that *Life*'s editors reviewed, or by reading other periodicals, such as the *Saturday Evening Post* or the *Atlantic*, in which modernist texts were more regularly published.

The massive use of parody in *Life* exemplifies its ambivalence towards modernism: as the etymology suggests, parodies mocked, but also paid homage to modernism, since they revealed a fascination for their subjects. Cultural distinction was undoubtedly a central value both for the authors of these parodies, who displayed their knowledge, and for their readers, who were expected to understand these references, thus confirming the importance of the link between middlebrow magazines and high culture.

A parodic tone informs the whole magazine. Baird Leonard's column, 'Mrs Pep's Diary', which had over 200 publications between 1922 and 1932, and mocked the fashionable woman's occupations, was based on a parody of the diary of Samuel Pepys. Two 'Burlesque Number[s]', one in 1921 and another in 1928, and a 1929 series of parodic cartoons by Rea Irvin entitled 'Impressions of Magazine Offices' likewise presented parodies of well-known magazines of the time.

Modernist works represented an important source of inspiration for *Life*'s parodic nature. Three 'Archy' poems by Don Marquis, published in 1917, 1922 and 1923 respectively (with the 1917 one reprinted from the *New York Evening Sun* and the 1923 one from the *New York Tribune*) parodied free-verse poems. Archy, a character of a cockroach Marquis created in 1916, and probably one of his better-known creations, was supposedly the reincarnation of a free-verse poet, and was characterized by its ability to jump on Marquis's typewriter keys to write unpunctuated, lower-case poems (Archy — like Cummings, among others — could not operate the shift key). Interestingly, a poem like 'Archy Fears the Worst' represents a form of achievement as far the rhythm is concerned, leaving us to wonder if parody was not a way for Don Marquis to actually try his hand at free verse.²⁶ A 1920 unsigned parodic poem entitled 'An Imagist Summer Resort' supposedly focuses on one particular avant-garde, imagism.²⁷ However, the parody offered by *Life* is less a mockery of imagism as such, than a criticism of modernism at large: far from the concision and precision claimed by the imagists, what is underlined in this parody is the absurdity of its discourse.

At least five writers were the butts of parodic rewritings in *Life*: T. S. Eliot, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Gertrude Stein, Vachel Lindsay, and Luigi Pirandello. Eliot's intricate parody, entitled 'Death Near Water', suggests that its author, Ed Graham,

26 Don Marquis, 'Archy Fears the Worst', *Life* (23 March 1922), p. 2.

27 'An Imagist Summer Resort', *Life* (17 June 1920), p. 2.

had a good knowledge of Eliot's poetry, as he mixes references to *The Waste Land*, *The Hollow Men* ('This is the way the week ends | This is the way the week ends | This is the way the week ends | Not worth a hang, not worth a whimper'), and 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' ('Along the beach the women come and go | Discussing sex and Jean Cocteau').²⁸

With at least nine separate publications of parodies of her work over the course of fourteen years, Gertrude Stein was by far the most parodied writer in *Life*, confirming 'Stein's unusual reception'.²⁹ According to Stein herself, it was the publication of *Tender Buttons* in 1914 that 'started off columnists in the newspapers of the whole country on their long campaign of ridicule'.³⁰ And indeed, no fewer than thirty-eight reviews of *Tender Buttons* were published in the USA between June and December 1914.³¹ Apparently, *Life* did not participate in the mass book-reviewing of *Tender Buttons*, and interestingly, apart from the mere inscription of *Tender Buttons* on the list of 'Books Received' in June 1914, the first reference to Stein I found in *Life*, in August 1916, already established her as a reference (Welsh writer Caradoc Evans being described by literary editor John B. Kerfoot as 'a sort of Welsh Gertrude Stein').³² In the wake of H. L. Mencken's review of *Tender Buttons* in the *Baltimore Sun* as 'A Cubist Treatise', *Life* participated in the association of Stein's writing with cubism, with three out of four of her early parodies entitled 'Cubist Poem' or 'Cubist Poems' (on 12 July 1917, 13 September 1917 and 2 January 1919).³³

When reading the many parodies of different authors in *Life* devoted to Stein, one cannot miss the pleasure these writers seem to have derived from their own play on language. Occasionally, parodies seemed to work as powerful outlets for the parodist's/reader's frustration with making sense of Stein's texts. Paul S. Powers' parody, of April 1928, is thus based on the repetition of one central theme: 'I cannot, and by this I mean this, make head or tail, or head, out of Gertrude Stein's compositions'.³⁴ The title of the parody, 'The Difference that Makes a Difference a Difference', suggests that its author — who was mostly a western writer and who published extensively in pulp magazines — had an accurate understanding of Gertrude Stein's grammar-based repetitions.

Although the strangeness of Joyce's writing in *Finnegans Wake* probably qualified him for recurrent appearances in the 'Great Minds at Work' and 'Little Rambles with Serious Thinkers' columns — just as was the case for Stein, who appeared in these columns as much as her lifelong rival — his treatment in *Life* is on the whole very different from that of Stein. Whereas Stein was the butt of many parodies, Joyce was not: I did not find a single parody of Joyce in *Life*. Moreover, he was the subject of half as many quotations or comments as Stein. As Leick suggests, 'Stein was particularly bothered by the early acceptance and canonization of James Joyce, whose work she insisted was not as "new" as her own'.³⁵ Stein was probably less accepted than Joyce, but she received an audience in *Life* with which Joyce was not able to compete. Her radical 'newness' might have ensured her such a presence in the pages of the magazine; her

28 Ed Graham, 'Death Near Water', *Life* (1 August 1930), p. 3.

29 Karen Leick, 'Personalities of Modernism: America Reads Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound, and T. S. Eliot, 1920–1950' (doctoral thesis, Northwestern University, 2002), p. 71.

30 Stein, p. 192, quoted by Leick, 'Personalities of Modernism', pp. 93–94.

31 Elinor Hope Warner, "'Officer, She's Writing Again": Gertrude Stein's American Readers' (doctoral thesis, University of Virginia, 1994), pp. 45–46, quoted by Leick, 'Personalities of Modernism', p. 94.

32 J. B. Kerfoot, 'The Latest Books', *Life* (10 August 1916), p. 248.

33 See respectively *Life* (12 July 1917), p. 47; *Life* (13 September 1917), p. 431; and *Life* (2 January 1919), p. 23.

34 Paul S. Powers, 'The Difference That Makes a Difference a Difference', *Life* (19 April 1928), p. 24.

35 Leick, 'Personalities of Modernism', p. 121.

'nonsensical' style might also have been easier to parody. Moreover, she was a woman, and she was American — which might have been two more reasons to make fun of her.

In any case, both writers were presented, and presented themselves, differently. Stein created a personal bond with the magazine by contacting editor Thomas L. Masson and sending in texts on two occasions (the five short pieces gathered under the heading 'Relief Work in France' on 27 December 1917 and 'A League', published on 18 September 1919), which might explain her presence on the 'Life's Birthday Party' double-page cartoon by Ralph Barton on 4 January 1923.³⁶ She was also introduced to *Life's* readers with parodies of her writing, and the only (negative) review of her work *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* did not appear until October 1933. Joyce, by contrast, was first introduced with positive reviews — as early as 1917 — of less radical works than *Finnegans Wake* (which was not mentioned in *Life* until 1928, eleven years after Joyce's first introduction). What seems to be the first reference to his work, on 26 April 1917, is a review of *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* by John B. Kerfoot, which makes clear that '[t]o the mass of casual fiction readers, [...] it would prove largely unintelligible on account of its unfamiliar presentation' but that 'both in method and content, it is a work that no understanding student of the influence that modern psychology is having on literary art can afford to miss'.³⁷ Two weeks later, the same Kerfoot reviewed *Dubliners*, comparing it 'in quality, though not in method', to John Galsworthy's 'A Motley'.³⁸

On the whole, Stein's work was probably given less serious attention than Joyce's, but her name was more frequently mentioned, and the general characteristics of her work considered as widely known, as her presence in two culture quizzes in 1935 and 1936 indicates — with a serious question about the title of her latest play in January 1935, and the comic suggestion, among the four possible answers to a question on *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* in the July 1936 quiz, that '[m]ost of thieves in *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* were killed by reading a volume of Gertrude Stein'.³⁹

This collision between 'high culture' — with Gertrude Stein seen as one of its most accomplished representatives — and low culture (whether popular or commercial) is a favorite comic device in *Life*. One of the funniest parodies of Stein's work is Allan S. Becker's 1925 'If Gertrude Stein Wrote a Soap Ad':

White white pure white. White is pure and pure means white. Means Ivory which is white and pure and soap. Pure pure poor who said poor it is not poor it is pure and it is pure for ninety nine percents and it is pure for forty four one hundredths of another percent and after that it is not pure. For fifty six one hundredths of a percent it is not pure. No no not pure, and we do not care if that is so. If so or if soap.

It washes hands and chemises and flannels and faces and ears and behind ears but not behind faces or flannels or chemises. Washes washes and does not wash washing more than it does not wash. It is made by a Procter and it is made by a Gamble and it is made by a Procter but not a gamble. I am told this this is what I am told and I know nothing but what I am told. I know nothing.

I think that this is the end of my song of soap and whiteness and percents and purity and Procter. I think that my song is done. A song and no song and no song but sung. No more or more or or and no more.⁴⁰

36 Ralph Barton, 'Life's Birthday Party', *Life* (4 January 1923), p. 20.

37 J. B. Kerfoot, 'The Latest Books', *Life* (26 April 1917), p. 742.

38 J. B. Kerfoot, 'The Latest Books', *Life* (10 May 1917), p. 820.

39 'Are You Sure', *Life* (January 1935), p. 40; 'Are You Sure', *Life* (July 1936), p. 19.

40 Allan S. Becker, 'If Gertrude Stein Wrote a Soap Ad', *Life* (30 April 1925), p. 6.

The association of a highly-demanding modernist writing with the mundane context of commercial culture contributes to the cultural plurality at work in middlebrow magazines, but can also be read as a way of dealing with the cultural anxiety triggered by the ambivalent relationship of middlebrow culture to highbrow culture, seen both as desirable and overly intellectual, as suggested, for example, in various statements by literary critic Kyle Crichton who calls *Of Time and the River* by Thomas Wolfe, *Sons and Lovers* by D. H. Lawrence, and Joyce's *Ulysses* 'masterpieces', while bombastically stating that '[a]nybody who wants to annihilate the intellectuals has [his] blessing'.⁴¹

Life stages encounters between the intellectual sphere (embodied by modernist references) and more mundane spheres presented as poles apart. Such encounters are the bases for various satires published in *Life*. In July 1913, in the wake of the Armory Show, Will Allen fused the worlds of futurism and baseball in a cartoon entitled 'A Futurist Home Run'.⁴² In January 1935, a cartoon by famous *New Yorker* cartoonist George Price showed two men seated in one of the couches of a living room featuring various identical couches, pianos, tables, carpets, paintings, and lamps, with the carpets, pianos, and tables piled on one another. The caption reads: 'My wife is a great admirer of Gertrude Stein.'⁴³ Many satires contrast the modernist artist's point of view on the world with that of the man on the street.

Teaching Modernism: The Use of Literary and Artistic Criticism

Along with parodies and other forms of satirical comments, literature and art criticism is the most important modality of the presentation of modernism in *Life*. Gertrude Stein, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Thomas Wolfe, William Faulkner, John Dos Passos, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, Amy Lowell, and D. H. Lawrence are among the avant-garde artists whose work was commented on for the benefit of an audience who was not its primary target. The same goes for film productions such as *Metropolis* by Fritz Lang, *The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari* by Robert Wiene, *Salome* by Charles Bryant, *Nanook of the North*, and *Moana*, both by Robert J. Flaherty. These were presented — among more popular releases such as cartoons featuring Felix the Cat or the 1925 *Ben-Hur* by Fred Niblo — and discussed by film critic Robert E. Sherwood. Along with literary critic Kyle Crichton, Robert E. Sherwood played an essential role in *Life*, both for the quality and quantity of their interventions. Between January 1921 and September 1928, Robert E. Sherwood (1896–1955), a playwright, editor, and screenwriter, was in charge of 'The Silent Drama' column, to which he contributed over 500 times. Sherwood had begun his career as a movie critic in *Life* and *Vanity Fair*, where he worked with his close friends Dorothy Parker and Robert Benchley, who, like him, were among the original members of The Algonquin Round Table. Kyle Crichton (1896–1960), the father of novelist Robert Crichton, contributed about 120 papers to the 'Contents Noted' literary column between December 1932 and November 1936, when the magazine folded. Crichton, who had worked as a coal miner and steel worker, was a politically committed author of novels and biographies (including a biography of the Marx Brothers) who wrote for *Collier's Magazine* — a proponent of investigative journalism and social reform — as well as the *New Masses* and the *Daily Worker* under the name Robert Forsythe.

Both Sherwood and Crichton were determined to *teach* high culture — and modernism in particular — to their readers. Crichton presented himself as a moderate,

41 Kyle Crichton, 'Contents Noted', *Life* (July 1934), p. 41.

42 Will Allen, 'A Futurist Home Run', *Life* (10 July 1913), p. 64.

43 George Price, 'My Wife is a Great Admirer of Gertrude Stein', *Life* (January 1935), p. 36.

a humanist, and a pedagogue, eager to position himself as an intelligent, didactic, and eclectic critic, neither close-minded nor snobbish, and faithful to the democratic ideal which developed in the nineteenth-century American press. When introducing a new work, Crichton did not hesitate to start from a criticism usually made to modernism, including in the pages of *Life*. But when Crichton evoked the idea that modernism's stylistic virtuosity hid an inability to do the job, it was only to better reject it. About *The Big Money*, he writes:

The charge against Dos Passos is that his technical innovations are only a way of evading the fact that he can't really write a novel. The simplest answer to this is that he has succeeded almost entirely in doing what he set out to do, i.e. reveal a period of history through a cast of characters.

As he goes on reviewing *The Big Money*, Crichton addresses key questions such as what makes a novel a good novel:

What makes great novels is a matter of dispute, but I should say that good writing has little to do with it. Dos Passos belongs in the great tradition of American literature not because he is a better writer than Robert Nathan or Booth Tarkington but because he has a larger conception and a keener perception of the comparative worth of events.

Crichton then illustrates his thesis by using a popular reference, that of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which he describes as 'the most influential novel ever written'. Style, he says, is not that important. This is what he writes about Harriet Beecher Stowe:

[...] the fact remains that even in her day there were hundreds of authors who could out-write her from a strictly technical basis. It must be admitted that it would have been ideal if she had possessed the theme and the genius of Tolstoy as well, but without the literary genius *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is still a great novel.

However, Crichton's democratic, anti-elitist notion of literature does not push him to reject style altogether:

If originality of treatment helps a first-rate intelligence such as Dos Passos or Aldous Huxley, I am all for it. The one great virtue of the novel is that it has no form, and I have only contempt for critics who seek to confine it.⁴⁴

Crichton was thus able to address important literary issues in a didactic way, starting from commonly-held views on modernism, resorting to logical argumentation and a popular example, explaining his thesis in different ways, and using simple language, humour, and a humble tone (he presents himself as 'one reader' among others). His conception of what a good novel is shows his broad-mindedness, as do his capacity to compare literature with other disciplines and his insistence on the emotions that literature alone can convey: 'The future historian may get his facts from other sources, but the feeling of those years can come, and accurately, from the books of the Dos Passos trilogy.' Crichton's didacticism does not prevent him from developing demanding, nuanced analyses. He is able, for example, to explain why *Tender is the Night* is not, to

44 Kyle Crichton, 'Contents Noted', *Life* (October 1936), p. 36.

him, a good novel, while defending the idea that F. Scott Fitzgerald is an important artist, and calling into question the role of some well-established critics.⁴⁵

The popularization of modernism in *Life* was sustained by a broader effort to use various creative communication strategies aimed at attracting the reader's attention. Cartoons and humour, two cornerstones of the magazine, were frequently used. So were specific columns or devices. In his 'Contents Noted' column, Crichton suggested monthly and annual prize-winner lists that allowed *Life's* readers to easily identify the titles that the critic most recommended; however, the pervasive humour of those lists separated them from more commercial initiatives such as book clubs' reading lists, which raised controversies even in middlebrow magazines (Crichton himself mocked them in his February 1933 column⁴⁶).

Crichton's December 1932 column well illustrates the playfulness of his lists.⁴⁷ Amid expected headings such as 'Finest Writing', 'Greatest Book', 'Best Poetry', and 'Best Book Review', Crichton indulges in prize headings such as 'Lousiest Book', 'Punkiest [*sic*] New Magazine', 'Biggest Flop', and 'Best Literary Gag' (in this case, a witticism by William Faulkner reading: 'Arnold Bennett is the only man I ever heard of who set out to be a second rate writer and succeeded'). Modernism was popularized through other columns, such as 'Rhymed Reviews', which Arthur Guiterman (1871–1943) ran from August 1909 to December 1928. 'Rhymed Reviews' offered a didactic and playful introduction to modernist works such as *Orlando* by Virginia Woolf and *The Beautiful and Damned* by F. Scott Fitzgerald. Factual information is given about *The Beautiful and Damned*, such as the title of the novel, names of the author and publishing house — we even learn that it is Fitzgerald's 'second novel' — followed by a rhymed, light summary of the book which ends on a pun: 'Well, bless your hearts, be damned, my dears, | But don't be so damned long about it.'⁴⁸ After 'Rhymed Reviews' ended, another column helped present modernism to the readers of *Life*: Arthur Silverblatt's 'Imaginary Interviews', which ran from December 1929 to November 1932 (with at least thirteen of them). In 'Imaginary Interviews', Silverblatt mocked authors such as Ernest Hemingway, Gertrude Stein, and Eugene O'Neill, while creating a bond between them and the reader.⁴⁹ Hemingway does not answer the interviewer's questions and looks drunk; little more is achieved with Gertrude Stein, who mostly answers in Steinese, or with Eugene O'Neill, depicted as a psychotic. Showing the weaknesses of these 'big names' might have been a way to allow the reader to enjoy a feeling of closeness with them.

Some critics did not hesitate to admit they did not fully understand the works they were supposed to review. In 1925, in a review of *Mrs Dalloway*, Baird Leonard (1888–1941)⁵⁰ was not ashamed to admit that parts of the novel remained obscure to her: 'There are so many pages whereon I have no idea what the author is talking about. But you mustn't pay attention to me. Remember what the critics said about Keats and Shelley'.⁵¹ This open-minded relationship to modernism and its difficulty might have efficiently contributed to the dissemination of modernism by putting the reader at ease

45 Kyle Crichton, 'Contents Noted', *Life* (June 1934), p. 41.

46 Kyle Crichton, 'Contents Noted', *Life* (February 1933), p. 40.

47 Kyle Crichton, 'Contents Noted', *Life* (December 1932), p. 38.

48 Arthur Guiterman, 'Rhymed Reviews', *Life* (18 May 1922), p. 28.

49 See respectively *Life* (21 March 1930), p. 11; *Life* (21 August 1931), p. 21, and *Life* (27 December 1929), p. 8.

50 Baird Leonard was a columnist, critic, poet, and humourist who worked for *Life* (1922–32), the *New Yorker* (1925), *Harper's* (1927–29), *Judge* (1932), and the *New York Morning Telegraph* (1912–24). She was a prolific contributor to *Life*, and ran several columns: the 'Theater' column in the early 1930s, 'Mrs Pep's Diary' between 1923 and 1932, and 'Life and Letters' between 1924 and 1926.

51 Baird Leonard, 'Life and Letters', *Life* (9 July 1925), p. 22.

as to the reality of modernism's difficulty — since this painful and potentially shameful experience was shared even by the critic in charge of reviewing the novel.

Conclusion

The study of *Life* allows us to better understand the reception of modernism at the time of its production, when most cultural actors did not know how to measure its importance. It sheds light on how modernism was represented in ambivalent ways that mocked avant-garde productions and paid homage to them, revealing as such the middle-of-the-road position adopted by *Life*. The magazine painstakingly distanced itself from 'highbrowism', while showing respect for, and even fascination with, high culture — an ambivalent attitude that can be analyzed as a way of dealing with the cultural hierarchies at work in the editorial field. In *Life*, modernism circulated in ways that have been little studied, partly because they were not used by the dominant medium of modernism, namely 'little' magazines.

I have demonstrated that modernism circulated in *Life* in two main ways: a didactic one, teaching the readers rather difficult forms of high culture, and a critical one, through humour and even satire. These two modalities were not mutually exclusive; and in some cases, were combined, since some parodies — such as 'If Gertrude Stein Wrote a Soap Ad' by Allan S. Becker — also worked as didactic tools allowing greater familiarity between *Life's* readers and the aesthetic of 'difficult' authors. Mockery often went hand in hand with fascination; mockery also allowed middlebrow magazines such as *Life* to emerge as places where the legitimacy of the avant-garde could be questioned, in ways that were not possible in 'little' magazines. Indeed, the questioning of modernism seemed to reflect an anxiety that many readers probably shared at the time of the emergence of the avant-gardes, but that experimental, 'highbrow' magazines were not in a position to express. As such, the double agenda observed in *Life* — both satirical and didactic — might be a way of defining middlebrow magazines. Indeed, neither the 'little' magazines, nor the more mainstream magazines seemed to pursue this double agenda.

Although the study of a middlebrow magazine such as *Life* reveals important differences with 'little' magazines as far as their presentations of modernism are concerned, it also helps to blur long-established divisions. In a paper on 'Small Magazines' published in 1930, Ezra Pound legitimated the arrival of 'little' magazines into the editorial field by frontally opposing them to mainstream magazines, which, as one of the greatest advocates of the burgeoning experimental form of the 'little' magazine, he openly despised.⁵² However, the study of the reception of modernism in *Life* shows that this opposition was much more strategic than real, and worked as a way of giving value to the 'little' magazines at the expense of the more commercial ones, just as it gave value to modernist actors at the expense of mediators who were more open to a variety of cultural events. Such a radical opposition tends to erase an important fact: some 'big' magazines circulated modernism, sometimes at the same time or almost at the same time as 'little' magazines did. As the repeated publication in *Life* of quotations from *Work in Progress* [*Finnegans Wake*] suggests, bridges existed between mainstream magazines and 'little' magazines such as *transition*, where *Work in Progress* was first published at the time of its publication in *Life*.⁵³ Mainstream and 'little' magazines did not only share writers and artists; they also occasionally shared editors; John B. Kerfoot (1865–1927), one

52 Ezra Pound, 'Small Magazines', *English Journal*, 19.9 (November 1930), 689–704.

53 On this review, see Céline Mansanti, *La Revue transition (1927–1938): Le Modernisme historique en devenir* (Rennes: PUR, 2009).

of *Life's* most interesting and prolific literary editors, with almost 500 contributions between 1900 and 1918, was at the same time a regular contributor to experimental magazine *Camera Work*, with no less than fifteen participations between 1906 and 1914. Moreover, many mainstream magazines' editors read 'little' magazines, as Kyle Crichton's appreciative comment on them in 1935 makes clear:

the little experimental magazines [...] are born and die almost as rapidly as a tribe of moths but in their short careers give opportunities for young writers who would otherwise have the choice of entering the old man's feed store or of becoming fiction giants for Street and Smith. The truth, of course, is that the little fiction magazines, with all their goofiness, have been the sole source of good writing in this country for the past two decades.⁵⁴

Such facts suggest more than a marginal relationship between magazines such as *Life* and 'the little experimental magazines'; they invite us to remap the intellectual networks of the time so as to better understand the modalities of the dialogue between 'little' and mainstream magazines, as well as between modernist and non-modernist cultural actors.

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54 Kyle Crichton, 'Contents Noted', *Life* (September 1935), p. 34.

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