

“Post-Adolescence” and the Search for *Contact*

Robert McAlmon’s Neglected Contributions

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ELM: A Journal of Undergraduate Research, Vol. I: No. 1, Fall 2004

Robert McAlmon first encountered William Carlos Williams in the summer of 1920 at one of Lola Ridge’s parties. Although a new comer to the Greenwich Village scene, the “intense,” young Midwesterner made an instant impact on Williams (Williams 175). “Something clicked” between the two men that night and “before long McAlmon...had set up plans [with Williams] for the magazine *Contact*” (Williams 172). Williams had previously served as editor to the little magazine *Others*, a venture he appreciated for its “energy” and experimentalism (Mariani 129). However, *Others* developed into a nuisance for Williams since the artists involved with the magazine were “too concerned with their own precious reputations” (Mariani 125). Williams’s frustration with *Others* resulted from his belief that writers should be influenced by their locale, rather than a sensitivity to any particular movement or literary accreditation (Marling 72). McAlmon shared this belief as well. To combat the migration of American writers moving to Europe, McAlmon and Williams started *Contact*, in an effort to provide a forum for American writers to communicate American experiences.

This narrative portrays the traditional story of *Contact*’s genesis. While this story accurately depicts the focus and goal of the magazine, historians in their biographies and Williams in his autobiography neglect the conversations and interactions between McAlmon and Williams leading up to its formation. In particular, historians do not acknowledge McAlmon’s proactive approach as the “instigator” of the process and his belief that *Contact* should be pursued, regardless of success or failure (Williams 175). Conversely, Williams’s

apprehensiveness and his view that *Contact* was an excuse to print “some good stuff lying around that should not be lost” are overlooked (Williams 175). This paper analyzes Robert McAlmon’s short story “Post-Adolescence,” which tracks the conversations between McAlmon and Williams through fictional alter-egos Peter and Jim (Lorusso xvi). These conversations challenge Williams’s notion that the two men “clicked” initially and reveal McAlmon’s laborious efforts to persuade Williams to pursue the venture. “Post-Adolescence” portrays McAlmon not as Williams’s protégé but as a driving force in *Contact*’s existence, providing a more accurate depiction of the search for *Contact* and the problems that plagued the magazine’s success.

“Post-Adolescence” follows Peter who serves as McAlmon’s alter-ego. As an aspiring writer who has recently arrived in New York, Peter’s experiences with the avant-garde relate directly to McAlmon’s. Peter works numerous odd jobs, including posing as a nude model for a studio art class. The unrestrained atmosphere of alcohol and sex appeals to the curious youth. Yet through his experience at parties of the prominent poet, Dora, Peter finds the artistic atmosphere stifling. He considers the guests at Dora’s parties insincere fakers who pretend “to be revolutionary and flaming with passion” (McAlmon 36). Fortunately, Peter’s closest friends the doctor/poet Jim and the painter Brander also attend the parties, who share a similar annoyance with the “arty-art worshippers” of Dora’s parties (McAlmon 33). As outsiders of the crowd, the three friends provide “protection” for each other against the glorified, abstract discussions on “poetry, art, and social revolution” (McAlmon 33).

At one party, Peter overhears a conversation on English writers and the lack of accreditation given to American writers. One guest asserts that Americans are inferior artists and compares them to “lackeys” for the English. Peter interrupts the conversation and asserts that “we

[America] have the energy at the present moment... [and] what the public thinks can't matter anyway" (McAlmon 36). His remarks go unnoticed. After a miserable poetry reading by Reginald Crackeye (alter-ego of Alfred Kreymbourg), Peter expresses to a woman sitting near him, "Isn't this modern poetry movement awful? Lemon water, anguish, sand and sweat...How do we survive this atmosphere?" (McAlmon 37). To his dismay, the woman enjoyed the reading. Peter "rescues" Jim from a conversation in which a guests suggests that Jim's writing would improve "if he put more social content into his work, and make it more representative of the average person's experiences and emotions" (McAlmon 37). The guest insists that art should "serve to uplift us, and give us beauty" (McAlmon 37). The three friends leave the party dismayed, relocating at a local coffee shop to vent.

During his stay in New York, McAlmon encountered similar experiences. Like Peter, McAlmon took a job as a nude model. One of the students of the class was Marsden Hartley, alter-ego of Brander, who introduced McAlmon to Williams Carlos Williams at Lola Ridge's party, alter-ego of Dora. Just as Peter considers the guests of Dora's party as "pathetic," McAlmon distrusted the "political and artistic presumption of men and women who had neither sweated nor struggled" (McAlmon 33, Smoller 29). McAlmon despised figures like Alfred Kreymbourg and Lola Ridge for their detachment from the "oppressed masses" and considered them incapable of truly expressing the thoughts and emotions of the average citizen (Mariani 173).

However, McAlmon viewed himself as an appropriate voice for the masses, given his working-class upbringing and numerous low-paying occupations (Smoller 17). Throughout his adolescent life, McAlmon pursued a life exempt from systematic beliefs. He valued personal experience over dogma, to learn as one goes rather than adhere to predetermined guidelines.

Schooling proved dull for McAlmon, and after a stint at the University of Minnesota, he worked “with the crude, hard men who tramped across the badlands laying track or punching cattle” (Smoller 17). When his family moved to California, McAlmon studied a year at USC. Again, the ambitious youth left school because it bored him. As he explains in an article in *This Quarter*, “the entire idea back of college was to make formulas on how to think and feel rather than to teach one to sense and judge, wholly, for oneself....Damn the whole college, professors, president, and Y.M.C.A.-minded students” (Smoller 18).

Consistent to McAlmon’s history and his writing was his firm belief that personal experience supersedes intelligence. His disgust for Lola Ridge and her parties derived from his conviction that “one writes to discover rather than to write” (Tashjian 27). McAlmon considered himself more qualified to write because of his array of experiences. He felt he could do these experiences justice, rather than some intellectual who spends “too long within his library, [too] dependent upon other men’s philosophies of art” (“Modern Antiques”). McAlmon’s frustration with the avant-garde spurred his desire for artistic release. After meeting Williams, McAlmon insisted on starting a venture that emphasized “writing about one’s own place in one’s own idiom straightforwardly, without obeisance to European models” (Mariani 174). Like Peter, McAlmon believed that native artists possessed the energy and talent to establish a distinctly American art form. Both men distrusted the literati to provide such an opportunity, so they initiated the process by founding *Contact*, a little magazine for Americans by Americans that stressed the importance of locale in one’s writing.

While McAlmon and Williams agreed on the magazine’s purpose, the two struggled on how that end should be achieved. “Post-Adolescence” addresses McAlmon and William’s struggle through a series of conversations between Peter and Jim. Although the story never

explicitly mentions *Contact*, Peter approaches Jim about “getting writers and painters together...in this country” (McAlmon 12). Peter insists that “[i]t’s got to be done in this country” because “nobody else will help them if they don’t help each other” (McAlmon 12). He even recognizes that while few artists can reach an “agreement” that they should “start something” regardless (McAlmon 12). Jim expresses his frustration with modern art, in particular in deriving “the terms to condemn it,” and suggests that the two men do not have “any base” to begin (McAlmon 12). Peter insists that their base “must recognize individual qualities” in an effort to do away with “class terms” that define movements. Jim wants their efforts to be “inclusive” and Peter claims that focusing on individual qualities is the most inclusive standard (McAlmon 12).

As Peter presses the issue, Jim starts to steer the conversation to his frustration with his duties as a doctor and to his family. He feels restricted by his job, concerned about whether or not he will get a vacation in the summer, and worried about supporting his growing children. He wants to “feel definitely free” (McAlmon 12). Peter encourages Jim to take a risk, advising that “you just have to take a leap and if you slip and bang your ass in the mudpuddle, tra la, c’est la vie” (McAlmon 12). Yet Jim has to leave before any solution can be reached. “Confronted with Jim’s temperament and situation,” Peter laments that the situation was “too impractical [for him] to suggest” his plans for an artistic venture and wished that Jim’s “occupation” did not keep them from having a “decent conversation” (McAlmon 14).

In a second meeting with Jim, Peter applies a more aggressive tone to his convictions. As the conversation progresses, Jim asks if he is a “coward” and wishes that he could “go mad” rather than have to make decisions (McAlmon 44). Peter refuses to listen to Jim’s melodramatics. Peter considers Jim’s comments “ridiculous” and insists that Jim recover his senses (McAlmon 44). Yet Peter’s advice eludes Jim. He expresses more frustration with his job and then labels their

discussion “damn fool talk about sensibility [and] imagination” (McAlmon 45). Peter admits that “perhaps the diversion won’t lead to anything more satisfactory,” but he insists that the venture would at least lead them somewhere new, where they could have a voice against the “arty-art worshippers” and stress “individual qualities” (McAlmon 45, 33, 12). Jim resigns that he can not act until he believes in the venture.

Peter leaves the meeting even more frustrated than previously. Just when he thought he had found a solution to his problems, his vision becomes compromised by Jim’s miseries (McAlmon 47). Throughout the rest of the story, Peter internalizes his thoughts on the venture. He concludes that New York’s “atmosphere” had become too “stifling” for him because of its “abhorring indifference to existence” (McAlmon 76, 74). Peter considers leaving for Europe in order to escape New York, in hopes of finding an environment where his purpose would not be “annihilated” (McAlmon 76).

Within half a year of arriving in New York, McAlmon did leave New York for Paris, after marrying Bryher (Smoller 36). Somehow Williams and McAlmon came to some sort of agreement on how to approach *Contact*, but “Post-Adolescence” does provide resolution to that conflict. Historian Dickran Tashjian claims that the first four issues of *Contact* focused on theoretical possibilities on “[how] American art [could] be created against...cultural opposition” (84). Yet by the fifth issue the editors found themselves returning to the basic question they had raised initially. While McAlmon and Williams “took an anti-art stance” and considered “the presence of Europe [corrupted] any possibility of American originality,” they could not overcome the appeal of trends like Dada, which attracted many of the New York avant-garde to its cause (Tashjian 89). The little magazine’s inability to make contact with its locale resulted in a minimal readership, about 200 copies a month (*American Literary Magazines*). With limited

success, McAlmon in Paris, and Williams tired of the venture, *Contact* ended publication after its fifth issue. Williams restarted the magazine a decade later, but without McAlmon as an editor.

While Tashjian accurately expresses that the “tensions informing *Contact* were derived from Williams’s feeling of entrapment between the forces of Europe and America and from his subsequent attempts to adjust theory and experience one another,” equally important to *Contact*’s formation is McAlmon’s frustration with the avant-garde (72). In a matter of months of his arrival, McAlmon’s patience for the New York art scene reached its climax. Desiring a medium to express his experiences and theory, McAlmon approached Williams, a man “he could trust to understand what he was after in terms of an American culture,” about starting *Contact* (Mariani 176). Williams praised *Contact* in his *Autobiography* because

our poems constantly, continuously, and stupidly were rejected by all the pay magazines except *Poetry* and *The Dial*. The *Little Review* didn’t pay. We had no recourse but to establish publications of our own. For after all, the outlets being so meager, we had otherwise far too long a time to wait between drinks.” (175)

The above comment highlights the fundamental difference between McAlmon’s and Williams’s reasons for founding *Contact*. The experienced Williams learned of the short lives of little magazines and of the limited financial benefits they provided writers. Williams hoped to get some exposure from the “good stuff lying around that should not be lost,” but he recognized that it was the springtime of little magazines and that “there was much else in the wind” if *Contact* failed (Williams 172).

By the fourth issue of the magazine, an advertisement on the second page desperately announces the sale of William Carlos Williams’s poems for a “minimum price of fifty dollars” (“Announcement and Sample Poem”). Living in Rutherford, NJ where “the world of art [was]

non-existent,” Williams’s felt like he was not getting the appreciation he deserved. His “writing always seemed to have to wait” for his other responsibilities like his medical practice and his family. In London and Paris, his friend Ezra Pound had earned a solid reputation, while at home he witnessed his own productivity falling (Mariani 184). Williams needed a boost of confidence; he wanted to believe that he could establish an “American vortex” with *Contact*, but he became “shrill” and doubted he could his ability to attract aspiring artists to New York over London or Paris (Mariani 182). As his experience with *Others* proved, all an artist could hope for during the limited life span of a little magazine was sufficient compensation, and, hopefully, some favorable publicity.

While Williams desired recognition, either financial or artistic, from *Contact*, the inexperienced McAlmon considered *Contact* like one of his various occupations, as another chance to explore and gain experience. Similar to Peter in “Post-Adolescence,” McAlmon believed that American writers had the talent and energy to challenge European standards. McAlmon dedicated himself to *Contact*, primarily funding the magazine on a nude model’s wage (Smoller 30). McAlmon believed in the principle of the magazine and wanted to pursue it regardless of its chances of success. Like Peter, McAlmon questioned “[w]hy is success so much more desirable than a failure?” (McAlmon 57). Unlike Peter, McAlmon was able to establish some successful, but limited contact with his locale through the little magazine. Yet *Contact* was just another notch in McAlmon’s belt. From his experience in New York, he established *Contact Editions* in Paris, a publishing company for expatriates. Through this venture McAlmon printed the first works of Gertrude Stein and Ernest Hemingway. McAlmon’s energy and perseverance yielded some of the finest writers of the 20th century, but it was his persistence with Williams that produced such an outcome.

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