

# Why Periodicals?

## Politics and Literature in Post-War European Journals (1945–75)

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Auf Poesie ist die Sicherheit der Throne gegründet.<sup>1</sup>

At most academic events, composed of multiple contributions, there comes a turning point when, suddenly – as if in a flash – what initially seemed like a collection of separate presentations loosely orbiting a broad theme coalesces into something like a more or less coherent musical theme. This may, of course, be an illusion, a construction of the mind – a merely subjective attempt to impose order on a series of unrelated elements. For as many times as one believes to perceive a significant thread within the maze of words, one loses it before its full articulation, whether due to afternoon fatigue, impatience for the next break, or longing for another coffee. And so it would remain, were it not for some notes carefully taken, though at times only decipherable with difficulty.

Going through my notes from the workshop ‘Politics and Literature in Post-War European Journals (1945–75)’, which I organised on 17 February 2025 at KWI, I was able to discern what I perceive as its musical theme.<sup>2</sup> In this blogpost, I will dissect the different voices of the polyphonic fugue that we carefully composed together on that cold yet sunny afternoon. The first voice addresses the idea that journals serve as platforms where debates are staged, often involving multiple authors, languages, and ideological orientations. Yet the subject of ideology – the second voice – surfaces in far more complex ways as journals themselves, through their editorial lines, maintain ideological outlooks that only partially align with those of their varied contributors. On top of that, journals often have to balance irreconcilable ideological positions. With regard to the theme of the workshop, the notion of literature as a weapon within ideological struggles emerged as a third and final voice – a metaphor embraced across the ideological spectrum, from the far right in early 1950s Germany to far-left Moroccan intellectuals in the late 1960s.

This gaping divide serves as a starting point for some initial reflections. I began the workshop with a few opening remarks on its title, which intended to provide clear temporal and geographical boundaries for the discussion. However, both in the process

of organising the workshop and even more so during the presentations, it soon became evident that while the chosen framework was rather generous, adhering strictly to these limits proved difficult, if not impossible.

Although we did not proceed in chronological order, topics discussed ranged from the midst of World War II with a discussion by Carlos Castro Sajami of the anti-fascist journal *Dyn* (1942–44) and ended with *Algérie Littérature/Action*, a journal founded in Paris in the mid-1990s. At the same time, as the example of *Dyn* illustrates, geographical boundaries were also crossed: the journal was published in Mexico City by the Vienna-born surrealist Wolfgang Paalen. Another journal, *Las Moradas* (1947–49), edited in Lima by the Peruvian writer Emilio Westphalen, featured translations of Karl Jaspers and Robert Desnos, thus bridging intellectual currents across the Atlantic. Both examples underscore a key characteristic of journal culture – one that is perhaps emblematic of culture and history more generally – namely, that it is *ex-orbitant*: it does not conform to fixed boundaries. The goal of the workshop, then, was to explore these exorbitant complexities, focusing on how the journal as a medium with its own specificities shapes the dissemination of aesthetics and culture, and to a certain extent, maybe, mimics it.

Assuming pathos permitted, two further questions beg for an answer: what is Europe? and what is literature? Geography alone does not provide an answer to the first question, nor does the mere presence of travelling Europeans and their projects abroad, as in the example mentioned earlier. Rather, Europe is a continually renegotiated entity – one that has ideologically dominated and materially exploited vast regions of the world and, to the dismay of today's far-right parties, inevitably intertwined itself with those it sought to subjugate. The resulting hybridisations, however, are all the more fascinating for this entanglement, as Andy Stafford's presentation on the Moroccan journal *Souffles-Anfas* (1966–72) demonstrated. Edited by Abdellatif Laâbi, *Souffles-Anfas* became a platform where Maoist politics and anticolonial tricontinental legacies intersected, giving rise to a significant articulation of the politics-literature nexus and fostering a generation of remarkable writers.

The second question concerns the nature of literature itself. After all, the literature discussed in these journals extends far beyond poems, short stories, or novels. While such forms are certainly present, the literary journal primarily functions as a heterogeneous textual space, bringing together editorials, interviews, open letters, rebuttals, reviews, translations, and critical essays spanning politics, philosophy, and sociology. Given this vast paratext surrounding 'properly literary' works, one might ask: what comes first? Does literature give rise to these polyphonic debates, or does it emerge from them? Put somewhat more synthetically: are poems chickens or eggs?

But let us return to the second voice of our polyphonic fugue, namely the peculiar role of ideology. In her presentation on *L'Europa letteraria*, a literary journal published in Rome between 1960 and 1965, Mila Milani showed how it sought to establish a space for exchange and debate between Western and Eastern European literatures. Fascinatingly, the journal had contact with both dissident Soviet writers and the Union of Soviet

Writers, the USSR's official literary organ. Rather than resolving ideological tensions, the journal served as a platform where these divergent ideological positions coexisted. A similar dynamic emerged in the case of the *Gulliver Project* (1961–64), discussed by Beatrice Occhini. This initiative sought to establish a European forum but ultimately failed when national differences created an impasse just as the journal was on the verge of publication. This impasse, Occhini argued, was primarily linked to debates about the literary form of the journal, which was perceived in France as most progressive and radical, but in Germany as arch-reactionary.<sup>3</sup> The remnants of this project materialised in a single issue, published in Italian, which stands as a testament to both the utopian aspirations and the ultimate failure of this internationalist endeavour.

Ideological fault lines of various kinds come to the fore here. One such example is the complex tension between centre and periphery, particularly evident in the context of anticolonial journals. In his discussion of *Algérie Littérature/Action*, Tristan Leperlier showed that being based in Paris and funded by French money was perceived as a mark of independence by Algerian writers and intellectuals, of which during the Civil War almost a quarter lived in France. The journal saw the promotion of literature as a political act in itself, particularly as it was attacked from all ideological sides – the state, Islamists, and others – and tried to provide a space for literature's autonomy. This was easier in the capital of the former coloniser. Alexandra Reza provided some historical background on this: most anticolonial journals at the heart of 1950s and 1960s African decolonisation were freer within the metropolises of colonial powers than in the colonised countries themselves.<sup>4</sup> When *Souffles-Anfas* was shut down in 1972 amid violent state repression, its contributors who were not imprisoned fled to France and unsuccessfully attempted to relaunch the journal from there.

Consequently, the metaphor of the platform should not be mistaken for a neutral space of encounter. Rather, it embodies ideological tensions between international and national perspectives, different national contexts, and the multidirectional power dynamics between centre and periphery, among other factors. They are thus far from neutral – hence the frequently asked question: *who funded the journal?* Far from being impudent, such questions address journals as epiphenomena to broader ideologically motivated geopolitical processes. Andrew Thacker's contribution illustrated this point well in his discussion of the journals sponsored by the Congress for Cultural Freedom – among others, *Der Monat* (Germany), *Preuves* (France), and *Encounter* (Britain). While their official aim was to spread and defend so-called 'free American culture' in Europe, he showed how these journals were also diverse and became sites of negotiation between their overarching ideological framework and the distinct editorial positions of their national contexts.

Literature exists at the heart of these multi-layered ideological fault lines. Thacker cited the 1951 striking request: "we could urgently use five hundred to one thousand copies of each of the following books, each of which represents a 'tank' in the ideological armament for the cold war."<sup>5</sup> Indeed, at the time, even relatively autonomous literary works were drawn into ideological struggles, demonstrating that literature, far from being

detached from power, could easily be enlisted in the service of major imperial forces. This same metaphor resurfaced in Daphne Weber's contribution on the far-right journal *Nation Europa*, first issued in 1951, which sought – and, from today's perspective, clearly succeeded – to forge a transnational network of far-right organisations, exploiting the all-too-adaptable capacities of the arts for ideological purposes.

Rather than condemning literature for its malleability, it is fascinating to explore these conflicting articulations within the literary field, which continues to navigate the tension between one view of poetry as securing the stability of the throne and another, expressed in post-war literary debates across France, Italy, and Germany, as well as in Morocco, where it was asserted in *Souffles-Anfas*: "Writing is an act, the poem a weapon, and discussion an assembly."<sup>6</sup>

## References

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1. Quoted in a 1962 essay that was republished in Enzensberger, Hans Magnus (2015): *Poesie und Politik*, Frankfurt a. M: Suhrkamp, p. 118.
2. Obviously, this text owes much to the presentations given by the participants of the workshop. The ideas I summarise are largely theirs, though I have only occasionally referenced their published work. References to archival material are derived from the respective papers of the participants.
3. "Diese Schreibweise, eine so progressive Haltung ihr auch zugrundeliegen möge, sei für Deutschland erkonservativ, und ihre entsprechenden Zeitschriften existieren bereits." See: Uwe Johnson an Ingeborg Bachmann u.a., 29.4.1963, Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach, SUA: Suhrkamp/03 Lektorat/Johnson, Uwe, S. 1.
4. Reza, Alexandra (2024): *Anticolonial Form. Literary Journals at the End of Empire*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198896319.001.0001>.
5. See Lasky, Melvin J.: *Der Monat* records, Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.
6. Quoted in Stafford, Andy (2023): "Writing Is an Act, the Poem a Weapon and Discussion an Assembly": The Political Turn in *Souffles* during Morocco's 1968', in: *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, vol. 59, no. 3, pp. 444–462, here p. 453, <https://doi.org/10.1093/fmls/cgad049>.

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