

LITERARY JOURNALS

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Summary

Literary journals evolved quite literally from the pages of newspapers in the 17th century, themselves a relatively new genre, where advertisements for new publications were printed. From this initial role of announcers of new books, journals quickly took on that of providing excerpts for a growing reading public. Literary journals, which proliferated in the 18th century and became ubiquitous in the 19th, then began to review new works, giving their growing readership a means to judge and choose from an ever-increasing availability of printed books.

The French periodical *Le Journal des sçavans* (1665-) quickly became a role model for a host of European titles, but by the early 18th century the English were in ascension, as the *Spectator* (1711-14) and the *Tatler* (1709-11) were imitated in many countries. These early literary journals were “literary” in name only, as the literary content was often slim. More accurately called *learned* journals perhaps, they were compendia of many subjects: philosophy, social commentary, entertainment, science, and political satire. It was not until the late 19th century that the completely *literary* review appeared, where the entire content of a journal consisted of either literary criticism or literature itself.

The 20th and 21st centuries have seen countless titles come and go, and some remain. The *Journal des Savants* is still with us, but with us too are thousands of small literary reviews that publish many more thousands of unknown writers alongside the famous, fueled in part by the huge increase in creative writing programs in the late 20th century.

Digital publishing has emerged as a new venue for the literary journal, and it remains to be seen what the long-term effect this new format will have on the existence and nature of the literary journal.

1. Ontology and History: The Beginnings of the Literary Journal

The history of the periodical press has yet to be written, for while many *national* histories exist, (See for example: *Histoire générale de la presse française* (Presses universitaires de France, 1969-76); *Geschichte der deutschen Presse* (Colloquium Verlag, 1966); *Guida della stampa periodica italiana* (Spacciante, 1890).) and many more specialized and narrow studies (by time period and/or genre) have been written, (Here the examples are virtually endless: *Revistas literarias españolas del Siglo XX (1919-1975)*. (Madrid: Ollero y Ramos, 2005); *30 Años de revistas literarias argentinas : (1960-1989)* (Buenos Aires: Catedral al Sur Editores, 1990); *Gli Anni delle riviste : le riviste letterarie dal 1945 agli anni ottanta*. (Lecce: Milella, 1985); *Questions of Style :Literary Societies and Literary Journals in Modern China, 1911-1937*. (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2003); *Panorama des revues littéraires sous l'Occupation : juillet 1940-août 1944*. (Paris: IMEC, 2007); *Periodical literature in 18th century America*. (University of Tennessee Press, c2005).) a history of the press as a whole, a *holistic* history, has not been made. Even farther away then is a history of the *literary* periodical press, a genre that became separate from general periodical publishing only in the 19th century, when literature itself became a fecund field, both in terms of study and of production, and when the mechanization of the press allowed for cheaper production and wider distribution.

Just what exactly constitutes the literary press is a bit of a conundrum as well. Often called “little magazines”, this sub-genre of periodical publishing has come to refer to journals with a relatively small readership specializing in the new writing of both established writers and those who are as yet unknown. They are often short-lived titles, although there are many that have lasted for decades (*The Paris Review* and *Granta* are contemporary examples). But the term can also mean journals that include essays and articles on literature and other cultural topics that appeal to the well-educated reader and that serve, in a sense, as standard-bearers of intellectual taste and intelligent writing. (Collini, Stefan. “*Modernism and the little magazines: the literary journal is dead. Long live the literary journal.*” *The Times Literary Supplement*. October 7, 2009.) (think *La Nouvelle Revue Française* and the *Atlantic Monthly*)

Literary though at the beginning of the periodical press’ history, in the late 17th and early 18th century, meant simply anything not a newspaper and not a gossip and entertainment journal. Journals that were considered literary periodicals were actually publications of a general nature that included many subjects. *Learned* is a term often used for these early titles, and more accurately describes their content and function. The nearly simultaneous appearance of the learned journal in several countries in Europe in the 1660’s is testament to a pervasive desire and need for both current information on scholarly (and not-so-scholarly) topics as well as notification of books being printed.

- France: *Journal des sçavans*, January 1665
- Germany: *Monatsgespräche*, 1663

- England: *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society*, March 1665
- Italy: *Giornale de' letterati*, 1668 (Steinberg, Saul. *Five hundred years of printing*. 4th ed. London; New Castle, DE: British Library; Oak Knoll Press, 1996. 124.)

The new genre of periodicals was a response to the ever-increasing numbers of books being printed and to the failure of previous methods for managing the flood of new book titles. Prior to the advent of periodicals, readers had recourse to printed lists of new publications from printers, to newspaper advertisements, to catalogues issued by booksellers, and to the annual catalogues issued at the Frankfurt international book fair. Apart from these published sources, men of letters exchanged letters and announcements with each other, in order to keep up to date with the growing mass of printed books.

Although bibliographies, or simple lists, of new books were published in great numbers during the 17th century, these lists increasingly could not provide a complete account of European publishing, and were usually limited to a particular region or country or to a particular subject. Correspondence too had become a cumbersome and inefficient means of staying abreast of scholarship and publication. Add to all of these factors the increasing use of the vernacular languages in printed books, instead of Latin, that heightened the need for local sources of information on new titles. Enter the learned journal, which quickly became the principal venue for scholarly communication.

Advertisements for new books had been appearing in newspapers for some time before the first journal was printed. These announcements of new books gradually migrated to the back of the newspaper, with all the other kinds of advertisements, and then were separated from the patent medicines and other items for sale, into a section all their own. The literary, or learned, periodical evolved from this literary section of the newspaper advertisements, as a jutting landmass breaks free of the mainland and forms its own new island.

The very first titles were then “abstract serials”, or publications that listed and summarized new books, thus providing both an account of the contemporary book market and an aid to educated readers overwhelmed by the myriad new titles. In addition to the bibliographic function of listing new books, periodicals provided a review function, by discussing and evaluating new works. Book reviews then constituted one of the first major content areas of early periodicals. Original articles appeared as well from the outset; the *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society* (1665) contained *only* original articles at first. Like newspapers that were their immediate predecessors, learned periodicals were a response to a demand for current information on the many different subjects, including what books were being published, that were of interest to their educated readership, and this function of *current* awareness continues to be a hallmark of periodical publishing, literary or otherwise.

During the 18th century, the literary journal continued to develop and evolve, as literature itself became a field of production and inquiry. The growing numbers of periodicals during this time period took on many different forms of the “literary” and bear witness to the overall diversification and development of the literary field. The 18th century literary periodical could be one that:

- Appeared at regular intervals and employed writers now regarded as *literary*
- Used literary material
- Contributed to the development of a literary genre (i.e. satire or the essay)
- Contributed to the development of the literary canon
- Significantly affected literary history
- Assumed significant literary functions
- Constituted important historical documents and were thereby tangentially literary (*British Literary Magazines. Volume 1: The Augustan age and the age of Johnson 1698-1788*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1983.)

As journals continued to include and treat many subjects, an individual title could display any one or more of these aspects on either a regular or occasional basis. Book reviews continued to be a major feature, as well as articles on literary subjects and other arts, moral instruction, news, and entertainment. Some titles began to publish more in one area than another; the *Journal des savants* took on a more medical nature for several years and *Philosophical Transactions* had become almost entirely scientific. Still, the purely literary journal had to wait for the mid-to late 19th century. It is at this point that one can speak of periodicals that published nothing *but* literature: either creative works themselves, articles about literary works, or a combination of the “creative” and the “critical.”

So one could, strictly speaking, begin the history of the literary periodical with this new genre that emerged with the literary culture of Romanticism and the cult of the writer, and is therefore an entirely “modern” phenomenon. The recent undertaking by Oxford University Press to document literary magazines (*The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines*) begins at this point, roughly 1850 for its precursors, and charts the growth and development of literary journals through the Victorian period and the first half of the 20th century. This is the era of the “little magazine”, as mentioned above, of the high-minded literary undertaking that assumed sometimes enormous financial risk for an ideal of promoting and contributing to one’s own literary culture. Publishing new works of the famous, first works of the unknown, and essays on both sides of the literary world, these often short-lived, sometimes nearly homemade ventures epitomize both an optimism for the continued existence of the literary in an increasingly commercial world and a dogged determination to ensure that survival at all costs.

If literary periodicals began as a means to somehow organize and make sense of the flood of publication in the late 17th century, by the late 20th they had become part of that deluge. Hundreds of new titles appeared, however briefly, fueled in part by the expansion of creative writing programs, especially in the United States and Great Britain, during the late 20th century. In addition, the almost frenzied literary output of the emerging digital world has sought a venue for its tenuous existence. What remains to be seen is the survival of the print artifact of a literary periodical in an age of post-print.

2. The French Avatar: Journal Des Savants

Writing is some 6000 years old, the codex over 2000, and printing with moveable type

over 550, but the periodical only 400. Hunger for information may be “timeless,” but its diffusion implies a social need; its mechanical reproduction, the existence of a market; and the rise of a new genre, a change in reading practices as well as cultural production. (Wald, James. “*Periodicals and periodicity.*” *A companion to the history of the book.* Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007. 423.)

Considered the first literary, or learned, journal, the French *Journal des savants* survives to this day. Its first issue appeared on January 5, 1665 in Paris and while its production waxed and waned over the course of the 17th and 18th centuries, and was completely suspended from the Revolution until 1816, it has defied the inherent nature of a periodical, that of ephemerality, and lasted into the 21st century.

Voltaire wrote of this journal: “*le père de tous les ouvrages de ce genre dont l’Europe est aujourd’hui remplie*”, (Voltaire. *Le siècle de Louis XIV.* Quoted in: Morgan, Betty Trebelle . *Histoire du Journal des scavans depuis 1665 jusq’en 1701.* Paris : Presses Universitaires de France, 1928. 17) acknowledging both the importance of this title as well as the subsequent flood of literary journals that followed in its wake. Its sources are to be found primarily in two places: the literary salons of the time and the importance of the exchange of letters among the educated. (Morgan. 21. A propos of the intense correspondence of the time: “*Alors tout semblait en mouvement, l’on voulait tout éprouver, tout tenter, tout comprendre, et l’on sentait le besoin de s’associer, de s’enivrer du contact des esprits.*”)

Conceived as a weekly review of the “Republic of Letters”, the *Journal des savants* articulated five goals in the initial issue:

- To serve as “an exact catalog” of European books, not just the titles, but a description of their subject and potential “utility”
- To serve as a place to record the deaths of well-known people and to list their works along with an account of their life
- To make known scientific experiments and anything new in the arts and sciences
- To publish major decisions by secular and religious tribunals
- To assure that anything interesting or worthy of the curiosity of the learned would be made known

The importance of timeliness was recognized from the beginning by its editor, and it began as a weekly publication since “things age too quickly to put off discussing them once a year or once a month.” Within its covers, readers learned of the new theories of Descartes, Hooke’s new invention of the microscope, the paths of comets, and reviews of new plays. Its content was an amalgam of history and fiction, verse and prose, scandal and truth, literary and scientific criticism. (Ibid. 17.) It more than lived up to its goal of relaying interesting and curious new ideas.

The book review aspect of the *Journal’s* mission quickly became controversial, as authors accused the first editor, Denis de Sallo, of being too frank in criticizing their books or of leaving them out all together. Sallo’s position became untenable and he was replaced with a new editor after only three months. Other editors followed, who had to navigate the turbulent waters of political and religious censorship and shifting tastes, as

the journal slowly but surely found its voice.

Only three months after the *Journal's* appearance, in March of 1665, a new scientific review began publication in London: the *Philosophical Transactions* of the Royal Society which has been continuously published ever since. Concentrating more on the sciences than the arts, this journal nonetheless did include some literary content in its early days and counts as an immediate descendant of the *Journal des Savants* and the next important example of a literary periodical. It was followed in 1668 in Italy by the *Giornale de 'letterati*, publishing abstracts and reviews of books mainly in philosophy and science, and in 1682 in Germany by the *Acta eruditorum Lipsiensium*. By 1692, there was enough periodical activity that a history of the nascent periodical press appeared in a work by a German scholar, who wrote: "The honor of having invented these recent journals belongs to the French...who were followed by the English and the Italians, and not long after by the Germans and the Danes, and finally by the Dutch." (Christian Juncker, quoted in Balsamo, Luigi. *Bibliography: history of a tradition*. Trans. William A. Pettas. Berkeley, CA : Bernard M. Rosenthal, 1990. 96.)

All of these early learned journals illustrated the international aspect of the Republic of Letters by printing reviews of books in many languages and from many countries. In addition, they would republish content from each other, translating as needed, thus knitting together the educated men of many countries. The diaspora caused by religious wars and the movement of Protestants from one country to another helped to fuel this international flavor of the periodical press, as readers in one country may have been citizens of another. But the world of scholarship had long been an international one, held together by the Latin language that allowed discoveries and ideas to flow freely from one country to another. The availability of information on an international scale in the early learned journals of Europe mitigated the separation caused by political and religious conflicts and by the gradual replacement of Latin by so many vernacular languages.

Seven years after the *Journal's* first issue, a new kind of periodical appeared in France, the *Mercure gallant* (1672, later the *Mercure de France*), that diverged from a scholarly mission and provided news of the court and society; thus establishing the second current of periodical publishing, that of entertainment with content that appealed to popular rather than learned tastes. The demand for current information at the end of the 17th century on any number of subjects gave rise to the appearance, sometimes short-lived, of numerous other periodicals, both learned and entertaining. These two streams of content will merge in the 18th century into the well-known literary periodicals associated mainly with England.

Sometimes reduced to only an annual issue and sometimes managing a weekly schedule, the *Journal des savants* survived until 1792, and then ceased publication during the remainder of the Revolution. It did not recommence regular publication until 1816, at which point it became more of a literary journal than it had been, with the majority of its content displaying a decidedly literary slant. It is with us still, published since 1908 by the *Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-lettres*: <http://www.aibl.fr/fr/public/home.html>

(243 years of this historic journal are available online at the *Bibliothèque de France*'s archive, *Gallica*. <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cb343488023/date>)

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Biographical Sketch

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