THE GALL OF WORMWOOD IN PRINTING OVER 66 ISSUES AND STILL CONTINUING

Marvin Malone

In addition to being a poet and the editor of The Wormwood Review, Marvin Malone is professor of pharmacology at the University of the Pacific, the author of 167 research publications, editor of the American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education, co-editor of the Pacific Information Service on Street-Drugs, member of the editorial boards of Lloydia: The Journal of Natural Products and Journal of Ethnopharmacology, and an authority on the isolating and testing of drugs from higher fungi and plants.

Mr. Malone is also a spare-time printmaker and an avid collector of little magazines. Frances Steloff of the Gotham Book Mart, H. E. Briggs of Books 'n Things, and Larry Wallrich of the Phoenix Bookshop were his original tutors in this regard. The earliest influence on Mr. Malone's notions of publishing was Eugene Jolas' magazine, transition. His editorial philosophy is amply disclosed below.

Let me be direct: for a little magazine to succeed it must have (1) a memorable title and a reasonably tidy publishing format; (2) one altruistic, well-read editor or editor in chief with extraordinary patience and persistence; (3) a budget which matches editorial aspirations with income; and (4) some sense of the absurd to offset the aura of high purpose which can clot around such a venture. Let me be realistic: the above items are listed in reverse order of importance.

A good little-mag title should be unique and have some poetic connotation(s). The “wormwood” of The Wormwood Review was
not chosen because of the biblical star Wormwood heralding the oncoming apocalypse, not from Screwtape, not from oil of wormwood (the active ingredient in absinthe which is reputed to make “hearts grow fonder” but which in reality produces organic brain damage), and not from the classic bitter draft of wormwood and gall. The title derives directly from Wormwood Hill in East Connecticut, where artemisia grows abundantly and near the place where the first issue was printed. Artemisia tea “repels black fleas, discourages slugs, keeps beetles and weevils out of grain, and combats aphids.” The word “wormwood” carries many connotations, all of which have some validity since all are based ultimately upon the reputation of the plant.

The editor is a professional pharmacologist, and as a result has been able to remain clear and independent of the politics, subpolitics, schools, subschools, factions, and subfactions of the nonliterary aspects of the literary culture and subculture of the past two decades. This has allowed him to focus available time and energy on the contents of the mag. The editor dictates the contents of Wormwood—rather than the audience (as in commercial magazines and the university quarterlies) or the contributors (as in the cult little magazines). Consequently Wormwood strives to educate and build an audience and to avoid cults.

Always a reader and a writer, the to-be-editor picked up on the New Directions Annuals during his first year in college. Then in rapid sequence he came across transition, View, Poetry London, Horizon (Connolly), Golden Goose, Zero—and then the world of the little magazine opened, with Inferno and The Deer and the Dachshund. The editor-to-be was hooked. The baptism was completed by the reading of the classic book The Little Magazine: A History and a Bibliography, by Frederick J. Hoffman, Charles Allen, and Carolyn F. Ulrich. He began collecting and reading, and the process continues undiminished. The collection is regarded as still the most comprehensive outside a university—beginning with complete sequences of Wyndham Lewis’s Blast (1914–1915) and Margaret Anderson’s the little review (1914–1929) and running through to this issue of TriQuarterly.

This catholic reading and collecting policy has forced the development of (1) a realistic perspective on what a little magazine can and cannot accomplish, (2) some editorial sense of what the sustaining influences are in Amerenglish literature, and (3)
some editorial appreciation of what is merely sophomoric rediscovery, what is frankly imitative, and what is truly unique in regard to submitted manuscripts. All this has led to a modest philosophy for the mag, to suit its very modest budget. The editor has never focused his energy on seeking and printing “established” names. The policy is as follows: (1) to seek new names and to sustain them, (2) not to feature the work of the editor and his personal friends, and (3) to avoid all the subtle and not-so-subtle vanity aspects by making the mag pay its way completely. *Wormwood* is quite content to be a little magazine and not a big-little magazine, a little-big magazine, or a big magazine. It receives about 3,000 submissions (all unsolicited) for each issue; with this input, there is no problem in finding new names for each new number. *Wormwood* does “discourage slugs.”

In early correspondence with the editor, Cid Corman indicated that it was useful to have each issue of *Origin* associated in the public’s mind with one poet, i.e. the Charles Olson issue, the Creeley issue, etc. This concept appealed, and *Wormwood* instituted its yellow-paper center sections (8–24 pages) devoted to either one poet or one idea. Twenty to forty copies are signed, and half are retained by *Wormwood* to distribute to patrons and friends of the press, while the remaining half become the poet’s property. This concept has been helpful to the poets and to *Wormwood*. The poets featured to date are John Bennett (issue 55), Harold E. Briggs (40), Charles Bukowski (16, 24, 53, 71), William S. Burroughs (36), Judson Crews (19, 58), John Currier (44), Sanford Dorbin (42), Ian Hamilton Finlay (14), Hugh Fox (32), Don Gray (26), Oliver Haddo (27, 28, 39), Alfred Starr Hamilton (61), Dick Higgins (25), Gloria Kenison (23, 26), Ronald Koertge (29, 35, 51, 63), Carl Larsen (11), Lyn Lifshin (47, 59, 65), Gerald Locklin (31, 50, 64, 67), Al Masarik (57), Ann Menebroker (54), Jack Micheline (37), Joyce Odam (49), Christopher Perret (21, 30), Ben Pleasants (38, 52), Bern Porter (41), Ray Puechner (27, 28, 39), Steve Richmond (43, 70), Kirk Robertson (60, 69), Walter Snow (46), Richard Snyder (56), Charles Stettler (48), Brian Swann (68), William Wantling (15, 36), Charles Webb (62), Jon Edgar Webb/*The Outsider* (45), and Phil Weidman (33). If you, the reader of these words, have never heard of 50 percent of these authors, then you are missing a certain section of living Amer-
english literature. Four are already deceased: Briggs, Perret, Snow, and Wantling. The ages, the personalities, the backgrounds, the writing styles of these four are disparate in the extreme—their only common denominator is that their best work appeared in Wormwood.


The editor receives inquiries at a rate of about once a month from individuals writing theses or taking polls/surveys relating to the little magazine scene. One of them asked for a list of the books that had most influenced the editor. The list was assembled hastily—but continues to be fascinating personally. Since it probably tells more about the philosophical slant of Wormwood than anything else which could be written, the list is reproduced here: Hugh Lofting’s *Dr. Dolittle* books; Jules Verne’s *The Mysterious Island*; Saki’s *Beasts and Super Beasts* and *The Unbearable Bas-
sington; Nathanael West’s Miss Lonelyhearts; Walt Whitman’s Leaves of Grass (especially the preface to the 1855 edition); Céline’s Journey to the End of the Night and Death on the Installment Plan; Henry Miller’s Tropic of Cancer, Tropic of Capricorn, and The Books in My Life; George Orwell’s Down and Out in Paris and London and 1984; William Sansom’s Something Terrible, Something Lovely; D. H. Lawrence’s Birds, Beasts and Flowers; Joyce Cary’s The Horse’s Mouth; William Carlos Williams’s The Autobiography of WCW and Collected Later Poems; James Joyce’s Finnegans Wake; Ray Bradbury’s Fahrenheit 451; Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.’s Mother Night; James Drought’s The Secret and Gypsy Moths. The sequence is roughly in order of reading and omits many of the editor’s favorite authors/poets—a favorite book may not necessarily be an influential book. Certainly the editor’s known predilection for the prose-poem should now be less surprising.

After the first three issues, Wormwood’s format has always reflected its income—the money necessary to put out four issues a year. The receipt of four issues annually pleases librarians, and the libraries are the stable backbone of our subscription list. The first issue was printed in 1959 in a barn by letterpress, on a machine owned by one of the founding editors (Alexander Taylor). Since the barn did not have adequate electrical wiring, the press was operated by having the other two editors (James Scully and Morton Felix) spin the flywheel by hand. The editors were fueled by gin, since the weather was cold and the barn drafty. The paper was obtained at cost via Sandy Taylor’s father.

This operation was economically sound, but the manual aspects did not appeal to the founding editors. Consequently the subscription money was used to print the second issue commercially. This used up all available cash. The venture went eighty dollars in debt, and the magazine quietly folded, as all good little magazines are supposed to do. In September 1960, the present editor arrived in Storrs, Connecticut—brash from mimeograph publishing in New Mexico, where little magazines perennially thrive. The first day there, he found the second issue of Wormwood in the magazine rack of one of the two local drugstores. On the second day, he learned that the mag was defunct, and within the month it was apparent that Wormwood had been a sport, in the biological
sense of the word. The academic and nonacademic locals did not look favorably upon modern literature, and the publishing of a little magazine was clearly neither sound nor right. With Sandy Taylor, *Wormwood* was resuscitated. The librarians received the balance of their one-year trial subscriptions and were pleased. The mag also had been critically accepted. Renewals came in. A policy was made to stay within the budget and adjust the format accordingly. This was not an easy choice, since many individuals consciously or subconsciously buy little magazines because of an attractive/exciting format—a format that will enhance coffee table decor.

With issue 5 other responsibilities took Sandy away from direct participation, and with issue 9 the present editor assumed full responsibility. To stay within the budget, he takes no money from the operation and puts every cent earned by the magazine back into its production. Any other names appearing on the masthead are pseudonyms (A. Sypher, Ernest Stranger, etc.); the magazine is a one-man operation. The editor reads all manuscripts, selects those matching the current editorial psyche, prepares camera-ready copy, designs the covers, maintains the mailing list, bills accounts, balances the books, addresses the envelopes, mails out the magazines. Currently, issues are mailed out two at a time to save effort in addressing, save the cost of envelopes, and cut the postal bill in half. The operation is tightly run: bills are paid on time and subscribers have guaranteed subscriptions. Only four bookstores in the U.S. have been found to be equally reliable in living up to their business obligations: Asphodel Bookshop (Burton, Ohio), Chatterton’s Bookshop (Los Angeles, California), Either/Or Bookstore (Hermosa Beach, California), and Serendipity Books (Berkeley, California). This very sorry state of ethics explains why *Wormwood* is not to be found in more bookstores in more cities.

The bookstores are not the only ones at fault. The editor believes that the main reason why private individuals do not subscribe to little magazines in greater numbers is the sloppy business practices of the average little magazine. Speaking from much experience as a collector, the editor realizes no one wants to pay in advance for a four-issue subscription and receive one
issue, knowing that two have been published (issue 1 reserved for libraries because too few copies were printed), and then have the magazine cease publication with the third issue (copies distributed only to friends of the press). No chance of a refund (there was a “closing” party and everyone left town)! After being burned this way several times in succession, only the true little-mag addict persists, and he too eventually begins to restrict subscriptions to DeBoer-circulated magazines. To combat this, *Wormwood* has a guaranteed subscription policy.

*Wormwood* prints only 700 copies. Approximately 100 are targeted as payment to contributors (two to six copies each or the cash equivalent), and 100 are designated as “exchange” copies for other little magazines (to keep communications open). If 300 copies can be sold regularly, then the magazine can survive with a decent format. The number of the remaining 200 copies sold determines the extra pages in the next issue and the luxuries of format that can be afforded. *Wormwood* retains its modest format because the magazine must operate within the limits of available money and available time. If 2,000 copies were to be printed, they could certainly be sold to bring in more money and to produce a more elegant look. However, the magazine could no longer be a one-man operation and a completely new and expensive set of operating procedures would be necessary—and the mag would probably not survive this “progress.”

In July 1967 *Wormwood* received one of the first fifteen grants awarded by the Coordinating Council of Literary Magazines; the amount was $415. Two grants have been applied for and received since that time (1970: $500; 1973: $1,000). Each grant has been used to tidy up the format of the magazine and to consolidate the “gain” without departing from the modest philosophy and modest size. *Wormwood* continues without being dependent on grants for survival.

Every three years the editor rereads the magazine as he prepares the traditional three-year index and debates whether *Wormwood* continues to have a function; there is no wish for continuation as an end in itself. The responses of readers and contributors, the number of reprint requests, the relative number of new talents found, and so on, are considered. If this analysis is positive, sub-
scriptions are then guaranteed for the next three years. Issue 72 will carry the next announcement as to whether Wormwood continues or stops.

A sense of self-importance has stifled many little magazines. Wormwood has at least one apparent way of combating this phenomenon. The approach is somewhat sophomoric and has frustrated the librarians and put off certain serious scholars of modern literature—nevertheless the technique seems to prevent creeping pomposity. Since issue 32 the cover title of the magazine (supported by the cover art) has been some semantic corruption of the magazine’s very high-poetry real name, e.g. The Warm Wooly Review, Worm Oil on View, Wormwood Cuts Through, The Worm Would View You, Wormwood in You, The Worm Would Bite and Chew, The Worn World Raw View, The Warm Wood Tree View, etc. In 1975 the masthead indicated that our beloved art editor, A. Sypher, had apparently been fired and a new editor, Ernest Stranger, hired. This allowed the ever considerate Editor-in-Chief Malone to adopt a subtitle for The Wormwood Review. The subtitle? “Incorporating Malone-Stranger Review.” The knowledgeable can only sigh and reply, “Heigh-ho, Silver!”