

Why didn't *The Egoist* sell? A response to Yale Modernism Lab, and a note to *PhilPapers*

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Abstract. A researcher at the Yale Modernism Lab, Elyse Graham, raises the question of why the early twentieth century literary review *The Egoist* had such troubling selling, despite its stellar contributors. She puts the blame on regulars Dora Marsden and Richard Aldington. I offer an alternative hypothesis.

The Egoist was a literary review which ran from 1914 to 1919. It published some famous names and works in modernist literature, but struggled to sell. In a dateless online post, a researcher at Yale Modernism Lab identifies these famous names as a reason to buy the magazine, if that is the right term – it looks more like a newspaper. But there were other contributors and these contributors were a problem apparently. The Yale researcher tells us:

But there were also plenty of reasons not to buy the magazine. The editor, Dora Marsden, insisted on printing at the front of the book her philosophical writing, which ran for many pages and contributed to philosophy more smoke than fire... Contributors such as Richard Aldington indulged in a level of self-regard that could be off-putting.

The authors referred to are actually ones I like reading from *The Egoist*. I look out for their names. I even feel as if the Yale Modernism Lab researcher is insulting my friends.¹

I think Dora Marsden's philosophical writings can and perhaps did serve as a stimulant for others: "We can turn this into professional philosophy or more readable literature." She

¹ I concede that they deserve some insult (Marsden not Marsbar), but what's next? In 100 years time, a Yale Lab researcher writes: "*PhilPapers* had plenty of good contributors but there were also reasons to avoid the site..."

analyzed the use of ordinary terms, such as “moral” and “immoral,” “just” and “unjust,” and “the law” and “murder.” Rather than comparing her philosophical writings to smoke as opposed to fire, I would compare them to fuel. She often sounds Nietzschean, by the way.

I wish to introduce an alternative hypothesis regarding why *The Egoist* struggled to sell enough copies, though it seems to have lasted a long time for a modernist journal. This hypothesis also puts the blame on Marsden but not because of philosophy of insufficiently high quality (not fire level, using the Yale Lab ranking system) combined with pages and pages of it. Observe the opening paragraph of issue 1, volume 1, which is right on the front page:

The concepts with which one age will preoccupy itself, and in which it will invest its surplus emotional heat have shown themselves to be so essentially casual as to be now a matter for mirth rather than wonder with its successors. The subject of an age's Master Passion round which its interest rages will be anything accidental and contingent which will serve: stand the heat, that is, and last out until enthusiasm tires. The amount of genuine enthusiasm which Athanasius, Arius and their followers were able to cull from the numerical problems in the concept of the Trinity was—incredible though it may seem—equal to that which this age culls from the figures of the football scores.

The alternative hypothesis then is “Her magazine struggled to sell because the opening issue insults most readers, preoccupied as they are with the preoccupations of the age. The journal quickly developed a bad reputation amongst readers interested in new literature as for only the few, not the many.” By the way, I suspect the opening quoted above was partly an experiment to determine what would happen to an English Nietzsche.