CHAPTER 1

Freeloading in Hobohemia
Antimodernism, Free Verse, and the State in American World War One Periodical Culture

In January 1916, just as President Wilson began a national speaking tour to explain to the American people his decision to expand America's military as part of a program of war preparedness, the *New York Times* hosted a discussion of an issue that would loom over American modernist poetry's relationship to World War One: What are the politics of free verse?[1] The poet Josephine Preston Peabody opened the question by critiquing free verse as undemocratic, claiming that *vers libre* was "in the worst sense of the word . . . aristocratic" and exclusionary because its irregular rhythm and lack of rhyme made it impossible to memorize and therefore to share.[2] In contrast, regularized poetic meter was "the most democratic thing" in mimicking "the rhythm of the heart-beat," producing a form that was inherently collective because it ran through all "the great moments of life." She predicted that the war would "make poetry democratic again," and would discourage "mere experimenter[s] with words, making intricate verbal patterns for the entertainment of [their] friends." A week later, the poet James Oppenheim gave the modernist reply, decrying Peabody's equation of democratic art with popular appeal, and arguing instead that "democratic" art should not be understood as a formal quality. For Oppenheim, the vitality of art in a democratic society was conditional not on formal choices but on free speech, on tolerating a constellated set of practices and modes of expression, wherein each man "should be pre-eminently himself, whether that means being a hodcarrier or a philosopher."[3]

Oppenheim and Peabody's argument may now struggle for footnote status, but it exemplifies a broader phenomenon: how questions about literary modernism's public and political instrumentality became especially acute during World War One, and frequently revolved around the issue of free verse. The debate over the civic responsibilities of American modernism – and the formal choices that responsibility entailed – was highly public; not confined to little magazines, it spread to the *New Republic*, the

New York Times, and even the *Saturday Evening Post*. Modernist "bohemians" were alternately dismissed as esoteric, insincere, pretentious, elitist, and hermetic; and by 1917, this shaded into charges of "slacking," unpatriotically withholding labor (and money) from the state. In contrast, magazines such as *Poetry* and the *Little Review* fostered a counterpublic sphere of debate on the war, one that frequently defended the relevance of modernism, and free verse, to a moment of collective emergency.

This chapter seeks to recover the contours of that debate by focusing on three publications: the *Saturday Evening Post*, *Poetry*, and the *Little Review*. These periodicals took dramatically divergent positions on modernist instrumentality during wartime, and did so in dialogue with one another. Of particular importance to them all was how experimental poetics could engage the rapid expansion of the state, and the role of poetry in accommodating the new forms of sociability this expansion entailed. As outlined in the Introduction, within months of the declaration of war, the US federal state had initiated several powerful new institutions and asserted control over the spheres of private enterprise, the press, and domestic economy in unprecedented ways, often to the delight of Progressives who had long agitated for more direct governmental agency over American life. Yet much of this expansion occurred through governmental partnerships with preexisting corporate infrastructures, often reconfirming an already powerful discourse that aligned civic participation and political agency with consumer choice. In this circumstance of dramatic state expansion and the alteration (or innovation) of how a variety of social services were provided and administered, citizens' relationship to government and one another underwent substantial changes that posed both challenges to representation and transformations in what modern citizenship entailed. As this chapter explains, in this rapidly transforming situation, "freedom" became an elastic term that focused a host of competing political, economic, and aesthetic debates as citizens and authors struggled to understand and shape new practices of citizenship, debates that extended to free verse, free speech, and freeloading. And for these magazines, it was this nexus that became a site for considering not only the legitimacy of American participation in World War One, but the longer-term issue of the rapidly changing social experience of American citizenship, and the question of whether writers engaged in developing experimental aesthetic forms had obligations to mediate these new social relations. In doing so these magazines developed arguments and hosted debates about artistic autonomy, state sociality, and the obligations of the aesthetic to the collective well-being that would resurface in the 1930s. Just

as Wilsonian progressivism provided an important template for the policies of the New Deal, so did this early aesthetic engagement with the Progressive wartime state help shape the debates of the later era.

The enormous transformations of the American state and the flourishing of modernism that took place in the 1910s should therefore bear increased scrutiny as interrelated phenomena, and this chapter seeks to develop that scrutiny by examining how two American modernist magazines – *Poetry* and the *Little Review* – imagined the relation between individual and state, and the function of literary modernism in mediating that relation, during wartime. Despite their widely acknowledged status as the two most influential modernist little magazines of the decade published in America, the fact that they were largely unmolested by the postmaster general's aggressive implementation of the Espionage and Sedition Acts has contributed to a surprising lack of scholarship on how they articulated a commitment to experimental aesthetics as inextricable from a politics of the war.[4] The chapter also examines how this commitment was achieved in dialogue with antimodernist critics who perceived modernist experimentation as contrary to the aesthetic necessities of the wartime state, critics who took enormous pleasure in poking fun at the modernist project in lead articles of the *Saturday Evening Post*, the nation's favorite weekly magazine. For both sides, free verse focused this discussion; ripe for parody, grandiose ambition, and political investment, it became a locus where questions about aesthetic experimentation, aesthetic value, and artistic obligation were forcefully asked.

Antimodernism and Materialist Nationalism in the *Saturday Evening Post*

As the cartoon (Figure 1.1) from the *New York Tribune* in January 1917 demonstrates, even before American entry into World War One, free verse had frequently been the focus of mainstream mockery of modernists' disconnection from civic seriousness and responsibility.[5] Yet as the instrumentality of all public and economic activity underwent increased scrutiny in the war years, so calls for writers to support the needs of the state became louder. The shrillest accusations of modernist "slacking" appeared in the *Saturday Evening Post*. In 1918, it ran Wallace Irwin's "Patrioteers: The Red War and the Pink," a poem satirizing the attitude of New York's bohemian poets toward the war. Irwin mocked Greenwich Village's writers as an "Amateur League of Self-starting Messiahs," vainly considering themselves the unacknowledged legislators of the world; in actuality, their verse

Figure 1.1 "Shouting the Battle Cry of Freedom: Free Verse and Free Art Having Shown the Way, Free Science May Now Shake Off Its Shackles and Help to Swell the Ranks of Emancipated Knowledge. With Science Unfettered, Only Old Fogies Will Observe the Rules of Gravitation." *New York Tribune* (January 21, 1917), 8. Image courtesy of Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers, Library of Congress

consisted of "patent unworkable war panaceas." Sheltered from the reality of public emergency in "a mauve mildewed hole/Full of sawdust and soul" in Greenwich Village, their "rare inspirations/Were limited mostly to rare publications/Of small circulations."[6] These writers later settle at the "Pink Magazine," whose editor is reluctant to print anything connected to the war; he welcomes them as "souls so refined that of war they can make/A toothsome confection, quite pleasant to take."[7] Pointedly, the modernists' understanding of freedom leads them to freeload; as they leave the bar with the well-intentioned cry "to our work–/let none be a slacker or conscienceless shirk!", they "left the poor waiter to ponder and think:/'It's all very well – but who pays for the drink?'"[8]

Irwin's mockery of modernism's interconnected mixture of elitism, pacifism, impracticality, squeamishness, abstraction, experimentalism, pretentiousness, and anticommercialism was typical of the *Saturday Evening Post*, which during the war proudly positioned itself as the opposite of all these things. By 1913 the *Post* had sales of over two million; estimates suggest it reached an astonishing 10 percent of Americans.[9] The *Post*'s phenomenal success relied on a loss-leading cover price of a nickel to encourage mass circulation, a cover price subsidized by advertising – which occupied around 50 percent of the 100-page plus weekly.[10] As Jan Cohn brilliantly demonstrates, this business model gradually developed into an identifiable "*Post* style," typified by a celebration of business, self-reliance, personal upward mobility for the hardworking (guaranteed by the progress of a classless America), and moderate consumption as the visible marker of progress.[11] As Thorstein Veblen noted in 1905, this probusiness policy was delivered consistently across fiction, nonfiction, editorials, and advertisements, dissolving differences between genre and register.[12] Moreover, the magazine flourished partly because of its aggressive campaign of nationalization, as the *Post* style aimed to interpellate the *Post*'s readers, employees, and even the newsies who delivered it into an ideology of America.[13] Cultivating national (rather than sectional or local) habits of taste was attractive to the *Post*'s advertisers, who were keen to foster national habits of consumption; as Cohn notes, "the *Post* was created to echo and re-inforce in its contents the emerging concept of America as a nation unified by the consumption of standardized commodities."[14]

Moreover, the interlocking reliance of advertising and a national readership in the *Post*'s success occurred as consumption was beginning to be formulated not just as patriotic but as civic participation in its own right. The *Post* represents an influential artifact and motor of what Charles McGovern has called material nationalism; as he explains, between 1890

and 1940, "Americans came to understand spending as a form of citizenship, an important ritual of national identity in daily life. Explicit political and civic language, images, and practices that equated voting with buying shaped common understandings of consumption."[15] The *Post*'s adverts, fiction, and editorials configured consumption in this way; a discourse that "conferred Americanness through and in things," material nationalism also framed individual liberty as freedom of choice – a freedom best expressed and reproduced in the marketplace.[16]

An example of this material nationalism is this Hyatt ball bearing advert, where Hyatt ball bearings make possible the public *sphere* by providing the architectural frame to public *space* (see Figure 1.2). Found in mines, racetracks, farms, factories, and advertised on billboards situated above theaters, dancing-halls, and vacant lots, Hyatt bearings form the material and commercial infrastructure of this panoramic view of national space. Their products allow the citizenry to travel to the town's public square, as they are installed in the motor cars that transport them, and each corner of this square bears their advertisements. The square's function of public assembly, debate, and celebration is thus enabled and structured by this fantasy of monopolistic corporate dominance, so much so that citizens choose the language of the Hyatt adverts to affirm their national loyalty. In this vision, nationalist public assembly and speech, military and auxiliary service (there are prominent signs for the YMCA and the Red Cross), quieting the Kaiser, and choosing the quietest ball bearings become aligned as symmetrical and inextricable acts of wartime civic participation and patriotism. Hyatt ball bearings literally articulate, in both linguistic and mechanical terms, the points of contact between social forms and identities: between individual and state, citizen and consumer, corporation and community, wage-laborer and volunteer.

The *Post*'s material nationalism meant that its hostility to modernist experiment frequently focused on the economies of modernism, as Irwin's poem suggests. In 1917 and 1918, the *Post* ran several articles ridiculing what it called the "hobohemian" movement in Greenwich Village – reserving particular scorn for ideas of modernist "freedom." Days after the United States declared war on Germany in April 1917, Sinclair Lewis – who would famously mock bohemian affectation in *Main Street* (1920) and *Babbitt* (1922) – published the satirical short story "Hobohemia," the week's lead feature. "Hobohemia" features a young businessman, Dennis Brown, who follows his aspiring-bohemian sweetheart to Greenwich Village in an attempt to persuade her to return to their home of Northernapolis. Forced to ingratiate himself into "hobohemia" – "the place and state of

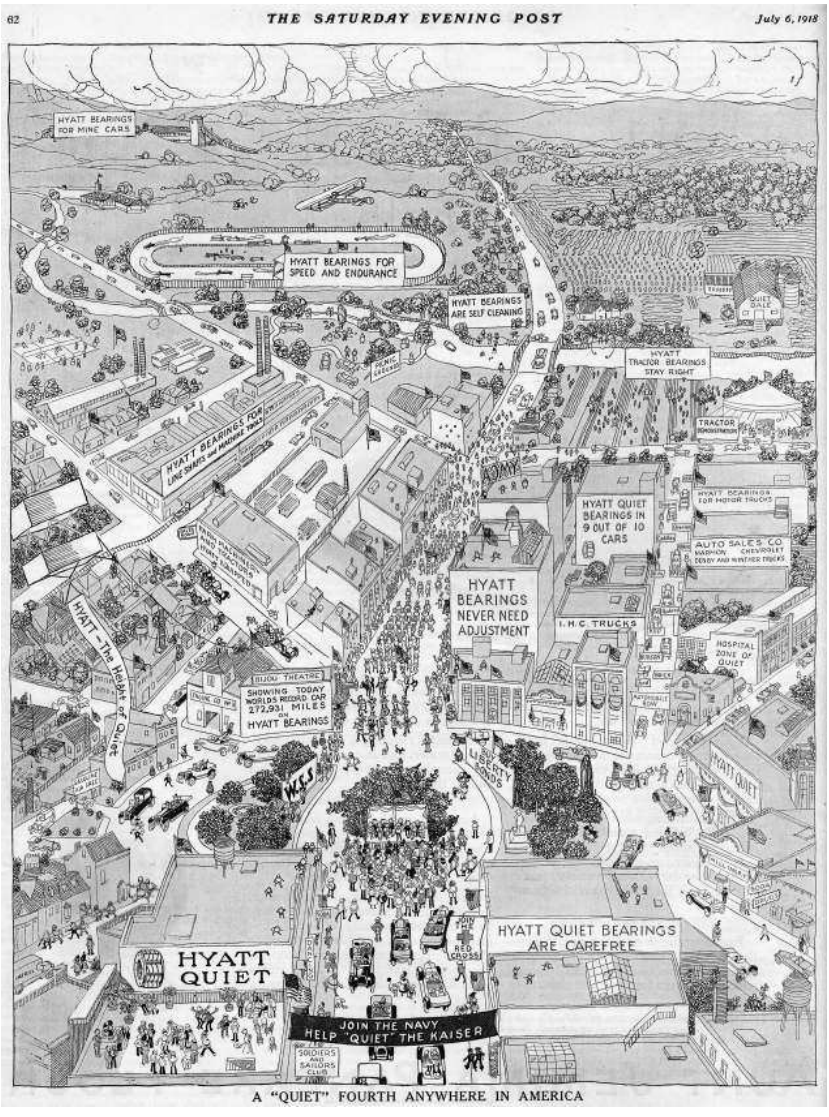

Figure 1.2 Hyatt Ball Bearings advertised in the *Saturday Evening Post*, July 6, 1918

being talented and free" – to win her back, he pursues modernist literary success by applying business methodology to writing literature; he hires an office, a press agent, an ideas man, and a Russian translator.[17] Together, the staff of the D.J. Brown Literary Productions Incorporated churns out

avant-garde poems and stories with astonishing success; Dennis reflects that "the reason these guys [bohemian writers] get away with literature is because no business man has taken the trouble to go in and buck them."[18] He concocts a Russian novelist called Zuprushin; several of his stories are accepted by the little magazine *Direct Action*. Soon, "The Zuprushin brand . . . became their chief line of manufacture," and after his first two stories – "The Faun of Folly" and "Fog of the Samovar" – appear, the company is deluged with "dozens of letters from small but fiercely iconoclastic magazines asking for contributions."[19] When Zuprushin's novel, *Dementia*, comes out, it is a sensation.

The story charts a complex relationship between modern American business and experimental, bohemian modernism. Primarily, modernism has unacknowledged concordances with consumer capitalism, which Lewis's work seeks to impishly uncover. Brown finds modernism's hunger for conceptual novelties, especially ones that can be easily formulated and quickly circulated, to be akin to his experience with public relations. In promoting Zuprushin, Brown understands his market, builds curiosity in his product, and carefully controls information flow to increase anticipation for his novel and thus maximize its impact. Free verse imagist poetry, with its supposed stress on unity, concision, and iconoclasm, recalls his work on advertisements, although most free verse poems are "not so well done."[20] Brown finds his experience writing reports on lumber-tract conditions helpful in forging Russian naturalist fiction, due to their mutually laborious accumulation of quotidian detail. The joke is modernism's unacknowledged reliance on a business system it claimed to repudiate; Lewis suggests that modernism would, in fact, be helpless without the methodologies of information management and brand recognition developed by advertising and public relations (PR). This neatly reverses one of the truisms about modernism's relationship to mass consumer culture, namely the ease with which its subversive potential was co-opted into cultures of fashionability and commercial design, ultimately serving as a "kind of research and development arm of the culture industry."[21] Instead, for Lewis, business serves as the unacknowledged R&D arm of modernism. Lewis's formulation therefore categorizes bohemia more as "a transitory and acceptable form of urban slumming," to draw on Janet Lyon's genealogical account of bohemianism, than as "a self-marginalizing and generationally determined artistic community whose work heroically transcends the economic pressures and prescriptive norms of bourgeois aesthetics."[22] Bohemia's vaunted iconoclasm is actually plagiarism.

Lewis's smug formulation seems to dismiss bohemia as nothing but derivative, but for one caveat. Brown's press agent tells him that the latest poetic style is free verse, "so called because it doesn't pay . . . A kind of poetry you wouldn't know it was poetry if it wasn't printed that way."[23] Later, Brown abandons writing *vers libre* for exactly this reason: it "didn't sell very well, and it attracted no attention."[24] Glossing "free" verse as valueless verse was such a good joke that it was repeated in Irvin Cobb's piece on Greenwich Village, "Improbable People of an Impossible Land," which appeared in July 1917. Drawing heavily on Lewis's portrait in "Hobohemia," Cobb opined that "real artists almost without exception are smart businessmen who dress and behave unostentatiously."[25] In contrast, Greenwich Village bohemianism is represented as indulgent posturing incapable of producing anything valuable, where "free lunch, free verse and free love, fattens the greasy he-alien who has hit upon the delectable knack of existing without working."[26] Cobb aims at some predictable targets: bohemian disdain for bourgeois standards, bohemian dress, costume balls, bohemian restaurants, and little theaters. Yet, in a twist on Lewis's piece, the "one true Bohemian" of Cobb's acquaintance has just been drafted, and is being forced to work. Bohemian nonproductivity, therefore, becomes particularly offensive during wartime, as Cobb, the *Post*'s star reporter on the war in Belgium in 1914–1915, obviously felt qualified to judge.[27] Partly, Cobb was critiquing those who prioritized their individual liberties above their obligations to the state at a moment of national crisis, a commonplace view at the time. But there was a more specific aspect to this. Surrounded by advertisements aligning wartime patriotic service with forms of consumption newly attuned to civic purpose, Cobb's piece cast modernists' refusal to produce or to consume (except when things were free) as outside a sphere of national consensus in ways that were at best risible, and at worst seditious.

Cobb's synchronization of patriotism with consumption aligned with a series of hand-wringing editorials in the *Post* pondering whether prewar habits of consumption were patriotic or unhelpful during wartime. This anxiety was partly caused by the contradiction between the encouragement of consumption by the *Post*'s extensive advertising and the advice of agencies such as the Food Administration to reduce consumption of key commodities to assist the war effort. That the Food Administration made these exhortations within the pages of the Curtis publications only sharpened that sense of contradiction.[28] Predominantly, however, material nationalism remained the keynote of the *Post* throughout the war, as advertisers strove to link consumption of their products with national

service. Parker, for example, boasted that their pens were "used in the armies and navies of the world," and cajoled mothers that "your boy needs a Parker." Del Monte proudly announced it was "working to win the War"; Paige Automobiles advertised itself as a "national utility"; Victor Victrola boasted it was "thrilling the soul of the nation," including soldiers in camp; and Kodak launched a successful campaign to market cameras to soldiers.[29] Cobb's criticism was therefore consistent with the *Post*'s overall policy in its attack on modernist "freedom" in economic terms, and in two key respects. First, if consumption did, as material nationalism implied, amount to civic participation, then by not paying for the goods one consumed, one defaulted on one's civic obligations. A "free lunch" stymies the fiscal exchange that served as the symbolic and functional equivalent to democratic choice; without this exchange one could not validate oneself as part of the state. Secondly, "free" verse, for both Lewis and Cobb, was an economic failure from the perspective of the recent neoclassical "marginalist revolution" in economics – which argued that demand for a product, not the labor time or material costs involved in producing the product, was the condition that configured value. As James Livingston observes, this theory, which was gaining orthodoxy in the early century, asserted that "unless effective demand validated the prior expenditures of labor-power, commodities would have no value regardless of the labor-time contained in them."[30] Given that free verse is free because "it doesn't pay," it is effectively valueless as a commodity in the literary marketplace, despite the labor-time it might take to produce. It therefore became *wasted* labor, which could have assisted the wartime economy elsewhere. Dennis Brown abandons free verse because he cannot generate demand for it, unlike other modernist forms; for Cobb, it vacates normative systems of exchange (along with "free love") to exist as a solipsistic and unsocial indulgence.[31] Emerging at a time when the national instrumentality of all forms of labor and consumption was under scrutiny, these forms of being "free" therefore became un-American, marking bohemian free versifiers as "greasy he-alien[s]" in a nativist rhetoric that the *Post* would ramp into hysterical proportions in 1918.

Poetry, the State, and Modernist Freedom in Wartime

In the face of such hostility, modernist magazines contested the meaning of freedom in wartime. The struggle of magazines such as *The Masses* and *The Seven Arts* to protect their freedoms to criticize the war in print are well known, as is their ultimate failure to do so in the face of the Espionage Act