Introduction to *Le Petit Journal des Refusées*
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IT HAS come at last — the acme of paretic publications — in the form of *Le Petit Journal des Refusées*. It hails from San Francisco, the hatching-place of the *Lark*, but it goes that feather-brained fowl several better in the line of idiotic eccentricities.

It purports to be the organ of all the horrid, three-named women whose productions have been refused elsewhere. While modestly calling attention to the fact that the idea of publishing “Rejected Manuscripts” originated with THE BAUBLE many moons ago, I may generously concede that *L. P. J. des R.* has printed much worse stuff than I dared to perpetrate. In addition, it is dished up with the most outrageously grotesque designs on choice wall paper, the figures of which show plainly beneath the text. This beats Thomas B. Mosher’s hand-made, deckle-edge effects, and marks the limit of eccentricity in typographic artlessness.

—*The Bauble* 3:1 (October, 1896)

The *affiche* heralding *Le Petit Journal des Refusées*, is one of the most terrifying up to date. Printed in yellow, purple and green, a writhing wreath of humanity surrounds the announcement behind which are ranged assorted Frights from a Roentgen to a Beardsley. In the foreground is a figure which may be Greek art trampled upon by Modernity, or Imperial Caesar dead and turned to clay, or even Tree’s Hamlet at the pleasure of the observer. The new quarterly which this poster posts, and which will appear on the first of June, is, it is claimed, more artistic than a Bicycle catalogue, more ingenious than *The Lark*, weird as a Hasheesh Dream or a Circus Dodger, an Impossible Literary Prodigy!

In this day of the Apotheosis of Freak and Fad, it is indeed an audacious Editor who attempts to out-Herod Herod in this line. But the Redacteur of *Le Petit Journal* calmly sees and raises all existing Toy magazines and parodies their matter and manner. *The Journal* is printed on wall-paper, cut bias and hemmed; every copy on a different pattern. These wall-flowers of literature are described as the sensation of the century, and will doubtless be a blooming success.

—*The Echo* 3:3 (1896)

Published out of San Francisco by Gelett Burgess and Porter Garnett, *Le Petit Journal des Refusées* was almost certainly the most eccentric of hundreds of proto-modernist little magazines published across the United States in the 1890s. It was only sixteen pages in length and only one issue was ever published—in the summer of 1896. Printed on old wallpaper, not a single edition was exactly the same, varying widely in
color from mostly black and white with decorative perforations to brilliant gold, various
greens, and even a startling purple
(Image 1). It was cut in an odd,
trapezoidal shape, which Joanna
Drucker has wittily described as being
designed to make it stand out in any
library, tipping forward off the shelf on
its angled pages. Its shape “destabilizes
the object,” as she writes, setting it
apart from “the upright stance of better-
behaved publications,” which knew
how to stand straight on shelves.¹
When opened up, it looks rather like a
butterfly, which is fitting metaphorically
since Le Petit Journal des Refusées was
nothing if not a social butterfly (Image
2). It was a nonsensical romp of inside jokes shared with its sister magazine, the Lark,
and other exemplars of the craze for the so-called freak magazines. Burgess’s later brag,
that the PJR was “destined to become the reductio ad absurdum of the ‘freak’ journal,”
would seem to have been spot on.²

While remarkable because of its uniqueness—there really is nothing else quite
like it in the world of the American fin-de-siècle—Le Petit Journal des Refusées is also
representative of the entire class of these magazines to the extent that it makes very little sense on its own. The effect of its outrageousness depends upon the relays it strikes with its sister publications. (It would be a prime candidate, today, for a project that would take advantage of public hyper-linking—perhaps something to be considered by the Modernist Journals Project). And because it is so very much a publication dependent upon the social fabric of the bohemian, fine art networks of the period, the PJR usefully highlights both the contours of the proto-modernist little magazine movement in the United States in the late 1890s, and also the manner in which modernist journals emerged internationally as a group phenomenon.

**PJR and the Freak Journals of the 1890s**

What does it mean to think of *Le Petit Journal des Refusées* as a magazine—little, modernist, or otherwise? It was not a serial publication, only one issue ever seeing the
light of day, nor does it appear that there were ever plans for another. It also comes up short on definitional grounds in that it did not publish works by a variety of authors, but rather appears to have been entirely the work of Burgess and Garnett. In distinguishing its type, it is worth noting that, unlike most magazines, the cultural influence of this one can neither be judged by the longevity of its print run, nor by the breadth of its circulation statistics, nor by the reputation of its contributors. It was not a distribution mechanism for works of art, literature, opinion and news; but rather, it was an aesthetic and comedic end in itself. Properly speaking, it is more a book or a pamphlet than a magazine, or perhaps more properly still, and a bit more adventurously, we could call it a self-contained objet d’art (semi-mass produced), if one lacking in the pretentions normally associated with such things. It is in part because of its classificatory oddity that I’ve adopted the practice of an early bibliographer of this entire class of publications, Frederick Faxon, who in 1903 gathered them together under the title “ephemeral bibelots”—transitory little art book-things.3

But then, of course, the PJR did position itself as a magazine, a petit journal, albeit in a parodic mode; and it was understood quite broadly as such by other magazine editors. The contradiction of this act of self-naming is worth pondering because it helps expand the field of its relations.

Its relations to the other ephemeral bibelots was apparent from the start. The first announcement of Le Petit Journal des Refusées came in October 1895, in an advertisement Burgess penned for his marginally less ephemeral journal, the Lark (a “little magazine” that, itself, only ran for two years, 24 issues plus a valedictorian extra number Burgess called the Epilark). As editor of the Lark, and leader of a coterie of San
Francisco bohemians that included most of his co-authors in that undertaking, Burgess was one of the more visible artists involved with the bibelot craze, and the *PJR* was only one of many similarly ephemeral journals he spun off from the *Lark* (**Image 3**). The initial announcement was a call for articles that situated the *PJR* in this field:

> It will be the *smallest* and most *extraordinary* magazine in existence. It will be printed on *Black* paper with *Yellow* ink. The margins will be very, very wide, the cover almost impossible.

> The rates for insertion of prose articles will be only *five dollars a page*; poetry ten dollars a page; but no manuscript will be accepted unless accompanied by a letter of regret at not being able to find the same available, from some leading magazine. *No manuscripts will be refused*. Terms are cash, invariably in advance.4

Two numbers later, in January 1896, Burgess brought it up alongside another of his satirical journals, a magazine he called, in a play on “the lark,” the *Nightingale*. In a later issue, the *Lark* published a blurb about the *PJR* that had appeared in the *Chap-Book*, the most well-known of the American little magazines in this class, which mentions it in the context of a bibelot Burgess was calling *L’Arkitecture Moderne*:
That one can fool all the people some of the time was well proven in the first numbers of THE LARK, and its miraculous survival as clearly demonstrates the fact that one may fool some of the people all the time. But the audacious attempt made by its publisher in the “PJdR,” and now in “L’Arkitecture Moderne,” to fool all the people all the time, will surely shipwreck “les Jeunes,” none of whom, by the way, are under fifty.⁵

“Les Jeunes,” it should be noted, was a moniker that Burgess and his fellow artists had adopted after a misprint in the New York Times, which had meant to say that the color “jaune” was like the Chinese paper on which the Lark was printed. By way of that fortuitous misunderstanding, les jeunes/jaunes may also have evoked The Yellow Book, whose decadence was being both mocked and emulated. And, as we will see, it almost certainly pointed to several youth art movements situated around ephemeral journals in France.

The point is that Le Petit Journal des Refusées was launched in what Garnett and Burgess surely understood to be a churning sea of similarly bizarre bibelots, a point carried home when we note that Burgess produced two others in the 1890s as well, Phyllida, or The Milkmaid and Enfant Terrible (Image 4). While all of these publications varied widely in style, the essence of their artistry depended upon the vibe

Image 4. Shortly after moving to New York, Burgess brought out Enfant Terrible!, which had a similarly ephemeral run—only one number ever being published. Notice the “goops” on deck. Photo credit Princeton University Library.
set up by the reverberations between them, and thus it is no surprise that they are much
given over to elaborate lines of citation and punning.

The longest piece in the PJR, running four pages, is the abecedarius, “Our
Clubbing List,” which serves as something like a highlight tour of the American bibelots:

“C is for Chap-book, the pater familias/Of magazines started by many a silly ass”; “F is
for Freak: see the great exposition/Of freak magazines—5 and 10 cents admission”; “R is
for Rubbish: are you looking for some?/Just open the Bauble and put down your thumb”; 
“V is for Versification and Verse;/We thought Chips was bad, but the Olio’s worse”; “Z is
for Zounds! What unspeakable deco-/Rativeness Bradley has furnished for
Echo” (Images 5 and 6). Between 1895 and 1903, close to three hundred little magazines of this kind were published in the United States, their titles reading like self-fulfilling prophecies of their ephemeral appearance: Chips (1895-1896), the Echo (1895-1897), the Fad (1896-1897), the Fly-Leaf (1895-1896), Impressions (1900-1903), Jabs (1901-1903), A Little Spasm (1901), the Pebble (1900-1901), the Shadow (1896), Snap Shots (1901), and Whims (1896).

The literary establishment of the time wrote off the entire class of these publications. As a very brief notice in the Critic suggests in 1897, “not one of them [‘fad journals’] had an excuse for being, and most of them ceased to be ere they had fairly been”:

The Lark, that wings its flight from San Francisco, has for its distinction that it introduced the Purple Cow into art. It has done other things quite as bad, but it will always be known as the inventor of the Purple Cow. After all, if there is such a freak in literature as a Yellow Book, why should there not be such a freak of nature as a Purple Cow? One does not look to a Purple Cow for milk, nor to a Yellow Book for anything but yellowness.6

Another critic was Frank Norris, the naturalist writer who was friends with Burgess and Garnett, and an intimate of the bohemian scene in San Francisco. Despite this fact, he published a screed against them in 1897, notable for the masculinist language of heroism for which naturalism is well-known:

Yes, there are Les Jeunes, and ‘The Lark’ was delightful — delightful, fooling, but there’s a graver note and more virile to be sounded. Les Jeunes can do better than ‘The Lark.’ Give us stories now, give us men, strong brutal men, with red-hot blood in ’em, with unleashed passions rampant in ’em, blood and bones and viscera in ’em, and women, too, that move and have their being, people that love and hate something better now than Vivettes and Perilles and Goops [these being direct references to fictional characters and cartoon figures in the Lark].7
In the seminal book on the modernist little magazines, Hoffman, Allen and Ulrich take the same course in writing off the ephemeral bibelots, suggesting that they were of little interest when compared to the little magazines of the 1910s and 1920s.\textsuperscript{8}

The reputation of \textit{Le Petit Journal des Refusées} may currently be on the rebound, as suggested not only by this edition at the MJP, but also by the availability of several others online and in print, as well as by the recent republication of writing by Burgess.\textsuperscript{9} However, the cultivated aura of its ephemerality remains of central importance. With respect to the \textit{PJR}, perhaps Burgess’s most telling accomplishment was to have coined the word “blurb” in 1906 (\textbf{Image 7}). By that time, he had left San Francisco for New York, where he worked for a publishing company and began to experiment with the concept of the book jacket. His innovative approach to marketing and promotion led to the creation of the “blurb,” a genre of short, promotional writing that is still used today in the publishing industry.
York and turned his attention from publishing bibelots to writing novels. Today, in addition to his nonsensical quatrain “The Purple Cow,” Burgess is most remembered for some stylistically distinct drawings of elliptical “goops,” which in the early 1900s migrated out of the Lark and onto the pages of a series of illustrated children’s books on manners, starting with Goops and How to Be Them in 1900, and followed by a comic strip in the 1920s (Image 8). Retrospectively, however, it is Burgess’s coinage of “the blurb” that seems best to describe the impossible literary prodigiousness of Le Petit Journal des Refusées. His bibelot elaborated what we might even think of as “the art of the blurb”—not something permanent, but an eccentric citational aesthetic, as demonstrated in “Our Clubbing List,” that in many ways defined the pleasure of the bibelot movement to be that of making unexpected, and occasionally mind-altering, connections.
An International Movement: On Circulation

The most intriguing of the bibelots featured stunning post-impressionist graphic arts, experimental short stories and prose poems, and acerbic commentary on topics ranging from aesthetic fashions to politics and social mores. But their real interest emerges only when they are considered as part of a group phenomenon, and particularly to the extent that they stand in more broadly for something like the emergence of an anti-realist, modern, fin-de-siècle aestheticism—indeed, as the progenitors of a kind of aesthetic public sphere that comes to characterize the avant-garde.

Works like the *PJR* are particularly interesting objects with which to reconsider not only the historical period, but also the significant role that patterns of circulation played in cultural production. What we are looking at with the parodic intertextuality of the *PJR* is a prime example of a highly specialized, tightly organized circulation network that spread along paths running parallel to, but not interconnected with, more established print culture. And whereas one might be tempted to think of it in terms of experiment and innovation, the *PJR* reminds us of something about the avant-garde in general, namely that its newness frequently emerges from particularly tight-knit, highly recursive publics.

When I reviewed Drucker’s work on the facsimile edition of the *PJR* put out by Rice in 2009, my focus was on the manner in which Garnett and Burgess seem to have anticipated certain characteristics of high modernism, and especially their apparently proto-Dadaistic tendencies. Some particularly prominent examples are the Corinthian columns wearing eyeglasses and imps with African masks decorating the border of “What Smith Tried to Believe” (Image 9). Perhaps even more to the point, however, is the parodic premise of the magazine itself—that everything it published had been rejected by
at least three other magazines (often fake ones). My point was to suggest that bibelots
like the PJR were part of a group movement engaged in reimagining the shape and
color of the aesthetic public sphere, and that they served as an unacknowledged
catalyst to the modernist avant-
garde. To be “refused” not only
distinguished the content of the
PJR from the mainstream press,
but initiated the relays between the
bibelot and other delightfully
obscure fad magazines. In the
same way, being refused set the
stage for Duchamp’s Fountain in
1917, a refusal that was also
staged, it is crucial to remember, in
an ephemeral journal.12

If Le Petit Journal des
Refusées points ahead to high
modernism, it also encourages a
long overdue investigation back to the second half of the nineteenth century, and in
particular to the question of what the “modern” meant to nineteenth-century American
artists. In this respect, it directs us mostly to fin-de-siècle Paris. The title recalls the well-
known Salon des Refusés of 1863, where Manet’s ground-breaking painting, Le Dejeuner
sur l’herbe, was displayed—alongside, let us not forget, the American James Whistler’s

Image 9. African masks and columns with glasses in
the PJR, anticipating the preoccupations of high
modernism by a decade or more.
Symphony in White, No. 1: The White Girl. The PJR also points us, just as explicitly, to Paris’s own wave of enthusiasm for ephemeral bibelots. The border decoration in the PJR surrounding “The Ghost of a Flea,” probably the bibelot’s most astounding piece of writing, is an immediately recognizable reference to the saucer-eyed cats drawn for the famous Montmartre cabaret, Le Chat Noir, and its seminal little magazine of the same name, Le Chat Noir (1882-1895) (Images 10 and 11). Garnett and Burgess’s repurposing of this particular chat noir points us—wispily, without high stakes but with some delight—from the PJR in the direction of the French revues éphémères.

If we thus get ourselves quite quickly over to Paris from the pages of the PJR, we might also move back in time just a bit to the precursors of the Chat Noir journal, which...
seem just as striking in their suggestion of the aesthetic orientation of a group movement. For example, the first editor of *Le Chat Noir* was Emile Goudeau, who, rather like Burgess, only a decade earlier, had delighted in the format of the bibelot. Founder and organizer of a loose association of Parisian artists, writers, musicians, dramatists and students known as the Hydropathes, a movement of “*les jeunes*” in revolt against cynicism and stagnation in the arts, Goudeau edited a journal, *L’Hydropathe* (1879-1880), which had much in common with the *PJR* (Image 12). It was largely a promotional magazine, blurbing the activities and successes of various of the Hydropathes—one of whom was featured, in caricature, on every cover.

The significance of the Hydropathes to *Le Petit Journal des Refusées* is that they helped develop an acerbic parodic style known as *le fumisme*, which in the words of Georges Fragerolle was devoted to “cutting open the smug sky under which we live”—again, a term aptly applied to the *PJR*. Shortly before *L’Hydropathe*, André Gill had initiated a series of similarly ephemeral, *fumiste* reviews. These included *La Lune* (1865-67), which upon being censored in 1867 metamorphosed into *L’Eclipse* (1868-1876), then *La Lune Rousse*
(1876-79), and finally La Petite Lune (1878-79) (Images 13-14). Gill was also involved with the Hydropathes, and, later, with a group of young artists calling themselves the Incohérents—a group which organized several expositions of “les Arts Incohérents” around Paris and its suburbs between 1882 and 1887.14

It is certainly no stretch to think of the output of Burgess in terms of a similar incohérence. All of these magazines and related movements were involved in redefining the aesthetic public sphere out of which, later, Dada took shape; and they would seem to have everything to do with the kind of fin-de-siècle modernity staged on the pages of the PJR, the Lark, and other ephemeral bibelots in the United States in the 1890s.

As Mary Shaw has noted when commenting on related material in France, it is not surprising that much of this work and most of its authors have been forgotten or overlooked by literary history. To the extent that parodic markers of the avant-garde functioned as “signposts of an elite, self-defining community of writers and readers,” the references of the most prominent and aggressive writers tended to become increasingly obscure to the uninitiated. Shaw suggests that when rediscovered today, this material captures our attention less because of the “particular merits of a certain writer’s work than because of the work’s manifestation of a given writer’s inextricable involvement with the general spirit of these avant-garde groups”—which in part explains my focus on context here, with the craze for ephemeral bibelots being almost as interesting as the content of any particular exemplar.15

**PJR and the Digital Archive**

A smashing, purple copy of *Le Petit Journal des Refusées* at Harvard’s Houghton Library contains the following hand-written note from Burgess to the library’s benefactor, Thomas Newell Metcalf:16

Scituate, Mass, July 21st, 1904
My dear Metcalf;

I don’t wonder that you thought that the P.J.R. must have gone astray, after my having written especially for your address. You would hardly imagine that such a thing as the mere lack of wrapping paper would prevent my sending the magazine, but that is what I have been waiting for.

And now, maddeningly enough, I cannot find the original copy, and have to send this one, which I post under separate cover. I had another, slightly more legible, but perhaps you can make this one out. It is perhaps more bizarre than the other.

I am rather ashamed of the thing, now, except as a proof that I have been as mad as anyone of my age, and have in my day spent a whole
month being foolish enough to try to break the record for silliness. This book makes me blush, and yet, to understand it, you must take into account the riot of foolish magazinelets then prevalent. This was a reductio ad absurdum.

Take it with apologies, and compliments from
Yours faithfully,
Signed Gelett Burgess

The note raises two key points. The first concerns the faddishness of the fad for ephemeral bibelots. By 1900, Burgess, the main creative force behind the PJR, had moved from San Francisco to New York and given up magazine editing. He turned to writing books both for adults and children, publishing twenty-five largely forgotten volumes before his death in 1951. While never a less than bizarre author, he did write for more mainstream venues, including the Century, St. Nicholas, Life, and Harper’s Bazaar. An article of his published in the Architectural Record in 1910, “The Wild Men of Paris,” is said to have introduced Picasso, Matisse, and Braque to readers in the United States.17 The New York Times ran an obituary for him, crediting him for contributing “blurb” and “goops” to the language and for his poem “The Purple Cow.”

He did not, however, continue on with the “riot of foolish magazinelets.” That fad, as he wrote in the Epilark in 1897, anticipating things by five or six years, was “almost over now”:

But the war is almost over now, and the little wasp-like privateers that have swarmed the seas of Journalism are nearly all silenced; the freak fleet has disarmed, but who knows how many are missing? Not a port but gave help to the uprising and mustered its volunteers in the fight against Convention. It was a tea-pot tempest that made them and wrecked them, and yet, when the history of the Nineteenth Century decadence is written, these tiny eruptions of revolt, these pamphleteering amateurs cannot remain unnoticed, for their outbreak was a symptom of the discontent of the times, a wide-felt protest of emancipation from the dictates of the old literary tribunals. Little enough good has come of it that one can see at present, but the sedition is broached, and the next rebellion may have more blood to spill.18
Burgess’ assessment was not entirely accurate. If the first wave of ephemeral bibelots in the United States died down by 1898, a second wave took shape by 1902, although it, too, only lasted for a couple years. The point, however, is that the fad was a fad. Part of the aesthetic frisson of these early little magazines depended on their ephemerality—on the sense they developed of being precisely in and of the moment, and also, because of it, rather impossible to grasp. This refashioning of the fad as a kind of modern art, and of the bibelots as “tiny eruptions of revolt,” is, in and of itself, propitious of things to come.

The second point concerns the current archiving of *Le Petit Journal des Refusées*, which presents certain challenges to the extent that there is no single definitive copy of the bibelot. The issue is not, simply, that it was printed on differently colored pieces of wallpaper. There were also two different versions of the magazine, with varying pagination and content—both of which are (or soon will be) available here at the Modernist Journals Project. Presumably it is to this difference that Burgess refers in the letter to Metcalf when complaining of being unable to locate the “original copy.” My suggestion would be that we try to hold onto a mental sense of the two versions of the *PJR* simultaneously, as well as to the idea of a few hundred copies of the journal all in different colors, all of these circulating through the bohemian networks of fin-de-siècle America. It could be useful to imagine each of them pointing back to the others. Our eyes circulating between the different editions of *Le Petit Journal des Refusées* might initiate us to the fumiste sensibility of circulation out of bounds. It seems altogether appropriate that the definitive edition of the *PJR* will remain, always, just out of reach.


4 The Lark 6 (October 1895), 7.

5 The Lark 10 (February 1896), 16.

6 The Critic, Number 776 (1897), 12.


9 The edition edited by Johanna Drucker is available in print and online at http://cnx.org/content/m24322/latest/?collection=col10709/latest. Harvard’s copy of the PJR can be accessed at: http://pds.lib.harvard.edu/pds/view/25286045. For the most recent Burgess reprint, see the volume edited by Alfred Jan, A Gelett Burgess Sampler: Ethics and Aesthetics (Create Space, 2012).


12 Duchamp’s Fountain was never exhibited; we only know the original by way of the famous Alfred Stieglitz photograph that was published in Duchamp’s ephemeral bibelot, the Blind Man, in 1917.

14 See Dennis Cate, especially pages 40-52.


16 Metcalf edited the pulp magazine All Story in the 1910s and is remembered for having discovered Edgar Rice Burroughs. Harvard’s copy of the PJR can be accessed online here: http://pds.lib.harvard.edu/pds/view/25286045.


18 Gelett Burgess, in the Epilark (1897), 11.