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Modernist Women Poets

Generations, Geographies and Genders

Edited by

Jane Dowson

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Editor

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About the Editor

Jane Dowson, Dr., is Honorary Reader in Twentieth-Century Literature at De Montfort University, Leicester, UK. She has published widely on women's poetry, including: *Women's Poetry of the 1930s* (Routledge, 1996); *Women, Modernism and British Poetry* (Ashgate 2002); *A History of Twentieth-century British Women's Poetry*, (Cambridge University Press, 2006); *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century British and Irish Women's Poetry* (2011); chapters in *The History of Women's Writing*, volumes. 8, 9,10 (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, 2015, 2017); and *Carol Ann Duffy: Poet for Our Times* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

Preface to "Modernist Women Poets"

This Special Issue showcases poets who enhance the breadth of modernist literary practices while maintaining modernism as a meaningful and identifiable aesthetic. Thus, we take as the cohering concept a complex relationship to both gender and modernity that manifests in self-conscious experiments with language. We also respect and traverse rigid demarcations of period, nationhood and form.

Previously, and crucially, feminist scholars proved that female poets count in orthodox categories of High Modernism. We demonstrated their centrality to intellectual Anglo-American experimentation that fed into and from the European avant-garde. Into the twentieth-first century, academic projects shy away from the exclusions of a capitalized monolithic Modernism that was bound by a narrow interwar period, linguistic abstruseness, and masculinized cultural imperialism. Instead, pluralizing chronologies, styles, locations and disciplines has enriched and enlarged modernist studies. We now have such categorizations as: generations; a chronologically elastic inter-modernism; the anti-elitist middlebrow; and postcolonial geo-modernisms.

Accordingly, in the following articles, leading scholars explore writers who both fit and cut across the generations that modernist histories might over-simplify: Marianne Moore, H.D., Edna St Vincent Millay, Dorothy Parker, Katherine Mansfield and Charlotte Mew were born around the cusp of the twentieth century and flourished during the 1920s and 1930s; Lynette Roberts, Helen Adam and Hope Mirrlees were contemporaries but publishing or recognition came later; the next generation can include Gwendolyn Brooks, Stevie Smith and Muriel Spark; Veronica Forrest-Thomson represents a third generation who published into the 1980s, while Frances Presley and M. NourbeSe Philip hinge this group with the contemporary poets Carol Watts and Natasha Trethewey whose works continue and rejuvenate Modernist stylistics.

Any notion of nationhood is both significant and too narrow when women were geographically mobile and often sidelined in the patriarchal contexts of their homelands. While place is central, albeit abstracted, in the works of Welsh-born Roberts and Watts, the concept of "geographies" signals the cultural plurality and internationalism of such women as H.D., Mansfield, Spark, Adam, Mirrlees, Forrest-Thomson and Philip. Philip and Brooks exemplify the potency of poetry to disrupt historical and contemporary narratives around white supremacy or racial conformity.

Any feminist account of women writers is inevitably revisionist: several poets are now widely discussed but others are misaligned—labelled as prose writers (Mansfield, Spark), feminized (Millay) or caricatured (Parker, Smith), for example. Yet, the extraordinary linguistic play of others (Mew, Roberts, Forrest-Thomson, Philip) warrant more extensive critical comprehension and contextualization. Remarkably, all poets are rarely female-centric and yet nonetheless gender-conscious in their avoidance of femininity, often displayed in the sheer pleasure of travestying social and literary orthodoxies.

The essays that follow are groundbreaking in plundering diverse theoretical fields in ways that disturb any homogenization of women's poetry. The authors supplant into literary poetic analysis the languages of geometry and mathematics, maritime materialities, tourism and taxonomy, architecture, classicism, folk art, Christianity and death, whimsy and empathy.

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Article

"Bury Your Heart": Charlotte Mew and the Limits of Empathy

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Abstract: Charlotte Mew's strikingly original and passionate poetry remains under-examined by modernist critics, yet it holds great importance in presenting an alternative version of modernism that foregrounds issues surrounding gender, sexuality and otherness. Mew's work explores key modernist themes such as alienation, fragmentation and psychological disruption from the perspectives of those on the margins of society, and in doing so challenges narrow definitions of the movement by highlighting the multiplicity and plurality of voices and concerns within it. Whilst Mew's decentred position often informs painful reflections on shame, exclusion and powerlessness, the culmination of so many marginalised voices in the poems and Mew's overriding compassion for the vulnerable creates a powerful challenge to the centre that contests traditional accounts of modernism as defined by white, European men. This article will explore how female experience informs Mew's exploration of empathy between the marginalised and how personal experience of gender-based oppression inspires compassion for other vulnerable groups who suffer under similar power dynamics or social prejudices. It will consider how female experience shapes both the content of the poems and her choice of poetic forms that allow for concealment of self against the fear of exposure. It will also draw upon contemporary feminist readings of modernist literature and emotion to examine the ways in which gender informs Charlotte Mew's treatment of key modernist themes and how this challenges conventional understanding of the movement.

Keywords: Charlotte Mew; Modernism; empathy

A central feature of Charlotte Mew's poetry is her emotionally sensitive examination of painful feelings of vulnerability and alienation. Throughout her poems, Mew focuses on the experiences of individuals existing on the peripheries of society whose vulnerability is often heightened by isolation, suppressed desires or feelings of shame. The authenticity and intensity of Mew's engagement with these themes reflects her personal understanding of the experience of occupying multiple forms of otherness. As a woman attempting to conceal her queer identity, family history of mental illness and financial difficulties, Charlotte Mew understood the challenges of attempting to suppress difference and pass in society. This knowledge can be seen as informing the poems' complex engagement with the complexities of empathy, especially between marginalised people for whom voicing objections to the suffering of others risks personal exposure and harm. This alternative perspective on alienation, powerlessness and compassion challenges ideas of empathy as a 'soft', feminine emotion, and instead shows it to be a morally complicated and potentially dangerous feeling that places marginalised people in direct confrontation with self and society.

The experience of empathy and the challenge of expressing compassion are not limited by gender. However, in many of Charlotte Mew's poems, female experience is both the source of empathetic feeling and the central obstacle to acting upon it. In the poems, the women who are most in danger of social isolation or persecution are those who fail to conform to conventional models of femininity and are therefore unable to pass in patriarchal society. The constant threat of social exposure and oppression is essential to the development of female empathy for other marginalised individuals

or groups. However, the inherent powerlessness of their precarious social position is also the key factor that prevents them from publicly defending such people. This complex struggle between personal empathy and social conformity is evident throughout Mew's work, but especially in 'Ken', 'Saturday Market' and 'The Farmer's Bride'. Each poem explores the complex interactions between the empathetic individual, the sufferer and the reader in a way that not only illuminates a vital aspect of Charlotte Mew's poetry, but also challenges preconceptions of modernism as a movement that rejects compassion and emotion. In this way, Mew shows the importance of recognising alternative voices and experiences beyond the centre in order to understand the multiplicity and diversity of perspectives within the movement.

1. Modernism, Gender and Empathy

Prior to the emergence of Affect Theory and the broader shift towards recognising the plurality of the movement, empathy was not an emotion immediately associated with modernist literature. The movement has been more persistently characterised by an interest in the psychological complexities of self, the interior life and the solitary figure in the crowd. These preoccupations have often been placed in opposition to notions of compassion, fellow feeling or empathy: forming the impression that modernism "was not concerned with tracing relations between people" (Martin 2013, p. 11). There are multiple reasons why "still-pervasive notions of modernism's hostility to notions of feelings for others" persisted (Martin 2013, p. 10). Julie Taylor identifies the role of modernist critics in creating a lasting impression of modernism as unemotional, arguing that "scholars have tended to emphasise modernism's aesthetic preferences for irony and detachment over embodied sentiment . . . " (Taylor 2015, p. 2). Whilst it is important to recognise the extent to which critics shaped narrow perceptions of modernism, the movement's association with a cynical, detached perspective on the world was also self-created. A distinctive feature of modernism is its preoccupation with defining itself through manifestos and pronouncements that set out standards for what is considered modern, good or new, and what is not. These edicts and proclamations often reject literature characterised by sentiment, sympathy or "the appeal to feeling" (Clark 1991, p. 38). A clear example of this is the Futurist manifesto, which celebrates war, masculinity and aggression whilst explicitly opposing feminism and declaring "scorn for women" (Marinetti 1970, p. 22). With more restraint, high modernism also dissociated itself from emotion and personal experience, with T. S. Eliot describing poetry as "an escape from emotion" and "an escape from personality" (Eliot 1972, p. 58). More generally, literary modernism's devotion to the new often involved a conscious separation from perceived weaknesses of the past: the whimsy of the Georgians, the sentimentalism of Victorian literature and the emotion of Romanticism. These factors combined to create a "pervading sense that early twentieth-century writers were hostile to messy emotion and particularly to empathy" (Martin 2013, p. 11).

This rejection of literature considered sentimental, sympathetic or conventional has a strong gender bias that reflects the broader historical marginalisation of female voices within the modernist movement. The celebration of avant-garde experimentation and the cool detachment of the new made subjects associated with women's writing and experience "both a past to be outgrown and a present tendency to be despised" (Clark 1991, p. 2). The role of critics in shaping this perception is again significant. Suzanne Clark identifies a direct relationship between critical responses to female writing and the treatment of emotion: "Modernist criticism located women's writing within the obscenity of the sentimental" (Clark 1991, p. 2). As Clark continues, within this bias the association of women's writing with excessive emotion went unchallenged: "The gendered character of this condemnation seemed natural: women writers were entangled with sensibility, were romantic and sentimental by nature, and so even the best might not altogether escape this romantic indulgence in emotion and sublimity" (Clark 1991, p. 2). This bias not only demeans women's writing but dismisses emotion as a less valuable or intellectual approach to poetic subjects; a characteristic of less accomplished writers who are unable to achieve modernism's sophisticated style of detachment. Charlotte Mew was not exempt from this form of judgement, with her writing being defined, both positively and negatively,

in relation to emotion. Edith Sitwell's loaded compliment that "it is usual for the poems written by women to be unendurably embarrassing when they deal with emotion, but Charlotte Mew's poems . . . never cause one embarrassment" values Mew's work almost exclusively in terms of its "emotional integrity and to the fine and truthful power of expressing emotion" (Sitwell 1929, p. 131). In contrast, emotion is the aspect Michael Holroyd criticises in relation to Charlotte Mew's war poetry, claiming that: "Her approach to subjects, by the side door of emotion, possibly rendered her inadequate to deal with the direct horrors of war" (Holroyd 1967, p. 157).

This pressure to remove emotion, sentiment and personal experience from poetry added to existing challenges for female poets. As Jane Dowson explains, women writers were already confronting the need to distance themselves from the pejorative Victorian label of 'poetesses' and its associations with flimsy, whimsical and emotional writing (Dowson 2002, p. 1). The added prejudices and constraints of modernist conventions increased pressure on women to either conform to the demands of male defined modernism in an attempt at acceptance or create their own forms and risk further exclusion. Both options positioned women's writing in response to dominant male standards within an already restrictive literary environment. For some women writers, such as Edith Sitwell, these standards were internalised and turned outwards to protect their own status within the movement. Explicitly foregrounding technical virtuosity and formal and linguistic experimentation over emotion, Sitwell used prejudice against female writers to establish her superiority. Speaking from her elevated position, she advised female poets to reject confessional or personal styles and write "in as hard and glittering a manner as possible, and with as strange images as possible" (Greene 1998, p. 253). The implication being that women must adopt a masculine writing style in order to have their work taken seriously.

In this, as in many other ways, Charlotte Mew stands slightly apart. Although she lived in Bloomsbury, was involved in the Poetry Bookshop and admired by leading figures such as Thomas Hardy, Virginia Woolf and Edith Sitwell, she had no ambitions to access the inner circles of literary modernism. Mew's lack of self-promotion, sense of educational inferiority and fierce self-possession kept her at the peripheries of literary culture and prevented her from receiving the recognition she deserved. However, it also meant that whilst she engaged with key ideas of the time, she did not shape her writing to meet any prescribed standards. Mew experimented with voice, form and lineation on her own terms, weaving Victorian themes and motifs with modernist ideas of fragmentation, gaps and multiple voices. Central to her poetic form and voice is the emotional intensity of her writing and its engagement with heightened experiences of trauma, shame and desire. The unifying thread between the poems is the significance of empathy in her depiction of those who experience these painful emotions. This focus on alternative experiences and perspectives reflects wider modernist ambitions to be "a vehicle to jolt its readers out of quotidian modes of perception" (Taylor 2015, p. 1). However, Mew's work is distinguished from mainstream modernism by its predominant focus on female experience and emotion.

Charlotte Mew's poetic engagement with the complexities of empathy and emotion can be usefully examined in relation to the broader critical recognition of the significance of affective qualities to the modernist movement. Encompassing a range of interdisciplinary approaches to emotion, the emergence of Affect Theory and the related 'affective turn' has encouraged greater awareness of the importance of feeling and emotion in literature. In relation to modernism, critics such as Kirsty Martin, Suzanne Clark and Julie Taylor have played a central role in challenging the previously dominant view of the movement as 'cold, hard and cerebral' (Taylor 2015, p. 2), In re-evaluating the role of emotion in modernist literature, theorists have emphasised the centrality of affect. Julie Taylor, for example, describes it as an aspect that has been 'hidden in plain sight', claiming that 'while modernists and their scholars have always been full of feelings, we have been slow to turn a critical eye towards them' (Taylor 2015, p. 1). Such challenges to the 'image of an anti-emotional modernist' (Taylor 2015, p. 3) have led to discussions of a range of emotions present in the movement, of which sympathy, fellow feeling and empathy are central.

Kirsty Martin's assertion that "sympathy was central to modernism" summarises a broader and more complex re-evaluation of sentimental literature by critics and philosophers (Martin 2013, p. 10). Whilst sympathy and sentiment are part of Charlotte Mew's poetry, the term 'empathy', which is being particularly suited to literary modernism as it came into usage at a similar time, is the most relevant to her work (Hammond 2016, p. 1). The distinctions between empathy and related terms such as sympathy, pity or sentiment are important. Identifying differences between empathy and sympathy, a term regularly used in the period preceding modernism, is especially important to understanding Mew's work. A central distinction here is the distance between the person who witnesses suffering and the sufferer. Suzanne Keen succinctly describes this difference as empathy being "I feel your pain" and sympathy being "I feel pity for your pain" (Keen 2007, p. 5). The degree of psychological separateness from the other's experience is what distinguishes feeling for the sufferer, to feeling with, or to reference the original German *Einfühlung*, "feeling into" (Ratcliffe 2008, p. 30). For Suzanne Keen, literature has a particularly vital role in developing empathy. Directly supporting the potential for writing to generate compassion in the reader, she describes empathy as "a vicarious, spontaneous sharing of affect, [which] can be provoked by witnessing another's emotional state, by hearing about another's condition, or even by reading" (Keen 2007, p. 4).

Empathy, rather than sympathy, is central to Charlotte Mew's poetry because it does not allow for the comfort of claiming incomprehension in response to the suffering of others. The challenge of Mew's poetry is not to understand the feelings of another person but choosing how to respond to this knowledge when the empathetic individual is also vulnerable to discrimination. Her concern is for private compassion concealed by public distance. In the poems, empathy is a more confronting and difficult emotion than sympathy because the psychological distance between subject and object is dissolved by a strong identification with the source of their pain, provoking challenging questions about personal morality and social conformity. Within this complex dynamic, the positioning of the reader in the poems shifts between the object of suffering, the empathetic individual and mainstream society: posing difficult questions about prejudice, social norms and individual responsibility. Issues of gender and intersectionality further complicate the extent of the reader's empathy or sympathy dependant on their position within or outside different social hierarchies. Independent to the reader's response, the poems depict individuals who are consistently passive in response to their own suffering and the suffering of others. This reflects the wider powerlessness and silencing of marginalised people that prevents altruistic acts. This passivity is necessary for self-protection, but it also emphasises the loneliness and isolation of outsiders and the difficulty of building a sense of community between those on the fringes of society.

2. 'Ken'

The complexity of empathetic feeling between vulnerable individuals is central to 'Ken'. In the poem, an unnamed speaker witnesses growing tension between the residents of a small town and a mentally impaired man, with the growing social intolerance of his behaviour resulting in his institutionalisation. The speaker is greatly affected by Ken's incarceration, yet despite his direct appeal to them, they fail to speak in his defence when he is taken away. Whilst the speaker's gender is not explicitly stated, their inability to challenge Ken's persecution seems rooted in the non-central social position inhabited by women. This peripheral status informs their fear of revealing a similar sense of difference that could lead to the same fate, as seen in the speaker's panicky insistence that Ken stops knocking on their door. The speaker's empathy for Ken suggests the possibility of an active compassion between individuals marginalised by what Erika Cudworth terms the "multiplicities of domination" (Cudworth 2005, p. 2). However, the powerlessness of both individuals and the fear of exposing similar signs of otherness overrides the possibility of community or protest.

In many of Charlotte Mew's poems, individuals consciously attempt to conceal difference or trauma in order to avoid social scrutiny. However, Ken's physical differences and lack of awareness of social codes preclude him from doing so and therefore exacerbate his vulnerability. The speaker's first

encounter with Ken is marked by their awareness of his difference, as they describe him as showing barely "a trace/of likeness to a human face". This initial impression of otherness is emphasised by his position on a "half-lit stair": a repeated symbol of boundaries in Mew's poems. Ken's difference is confirmed by the physicality of his movements as he "ploughed up the street,/Groping, with knarred, high-lifted feet/And arms thrust out as if to beat/Always against a threat of bars." However, the speaker's compassion for Ken and understanding of his essential goodness grows. The description of Ken as an "uncouth bird" initially appears dehumanising, but it also recognises his fundamental gentleness and vulnerability beyond his intimidating physicality. This birdlike description also has feminine associations that further diminishes his separateness from the speaker by emphasising the shared experiences of marginalised people. It also sharpens the later cruelty of caging him in an asylum. With this recognition, the speaker's response to Ken alters, with this shift revealing a dangerous schism between their perceptions and that of mainstream society which it is necessary for them to conceal.

A key difference between the speaker and Ken is the former's awareness of the importance of adhering to social convention. Ken's unconsciously antisocial behaviour is the antithesis of the speaker's self-protection and inhibition. The town is described as austere, monotone and claustrophobic: "A place of bells and cloisters and grey towers,/And black clad people walking in their sleep". Its dominating religious institutions ("watched from end to end/By the great Church above") reflect a rigid moral code and social hierarchy, to which Ken's irreverence is seen as an affront. Rather than recognising his peripheral status, Ken sees himself at the centre of human and non-human society: " . . . all the children and the deer,/Whom every day he went to see/Out in the park, belonged to him." There are clear parallels between Ken and Christ in his innocence, gentleness and final persecution. This is most apparent in his response to a statue of the crucified Christ in the church. His cry to "Take it away" is interpreted by the townsfolk as evidence of his profanity and ungodliness. However, it is a pure and instinctive expression of compassion in response to an image of the violent persecution of another human; a public protest against suffering that the speaker is unable to replicate when Ken is taken away.

Whilst Ken's differences and inability to conform to social convention continue to elicit resentment from the narrow-minded town's people, the speaker's sensitivity to his humanity is met with a sense of recognition by Ken and an attempt to communicate.

> Nothing was dead
> He 'said "a bird" if he picked up a broken wing,
> A perished leaf or any such thing
> Was just "a rose"; and once when I had said
> He must not stand and knock there anymore
> He left a twig on the mat outside my door.

The speaker rejects Ken's message because it threatens to expose a shared otherness that could endanger them in a society that persecutes difference. The reality of this threat and the importance of passing is confirmed by the removal of Ken from the town to an asylum. Interiors are often prisons in Mew's poetry and by locking Ken away from sight the town exposes its fear of those who are different or fail to observe society's rules. Given Ken's love of freedom, this is a significant cruelty. Life in the town moves on unaffected by his absence, but the speaker remains anxious about Ken's treatment "Beneath those twenty windows in a row", ominously remarking "What happen there?/ I do not know."

Ken's final act of self-preservation is to appeal directly to the speaker: "So when they took/Ken to that place, I did not look/After he called and turned on me/His eyes. These I shall see." Despite his impairments, Ken recognises shared characteristics and the possibility that they may speak for him. For 'safe' members of the community, such an act of protest could be interpreted as merciful or Christian, but voicing opposition is more dangerous for marginal members of society who need to avoid scrutiny. The poem foregrounds the painful complexities of empathy for vulnerable people,

for whom moving from compassion to altruism risks exposure and harm in societies that fear difference. By failing to challenge Ken's treatment and choosing instead to protect their own freedom, the speaker is complicit in his imprisonment. This poem has personal resonance for Charlotte Mew, who guarded the secret of her siblings' confinement in mental institutions throughout her life. In the context of the new science of eugenics, fear of passing on mental or physical defects was particularly sensitive for Mew, whose poetry is marked by such anxiety about female bodies. However, the strongest impact of her siblings' experience is the foregrounding of empathy for the vulnerable that resonates in 'Ken' and throughout the poems.

3. 'Saturday Market'

In 'Ken', the speaker fails to protest against the treatment of a marginalised individual because they fear their empathy will expose their own alternative identity. This anxiety is shown to be credible by the description of the treatment of a woman who has been publicly exposed in 'Saturday Market'. The poem depicts the social and personal consequences of female transgression through the figure of an unnamed woman who is scrutinised and isolated as a result of an undefined misdemeanour. The specific nature of the woman's crime remains ambiguously concealed behind the obscure description of an exposed "red dead thing". However, the vivid corporeality of the blood soaking through the woman's shawl carries associations with an array of feminine 'sins' and shame such as miscarriage, abortion or infanticide.

> See, you, the shawl is wet, take out from under
>
> The red dead thing—. In the white of the moon
>
> On the flags does it stir again? Well, and no wonder!
>
> Best make an end of it; bury it soon.

The excruciatingly public nature of the woman's exposure accentuates the precarious position of females in patriarchal society. The poem is set within a Best make an end of it; bury it soon.

> See, you, the shawl is wet, take out from under
>
> The red dead thing—. In the white of the moon
>
> On the flags does it stir again? Well, and no wonder!
>
> Best make an end of it; bury it soon.

Close-knit rural community gathered at the weekly market to trade goods and gossip. Mew views the market from the perspective of the outsider, describing it as a nightmarish bombardment of sights, smells and sounds combined with disconcerting sexual undertones: "Pitchers and sugar-sticks, ribbons and laces,/Posies and whips and dicky-birds' seed". This is an anti-pastoral scene of trauma rather than refuge, where women are subject to social judgement by locals who leer voyeuristically at their shame. Similarly to 'Ken', the underlying anxiety of the poem is the idea of the female body as a site of disease, madness or aberration; a potential risk to society which must be policed and scrutinised. As in many of Mew's poems, rural places are particularly dangerous for women and other marginalised individuals who are vulnerable to small town scandal. The serious consequences of personal trauma being turned into gossip are evident in the rejection of the woman from society, leaving her exiled and vulnerable to the duplicitous suggestions of the unidentified speaker who sinisterly urges her towards isolation and suicide.

> What were you showing in Saturday Market
>
> That set it grinning from end to end
>
> Girls and gaffers and boys of twenty—?
>
> Cover it close with your shawl, my friend—
>
> Hasten you home with the laugh behind you,

In 'Ken', the reader is positioned with the speaker: an individual who witnesses the cruel treatment of a marginalised individual from their position within mainstream society. In 'Saturday Market' the reader is positioned with the sufferer: the persecuted woman who is guided towards complete isolation by the malevolent speaker. This shift in perspective encourages greater awareness of the social pressure on women to conform by depicting the painful consequences of failing to do so. This focus on the female experience of social isolation in rural areas presents an alternative perspective on the modernist theme of alienation that illuminates the experience of vulnerable individuals beyond the centre. For such individuals, the modernist idea of the mass or crowd is not a subject of revulsion but a space of safety in which they strive to blend in and conceal their otherness. By aligning the reader with the persecuted woman, the poem has the potential to create sympathy or empathy for female experience. For the woman in 'Saturday Market', her choices are narrowed as she is denied refuge within the human sphere and encouraged to go "out of sight". Nature is often associated with the female, but here isolation is made absolute as the natural world is taken from her and she is systematically displaced from the world.

Think no more of the swallow,
Forget, you, the sea,
Never again remember the deep green hollow
Or the top of the kind old tree!

As in many of Mew's poems, interiors are associated with burial or enclosure: an ending alluded to as the speaker ambiguously encourages "a long, long rest". Banished from human society and dissuaded from retreat in the natural world, Mew depicts a pessimistic portrait of the fate of marginalised individuals in modern society. The poem develops the reader's empathy by emphasising the real experience of alienation beyond its intellectual conceptualisation and showing the consequences of transgression that limit altruism between the vulnerable.

4. The Farmer's Bride

'The Farmer's Bride' presents a more complex examination of empathy in terms of the positioning of the reader. The poem is written from the perspective of an anguished farmer who oscillates between sympathy and unreciprocated sexual desire for his terrified, young bride. The dramatic monologue form means that the unnamed woman is voiceless and seen only from the speaker's perspective; positioning the reader, initially, in alliance with the farmer's concern and incomprehension towards her actions. However, despite the narrative bias, closer reading of the poem reveals his sympathy to be more complex and less selfless than it first appears. In response, compassion shifts to his silent wife, who is imprisoned in an unwanted marriage within a patriarchal rural society that physically enforces narrow definitions of the female role. The lasting impression of the desperate plight of this woman reiterates Mew's consistent compassion for the lives of vulnerable individuals who suffer due to their inability to conform to social norms.

A key influence on the relationship between the farmer and his wife is their patriarchal rural community. As a male landowner in a socially secure position, the farmer is safely placed within the centre of society. The centrality of his social status is reflected in the conformity of his beliefs, particularly in relation to the role of women. From his conventional perspective, his wife's fear of men and inability to fulfil her role as wife and mother is an unfathomable rejection of a 'natural' maternal inclination towards nurturing. However, his attempts to categorise her behaviour as unnatural are inconsistent with his descriptions of his wife as "a leveret", "a hare" and "a mouse": all definitions rooted in the natural world and traditionally associated with women. What is clear is that placement in either category puts the woman in danger. Dehumanising her as an animal creates perilous affiliations with the non-human world within a patriarchal rural society based on anthropocentric domination of nature, whilst her 'unnatural' refusal to fulfil her prescribed gender role as wife and mother leaves

her placeless within society. Between these narrow dichotomies, she occupies, or is constructed as occupying, a suspended state between humans and nature: having her freedom restricted by humans like an animal, but also being subject to unwanted desires due to her human form.

The claustrophobic atmosphere of the poem and the increasing threat to the vulnerable woman shifts sympathy away from the farmer. Despite her narrative absence from the poem, glimpses of the woman's behaviour create a sensitive depiction of a painful and isolated existence, with her silence reflecting her lack of a voice within society. As in 'Saturday Market', female vulnerability increases in small communities, where narrow views of accepted femininity and restricted opportunities for anonymity produced a heightened atmosphere of gossip and persecution. The community are ominously referred to as a homogenous 'they', who police the woman's behaviour and make unanimous statements on her rightful place: 'Should properly have been abed'. The vulnerability of the woman is fully exposed when she attempts to escape her husband only to be hunted down like an animal and locked away:

> We chased her, flying like a hare
>
> Before our lanterns. To Church-Town
>
> All in a shiver and a scare
>
> We caught her, fetched her home at last
>
> And turned the key upon her, fast.

As in 'Ken', society responds to outsiders by imprisoning them. Here the tension of the domestic sphere is intensified by the proximity of the farmer to his terrified wife, which threatens to overspill into sexual violence. At this point, sexual desire overrides the speaker's earlier professions of concern. The potential for sexual assault further endangers the silent woman, whose husband's privileged position as a man in patriarchal society would protect him from experiencing any consequences for his actions. The limits of social compassion are for her, not him. This hopeless situation implies further trauma for the girl and a bleak future for women who do not comply with the norms of patriarchal society:

> She sleeps up in the attic there
>
> Alone, poor maid. 'Tis but a stair
>
> Betwixt us. Oh! my God! the down,
>
> The soft young down of her, the brown,
>
> The brown of her-her eyes, her hair, her hair!

To some extent, the fate of the farmer's wife is due to a lack of empathy. Throughout the poem, the farmer expresses sympathy for his wife, but his incomprehension of alternative versions of femininity and his failure to understand women who inhabit roles unrelated to the domestic sphere prevents empathy. This incomprehension is furthered by his inability to understand the experience of powerlessness. Despite his apparent tender feeling towards his wife, he is the dominant figure in the relationship. From the start, he describes how he "chose a maid", removing her agency or choice. He then continues to diminish her self-hood by removing her femaleness and humanity: " . . . 'twasn't a woman -/More like a little frightened fay". He also exposes himself as part of the community that physically curtails her movement: "We chased her", "We caught her". This absence of empathetic understanding increases the woman's vulnerability as the psychological distance between husband and wife restricts the speaker's ability to understand versions of femaleness that are not in relation to himself: "To her wild self. But what to me?'" Empathy describes a sense of recognition between two sufferers; in 'The Farmer's Bride' the more distant emotion of sympathy is expressed. The difference between the two terms, in relation to the poem, is that sympathy is shown to be more insidious and self-deceptive. This is evident at the end of the poem, where the speaker prefixes his desire to cross the

stair into her room with the description of her being "alone, poor maid". This protestation of pity for her isolation is in direct contrast to his previous description of her desire for men to keep away from her and implies a construction of sympathy to enable self-fulfilment. This strategy then creates a false moral framework that would allow the farmer to cross the threshold and fulfil his desires. This threat shows the limits of sympathy and the difficulties of achieving empathy for female experience within the narrow confines of patriarchal society.

5. Conclusions

The study of empathy in the poetry of Charlotte Mew is important in revealing the moral complexity of compassion between individuals made vulnerable by their otherness. By depicting the tensions between empathetic feeling and the need to pass in society, Mew shows empathy to be a challenging, confronting and potentially dangerous emotion, and in doing so challenges its associations with feminine softness or simplicity. The focus on the experience of those on the periphery of society also exposes the hypocrisy and cruelty of those at the centre of mainstream society and the consequences of their narrowmindedness on the lives of vulnerable people. The poems' depiction of empathy and the consequences of its absence could have a didactic or moralising tone. However, there is an absence of moral superiority in Mew's poems, as each speaker wrestles with the challenge of developing empathetic feeling into altruistic action within a patriarchal society that observes and constrains difference.

Charlotte Mew's complex engagement with empathy, compassion and female experience creates a direct challenge to traditional definitions of modernism. As Kathleen Bell argues, "If Mew is to be accepted as a modernist, perception of Mew should change but so should the perception of modernism" (Bell 1997, p. 14). This change is now underway as new critical and theoretical approaches foreground and value the role of emotion within the modernist movement, as well as challenging outdated and erroneous associations of emotion as a 'soft' subject for women writers. Meghan Marie Hammond's point that 'despite the vacancy in literary theory, empathy is very present in the practice of modernist writing" has been recognised by recent scholarship, which has begun to "unearth the wealth of empathy buried in modernist history" (Hammond 2016, p. 26). Valuing writers such as Charlotte Mew who voice alternative experiences of marginalised individuals contributes to knowledge of this aspect of the movement, as well as to the wider process of deconstructing narrow definitions of the movement and recognising the plurality of voices within it.

For the contemporary reader, the final shift in empathy is to Charlotte Mew herself. The poems' authentic treatment of alienation and marginalisation is rooted in the lived experience of concealment and otherness. Whilst modernist writers felt the pressure to abandon traditional female subjects related to personal experience, Mew used hers to create a community of voices speaking from the margins of society. This connection between her lived experience and her writing is explained by Jeredith Merrin: "Mew presents her private experience of pain into the service of a wider but not facile or presumptuous empathy. She shows us how passion (in the sense of solitary suffering) can become compassion (in the etymological sense of suffering with)" (Merrin 1997, p. 217). For a poet who was intimately familiar with what Jane Dowson terms "the psychological tensions between self-renunciation and self-realisation", Charlotte Mew knew and valued the importance of empathy in making life more bearable (Dowson 2002, p. 176). Despite the social and personal constraints on her happiness, Mew wrote to her friend that "We only have about half-an-hour" (on this earth) "Let's do what we can" (Fitzgerald 1984, p. 112). In her tragically shortened time, Charlotte Mew produced poetry that, without preaching or moralising, gave a voice to the marginalised, vulnerable and suffering, and made a claim for the importance of empathy as complex, challenging but ultimately essential component of human experience.

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Article

Counting Form: Gender and the Geometries of Address, in Frances Presley and Carol Watts

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Abstract: This essay treats two innovative site-specific sequences produced by women in the first decade of the twenty first century. Both are explicitly interested in the relationship between geometry, writing (as material and political practice) and geo-cultural space, a relationship each finds inflected to some extent by gender emphases. Starting from the premise that any piece of writing is itself a place, the essay considers the self-conscious textualities of its primary texts—one concerned with Exmoor; the other with a sheep-farm in rural mid-Wales—in the light of their different, if similarly rural and relatively remote, contexts. Presley's 'Stone Settings' explores the relationship between some of the quasi-geometrical Neolithic stone arrangements dotted across Exmoor, and the mediation of their apparently Euclidean sometimes barely visible forms in/as text. Watts' work-in-progress *Zeta Landscape* mobilises in the 'analytical' or 'projective' (ie non-Euclidean) geometry of its title the complex weave of routine care-giving and accountancy charging the contemporary (Michel Foucault's 'distributive') pastoral. Both sequences wryly suggest that poetic form can finally no more adequately figure place than the abstractions of mathematical discourse can utter the cultural ecology of any environment, however concrete-seeming. Aided by Jacques Derrida's powerful essay 'White Mythology', the account comes to rest on the equally equivocal recognition of the in/effectuality of metaphor in any kind of address, critical or creative.

Keywords: geometry; place; site-specific poetry; mathematics; metaphor; Exmoor; mid-Wales; stone settings; Zeta function; prime numbers; pastoral

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> "[N]umber is always in the middle of things" (Connor 2017, pp. 32–33).

However Stephen Connor's "things" are conceived, his formula echoes Galileo's ancient contention, ringing down the centuries, that the universe is written in mathematical language.[1] Both constructions seem to accept that, like any language system, mathematics is at root communicative, thus dialogic:

> Mathematics [. . .] shows that numbers [. . .] are tied together by hidden webs of relationship and entailment (Connor 2013).

Perhaps partly thanks to the consonances between arithmetic and language which Connor notes, mathematical ideas and terms have long supplied writers with useful figurative resources. Arguably the first literary critic, Aristotle, was of course as much mathematician as philosopher. As William Goldbloom Bloch remarks, "Mathematics can be creative, whimsical and revelatory all at once. More to the point, as embodied in the different meanings of the word 'analysis', it is simultaneously

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[1] "The universe . . . is written in the language of mathematics, and its characters are triangles, circles and other geometric figures, without which is humanly impossible to understand a single word of it . . . " qtd (Saiber 2016, p. 18). The following discussion derives from 'What counts: Landscape, number and metaphor', a paper given at the Experimental Women Writers Conference, Manchester University (Manchester, UK) in November 2013.

a process and an intellectual structure" (Bloch 2008, p. xii). Arguably this doublehandedness explains why, from Hellenism to the European Renaissance; and in the English tradition from Chaucer via the Augustans and Romantics to the luminaries of the nineteenth century, literary writers have found in mathematical discourse, as Arielle Saiber says of Giordino Bruno, not so much inspiration *per se* as "a warehouse of metaphors and structures that could be called upon to help reinforce the scaffolding of [their] thought" (qtd Rowney 2016, p. 49).

If "numbers . . . are tied together" anywhere in literary expression, they are perhaps most obviously so in the poem, as George Puttenham famously argues in *The Arte of English Poesie*, (Puttenham 1589). Poetry might seem never more definitively itself than in the knowingly dialogic entanglement of word, number and counting within the limits of the self-determining space it occupies, paginary or otherwise. The influence of geometry, specifically, on poetic writing might not seem obvious. After all, as Jeffrey Ranta notes, proportionately few poems can be safely or strictly argued to observe the rigid mathematical rules of geometry in any exact way. And yet, as Ranta also points out human understanding of "vision . . . is thoroughly caught up with geometrical concepts, models and theories . . . " (Ranta 1978, p. 708).[2] The very visual powers of poetic expression are precisely why and how, for Alexander R Galloway, poetry itself "comes to signify . . . the analogical branches of mathematics (like calculus or topology), what number theorists call the *real number* system, and hence geometry in the old Greek sense . . . By contrast, mathematics comes to signify . . . what number theorists call the *rational number* system—that is . . . arithmetic in the classical sense" (emphases added).[3]

Galloway's observations confirm how far (to Ranta's delight), "the visual surface of printed poetry in English, and indeed its non-visual depths of sound and imagery and meaning . . . open [onto different] kinds and degrees of geometrical shaping" (Ranta 1978, p. 707). As the texts featured in this account confirm, if the paginary poem is understood as itself to constitute a (textual) place, spatially arranged and culturally marked, its signifying life can only be compounded when it concerns or calls attention to location: topos. Not infrequently, the textualized spatialities of the poem—its material context, for example—serve to catalyse or heighten its resonances, aesthetic or otherwise. The following discussion considers how two English language sequences, produced by women working in the first decade of the twenty-first century, use the visual/formal materialities of the poetic sequence to examine the interrelation of counting and evaluation in both the spatially-oriented construct of the poem and the geo-cultural complex of its "address". Both authors and their works can be situated in the wake of mid-century American 'open field' poetics promoted among others by the charismatic figure of Charles Olson, Rector of Black Mountain College and author of the enormously influential essay 'PRO-Jective Verse'.[4]

Partly thanks to this shared genealogy, the texts on which I focus both negotiate with the legacy of Modernism in the field of mathematics—specifically Euclidean and non-Euclidean geometry—as well as literature: each takes a keen interest in the ways that what Galloway calls the "*real number* systems of geometry in the . . . Greek sense" operate and play out in the historical-cultural terrain and landscape(s) of the rural environment, in and beyond the space(s) of the page (Galloway 2011). Against this backdrop, their shared will to mark the insidious gendering of space and place—the political ramifications of which geographers like Doreen Massey and Gillian Rose have worked so

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2 Ranta is drawing, here, on the work of (Arnheim 1974; 1969).

3 The distinguishing demarcation which Galloway uses poetic writing to make, here, between number-led arithmetical mathematics and the spatialised world theorised by geometry both ancient and modern is useful. Very simply, it helps to explain and justify the relatively selective company of scholars on which this account draws. If the interest which, for example, philosopher Alain Badiou takes in poetry is undoubtedly sharpened by mathematical expertise, that interest originates in and reflects Badiou's abiding fascination, first and foremost, with number more than shape; with arithmetic more than geometry. Hence the latter's perhaps surprising absence in what follows.

4 For more on Olson's modernist instincts and legacy, see for example *Stratified Modernism* (Colby 2009), *Contemporary Olson* (Herd 2015) or Hoeynck's *Staying Open: Charles Olson's sources and influences* (Hoeynck 2019).

assiduously to expose and unsettle—is hardly coincidental.[5] Anchored in its several disciplinary contexts, framed by Harriet Tarlo's assertion that "Language is a form in which landscape can come alive", and animated in its later stages by Jacques Derrida's brilliant probing of metaphor in 'White Mythology', this essay shows how Frances Presley and Carol Watts probe their different fields of address—as women, writers and culturally-situated subjects—through the geometrically inflected "field" of the text (Tarlo 2011, p. 10). Presley's 'Stone Settings' takes as its subject the quasi-geometrical Neolithic stone arrangements dotted across Exmoor (Presley 2009). The sequence opens a collection actively interested in the creative effort to realize the "strange geometry" of the features in language on the page (Presley 2008b). Watts's *Zeta Landscape* (2005–) meanwhile routes the abstract analytical geometry of its title through the cultural-economic landscape of rural mid-Wales: a terrain shaped in some ways (she demonstrates) more by human activity—that blend of commerce and ancient socio-cultural habits on which animal husbandry will always depend—than nature.[6]

In these ways, each work finds the place-spaces of its address summoning and to some extent explained by the principles of geometry; a geometry which is for Presley's Exmoor, Euclidean, and for Watts, in Powys, projective or analytical. And yet at the same time the mathematical tool which each site suggests somehow falls short of the mark; somehow fails the imaginative (metaphorical) demands which the poet seeks to make of it. In this way, both writers and their works replay and confirm the equivocation which animates and inscribes Derrida's mesmerising dismantling of metaphor and its uses in 'White Mythology' (1974).

1. Geometry as (Modernist) Metaphor

> "Numbers and signs translate and potentiate each other" (Connor 2017, p. 45).

Navigating the seismic shifts in mathematics associated with the Victorian fin de siècle and early twentieth century, Jeremy Gray warns against over-determining the consonance of these developments with other kinds of modernism (Gray 2008, p. 14). Nevertheless, recent criticism flags the part played by mathematics in "the cultural vocabulary that modernist innovation drew on for its renewing power" (Goody 2011, p. 14). Baylee Brits confidently identifies

> a genuine link between the mathematical and the literary that is developed in the late nineteenth century and across the twentieth century … facilitated by the advent of a modernist mathematics in [Europe] (Brits 2018, p. h 2).

Some literary modernists took an active interest in contemporaneous developments in mathematical theory and practice. Jocelyn Rodal, examining Virginia Woolf's works for their mobilising of number theory, points out for example how many of the central figures

> in Woolf's orbit were working on, and writing about, modernist mathematics, including Bertrand Russell, Frank Ramsey, G H Hardy and Alfred North Whitehead … December 1910 … saw not only Roger Fry's post-impressionist exhibition but also the initial publication of Whitehead and Russell's monumental *Principia Mathematica*. 1922 witnessed not only *Jacob's Room*, *Ulysses*, and *The Waste Land*, but also David Hilbert's "The New Grounding of Mathematics" (Rodal 2018, pp. 75–76).

We could fill out the picture by noting that it was during the winter of 1920–1921 that Hilbert delivered the influential lectures he would publish a decade later as *Anschauliche Geometrie* and which

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[5] To quote Rose (1992), "Feminism has been consistently marginalized by mainstream geography" (Rose 3); alongside Rose, see the ground-breaking scholarship of works like *Space Place and Gender* (Massey, Doreen. 1994. Space, Place and Gender. Cambridge: Polity Press.) and *For Space* (Massey, Doreen. 2005. For Space. London: Sage.) by the late and much-missed Doreen Massey.

[6] Watts continues to describe this text as 'a work in progress'. For full publication details please see footnote 15 and Watts' entries in the reference list. Typically the author herself references it as (2005-) https://kslh.wordpress.com/tag/carol-watts/.

subsequently appeared, in their English translation, as *Geometry and the Imagination* (1932). For Gray, however, it is the work Hilbert had produced some thirty years earlier which lies at the core of the scholarly disturbances he traces: "If there is a single exemplary work that ushered in modernism, it is perhaps Hilbert's *Grundlagen der Geometrie* [*Foundations of Geometry* (1902)]" (Gray 2008, p. 5).

Like so many other developments in modern mathematics, Hilbert's contributions were founded on the influence of fellow German Bernard Riemann (1826–1866), the diffident genius whose work on prime numbers proved the existence of non-Euclidean space: that is, space which is curved ('hyperbolic', 'elliptical' and/or 'spherical') rather than flat.[7] It is partly for these reasons that a non-specialist might be tempted to conclude that the dramas of mathematical modernism are staged first and foremost in geometry. As far as Matthew Wickman is concerned,

> one of modernism's credos that new conceptions of non-Euclidean space, mathematically conceived during the nineteenth century, transformed cultural consciousness. Max Weber, Henri Lefebvre, Anthony Giddens, and other social theorists, reprising the credos of modern*ism*, say that modern*ity* involves a widespread "ability to critically estrange or reflexively engage the contemporary arrangement of the world" (Wickman 2016, p. 6).

Certainly, literary critical readers have discerned geometrical principles and theorems supplying what Wickman calls "figures of thought" for a range of modernist authors and texts.[8] The locution neatly depicts the way that the material ("figures") and the conceptual ("thought") converge and entwine in its geometrical resonance, much as geometry does itself. And as Wickman and others speculate, it seems precisely the figurative meshing of (concrete) form with (abstract) content that attracts literary authors to the language and ideas of geometry. Take Samuel Beckett, observing of James Joyce's 1929 essay collection *Our Exagmination* . . . : "Here, form is content, content is form . . . His writing is not *about* something; *it is that something itself*" ('Dante . . . Bruno . . . Vico . . . Joyce' qtd Culik 1993, p. 135; emphases original). For Matthew Rowney, Jorge Luis Borges's use of figures like the cell and the hexagon affords his writing a self-referentially "geometrical quality, *as the words shape and are shaped by the spaces they inhabit*" (Rowney 2016, p. 43; emphases added). With an apologetic eye on Connor (above), we might be inclined to rephrase Rowney's point as "words and spaces translate and potentiate each other". Or even, more boldly, as "numbers, words, signs and spaces are all (or can all be treated as) metaphors of and for each other"?

Zoltan Kovecses's *Metaphor* lists common source and target domains for an exhaustive-seeming account of the part played by conceptual metaphor(s) in everyday language use. Interestingly, ideas of location, situation, even spatiality make no appearance in either list; neither do textuality or writing (Kovecses 2010, pp. 17–20). These omissions seem curious if only because, as his detailed explanations make clear, the discursive practices Kovecses describes depend for particular reasons on the self-evidently metaphorical term/practice of "mapping". Even if the metaphor is being used for technical reasons by disciplinary specialists (Kovecses explains), as a figurative choice it certainly makes sense, thanks to the planar equivalence between—say—the written text, and terrestrial topography. Not only can any materially realised text be argued to constitute a form of topology, to be identified as place as well as utterance; conversely, as Georges Perec puts it, "the earth is a form of writing" (John 1999, p. 79). Texts and landscapes are more than coincidentally analogous with each other.

I am not alone in arguing that the poem's spatio-material arrangement makes the closeness between text and topos more significant to poetry than other kinds of literary expression. Some commentators take for granted the analogies between the poem's definitive spatialities and the specialised principles

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[7] One of the (numerous) applications with which Riemann's pioneering work is credited is its provision of the foundations for Albert Einstein's Theory of Relativity.

[8] Interestingly these have so far been, for the most part, trained on works of prose by writers who are male: Borges and Beckett attract particular attention (from Culik, Bloch, Brits and Engelhardt (2018, 2019), among others). Treatments on Gertrude Stein (Hoff 2010), and Virginia Woolf (Rodal 2018; Priest 2003; Engelhardt 2018) break the rule.

and discourses of geometry. Don Paterson, for example, speculates that the centuries-old popularity of the sonnet has to do with its geometric proportions, specifically "the visual appeal of an approximately square field on a sheet of white paper . . . Which is what a sonnet is, first and foremost: a small square poem. It presents both poet and the reader with a vivid symmetry that is the perfect emblem of the unity of meaning a sonnet seeks to employ" (Paterson 1999, p. xvi; qtd Chiasson and Rogers 2009, p. 49). Phillis Levin implicitly disagrees, in noting that "whatever its outward form, by virtue of its infrastructure the sonnet is assymmetrical. Opposition resides in its form the way load and support contend in a great building" (Levin 2001, p. xxv). Disingenuous as it might be, Paterson's equation of the sonnet's satisfying proportions—the visual harmony of its dimensions—with its intellectual intention (the "unity of meaning") certainly presumes on the equivalence between form and content; as metaphors of each other, each domain offers the other creative validity. This feature is precisely what, for Paterson, makes the sonnet the "perfect emblem" of the ideal dialogue between poetic form and content which it stages (Paterson 1999, p. xvi; qtd Chiasson and Rogers 2009, p. 49).

Chiasson and Rogers help to justify Paterson's claim. In the first place, the former point out, "the poetic innovators of the early thirteenth century that produced the sonnet, as well as other number-based forms like the sestina, the strambotto, and terza rima forms, were working within a mathematical renaissance of sorts":

> The sonnet was invented in the court of Emperor Frederick II [whose courtiers] included Leonardo 'Fibonacci' Pisano himself. Shortly before that time, Euclid's Elements was translated from Arabic into Latin by Gherado of Cremona . . . It was this text that contained the first widely circulated formal statement and proof of the Pythagorean Theorem . . . (Chiasson and Rogers 2009, p. 54).

Such historical convergences, these researchers suggest, are not coincidental; rather, they precisely explain why the numerical intricacies of the "single stanza" quadrangle of the Petrarchan sonnet—balancing the octave (two quatrains), sestet (two tercets) and pentametrical lineation—can be argued to "embod[y] two geometrical constructs *exactly*: the Pythagorean Theorem and the Primitive Pythagorean Triple" (Chiasson and Rogers 2009, pp. 50, 53; emphases added). They go on:

> We can construct the Pythagorean Theorem out of the three primary numeric components of the sonnet; 8 (the octave), 6 (the sestet) and 10 (the number of syllables in each line): $8^2 + 6^2 = 10^2$; 64 + 36 = 100. In this respect, the sonnet form does not merely *represent* the Pythagorean Theorem . . . it also *enacts* the elegant mathematical form" . . .
>
> The sestet (6) and the octave (8) are like the two perpendicular legs of the right-angled triangle, representing the distinct poetic split or fork . . . [T]he iambic pentameter (10), which persists through the entire poem [represents] the hypotenuse of a right-angled triangle; ultimately, the hypotenuse completes the triangle and makes a closed geometrical figure" (Chiasson and Rogers 2009, p. 53, emphases original, p. 57).

The claim that the Petrarchan sonnet stages a geometrical proof self-evidently presumes on the analogies between the (cursive) text, and the triangle's geometric shape. For all the satisfactions of the sonnet's "inherently mathematical" formal character, however "exactly" any sonnet might seem to map onto the formal proportions of Pythagoras's right-angled triangle, the transfer between the domains of language and form remains dependent on an intervening imagination. For one visually obvious thing, the sonnet's conventional iambic pentameter ensures that block-like isomorphic appearance which Paterson identifies with its consolatory effects (Paterson 1999, pp. xxvi–xxvii).

There is nothing remotely triangular about the way that a traditional sonnet *looks*; the characteristics which Chiasson and Rogers tease out so assiduously may follow or model the arithmetical relationships which underpin the geometry of the triangle, but it seems worth reiterating that those same relationships are never realised or play out in any properly triangular form on the page. The exploration of poetic geometry might seem more safely anchored in some equivalence between the planar landscape of the

(text-based) poem, and some kind of terrestrial landscape. In the wake of cultural modernism, any poem which deliberately links its own material spatialities with a particular locality, a geo-specific address—any poetic construct which proposes itself as the materialised analogue of a particular place—therefore begs questions not only about *when* but also *why* it might do so. Which observation returns us to Presley and Watts, both of whom use the geometrical inflections of both textual and geo-cultural landscapes to recuperate Modernism's re-inscription of the poem's numerate traditions.

2. Poetry in the Field: Site-Specificity and Form

> "The word *field* may in fact be etymologically cognate with Greek πλατύς, broad and Latin *planus*, flat. A field is a closed-off openness; it is a space in which certain variations are drastically limited in order that other variations may be augmented. A field is already a computational machinery, perhaps even the kind of machine of white or maximally-multiplied possibility that a white page (Latin *pagus*, field) or a blank screen can be" (Connor 2017, p. 28).

In Jonathan Bate's influential words, "Every piece of land is itself a text, with its own syntax and signifying potential" (Bate 2000, p. 237). Conversely, and as Connor's etymological ruminations (above) imply, a case can be made for approaching the textual 'field'—specifically the page—much as we might any landscape. At the same time however, Denis Cosgrove's oft-quoted insistence that "landscape is a way of seeing" (Cosgrove 1998) reminds us to pay some attention to *who* might be seeing—reading—any text-land/land-text, and how that might affect the emphases and nuances of its 'scaping'; the gender-freighted emphases and nuances with which scholars like Massey and Rose among others take issue, for example. A relatively recent genre of creative expression, site-specific writing is invariably motivated by an awareness of the extent to which cultural-political contexts are staged in the materio-physical environment, and might therefore mark its representation. In the words of one influential practitioner, Michel De Certeau, "*Space is a practiced place* . . . In the same way, an act of reading is the space produced by the practice of a particular place: the written text i.e: a place constituted by a system of signs" (De Certeau 1984, p. 117; emphases original).

Harriet Tarlo groups Presley's 'Stone Settings' and Watts's *Zeta Landscape* in the (site-specific) genre she christens "radical landscape poetry" (Watts 2011, p. 7).[9] Both sequences take close interest in a relatively remote landscape, distinctively (to retrieve Cosgrove) written on and through by human experience. Both works invest themselves in the reciprocity between the freighted physical, socio-cultural materialities of place and the differently freighted spatio-aesthetic materialities of the poetic construct: both explicitly ask to be addressed as a textual site addressing a textual site. In each case, the *topoi* which are the focus of the poetic address prove indelibly marked not only by geometry but also for one reason or another (the poets resolutely imply) by gender.

Nick Kaye grounds site-specific writing in the "exchange between [a poem] and the places in which its meanings are defined". If "the meanings of utterances, actions and events are affected by their 'local position', by the *situation* of which they are a part, then a work of art too will be defined in relation to its place and position [which] might articulate and define itself through the properties, qualities or meanings produced in specific relationships between an 'object' or 'event' and a position it occupies" (Kaye 2000, p. 1). In Franco Moretti's words, "What happens depends on where it happens" (Moretti 1998, p. 70). Which is why site-specific texts so often foreground, even find a kind of theatre in, their own compositional processes:

> As well as the usual formal considerations of margins, lines, syntax and sound, the poem uses the page as a canvas for a painting, a painting made up of words used as material, and

[9] The radicalism which the term assumes, as the introduction to Tarlo's anthology warns, is intended to reflect the dynamism with which "landscape poetry often challenges the divide between experimental or innovative and traditional or mainstream which has [long] haunted British poetry [yet] however innovative, this work attempts to be, to cite Olson, "Equal, That Is, to the Real Itself" (Tarlo 2011, p. 7).

> as a site for the verbal construction of the poem. The poem therefore combines the visual impact and effect of the arrangement of the material on the page with the signification of the words and their syntactical relationships. The arrangement of lines, shifting left-hand margin(s) and the use of white space all affect the rhythmic aspects of the language, the pace of reading, and the way attention is given to particular words (Davidson 2004, p. 100).

The product of Presley's collaboration with West Country poet-artist Tilla Brading, 'Stone Settings' takes its title from the Neolithic stone settings, or "arrangements of upright stones placed in roughly geometric patterns unique[ly found scattered across] Exmoor" (*Lines of Sight* 10). As Presley recounts, her efforts to explore these ancient monuments, many lying in remote and exposed situations, generated both "the sheer physical pleasure, or discomfort, of exploring the layout of the stones, [and] the sheer frustration of not finding them" (Hardy 2006, p. 3). For all the difficulties, Presley's late modernist principles require that she remain "suspicious of all artistic evasions, including my own":[10]

> The push of modern writing has been for the individual to be more open to both the sensual, objective world and to the subjective inner world. So that's the first thing—a being available to experience. And then, because of that, also, trying to make sure that the shaping, artistic process does not distort that experience (Skelt 1991, pp. 129–30).

Presley replies to Exmoor's challenges with the hybridism she honed in *Somerset letters* (Presley 2002), a blend of on-site improvisation (which "allows the site to 'dictate' the formation of the language, a deliberate permission of non-sense") and "discontinuous prose" poetry, written off-site and "incorporat[ing] narratives of community and history" (Hardy 2006, p. 2). The most resonant of those narratives borrows the words of Hazel Eardley Wilmot, the amateur archaeologist on whose research knowledge of Exmoor's mysterious antiquities is—even today—founded. Along with these practices, Presley found her subject matter demanding "New ways of treating the visual layout of the page and its relationship to forms in nature and human invention" (Hardy 2006, p. 2). The title poem of 'Stone Settings' begins:

per pl ex

moor

two three or four

paral lel rows

rec tangles

double square

squat shape

('Stone settings', *Lines of Sight* 13)

This striking text dismembers itself across the open 'canvas' of the page, visually replaying the deliberate-seeming geometrical shapes etched on their surroundings by the actual stones. The same

[10] Presley's idiom, she has freely admitted, was shaped early on by Ezra Pound, Apollinaire and HD, among others, encountered in the course of her postgraduate work: "my interest in the visual arts and poetry goes back to my studies in modernism and surrealism" (Hardy 2006, p. 2). Other interests and influences include Olson and his circle (embracing figures like Robert Duncan, Robert Creeley and Denise Levertov among others).

carefully-disposed materialities also mark the uninscribed spaces separating and sometimes fracturing the words themselves, playing out the interest Presley has long taken "in 'gaps' in the landscape, in our lives and in our language and the influence they have on our writing" (Presley 2008a). For Presley, the actual and metaphoric absences which Exmoor's settings host and signpost only sharpen their allure:

> the curiosity of these strange configurations is part of the pleasure of being puzzled … the framework which opens out a whole series of associated concerns, which form the layers of debris and complication, both on site and in the archaeological texts. (Hardy 2006, p. 2)

The same destabilising ironies haunt the gappy symmetries of 'White ladder', the poem which addresses its eponymous subject, "the double row of small standing stones, originally a quarter of a mile long" discovered inadvertently in 1975 (Presley 2009, p. 16).[11] At first only 71 stones could be seen, although in all its orderly spacing the setting—mostly of quartz—was plainly intended to be visible: the remaining stones were subsequently found "either submerged though still upright, or fallen and overgrown" (Eardley-Wilmot 1983, p. 24).[12] And yet, however verifiable the details of the site's dimensions and features, complicated by its antiquity, any signifying life it might once have codified remains a matter of speculation. Hence the symbolic vacancies and elisions which haunt the site, not least its name, as Eardley-Wilmot confides:

> Known in [ancient] times as a landmark, named in the final perambulation record and shown on the 1819 Inclosure Map when the Crown land was sold, White Ladder was then forgotten except as a name. (Hunting people still sometimes speak of 'Whiteladders Combe' at the foot of the hill) (Eardley-Wilmot 1983, p. 24).

Intervening on the dialogues and cross-currents (between material and imaginary; contemporary and ancient; signified—written/voiced—and implied or thought; space and time) which the site hosts, Presley honours the debt we owe to Eardley-Wilmot for our knowledge of White Ladder's very existence. Every word of her own 23-line treatment of a site that, she records amusedly, she was herself "wholly unable to find", has been drawn from the text of *Ancient Exmoor*. The resulting poem appears here in full (Hardy 2006, p. 3):

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[11] Eardley Wilmot recounts: "Several quartz stones and some slabs of sandstone, protruding a few inches through the turf, formed a pattern regular enough to indicate that the spacing had been one stride across, and two between pairs … The uprights pointed *along* the line, and the slow process of probing and checking showed that there were no additional stones between the two rows nor immediately outside them. In other words, it had not been a wall or bank. Nor is it likely to have been set up as boundary, since a single row with its stones much further apart would have been enough for that. Of the 161 stones found, 61 were quartz. The shining white stone was often used in prehistoric burial places, sometimes taken long distances for the purpose. It is a natural ingredient of this ridge." She blames ploughing and road-making for the disrepair of "probably once 200 pairs" (Eardley-Wilmot 1983, p. 24; emphases original).

[12] Lat 51.11888618 Long −3.81065667. An online source describes the feature as "measuring 420 m long, including 164 small-sized stones situated on a gentle north facing slope with a restricted sea view reveal. The row is orientated north west to south east, is visible only during periods of drought and stands in an area with broadly contemporary stone rows and cairns. A mound at the top of the row may represent a cairn". A 'Locational Note' appended to the entry observes: "The stone row is shown in the wrong location on the 1:25,000 Ordnance Survey mapping. It is actually situated to the east and on a different alignment to that depicted by the Ordnance Survey. The small size of the stones means that the row is very difficult to find … " (Gerrard 2016).

entirely			chance
cold			spring
short			grass
double			row
quartz			stones
sandstone			slabs
one		‘	stride
two			
between			
ladder			like
slow			search
not			wall
not			bank
not			boundary
shining			stone
ploughed			out
road			metalling
one		by	one
deceptively			swallowed
boggy			source
		Kinsford	
		Cunet	(io)
Girl	=	Kunti =	Spring[13]

In ‘White ladder’, the self-conscious textualities which tilt ‘Stone settings’ towards unpredictability by contrast help to stiffen the spine-like space holding the textual ladder’s two columns apart; the poem’s centre is constituted of and by absence. These starkly geometrical formalities both reduce and simultaneously point up the “polyphony” which the settings, mute as they are, might voice (‘notes and’). In interview, Presley points out “the multiplicity of voices that exist in any landscape, in any discourse, and our responsibility to listen to those voices as well as the recognition of our own very limited lines of sight” (Hardy 2006, p. 3). Such multiplicity helps, as she explains elsewhere, to undo the symbolically burdened and delimited field of vision associated with the “individual lyric ‘eye’ [in favour of] the plurality and the commonality of experience [of seeing]” (Presley 2008a).

To the same end, the sequence unapologetically and repeatedly appropriates Eardley-Wilmot’s own writing. Its use of the late archaeologist’s words implicitly constructs her as a post hoc—indeed posthumous—collaborator/co-producer of the sequence. In borrowing her words, Presley not only respectfully defers to the scholarly expertise which enabled Eardley-Wilmot’s re-writing of Exmoor. More subtly and suggestively, this decisively gendered gesture of inclusion also subverts not only the historic gendering of archaeological and geographical discourses but also the conventional hierarchies of Presley’s own address to the same inscrutable landscape: “in setting aside the illusions of closure, completion, stasis, perfection—the ideals of a patriarchal society—[collaboration permits] the possibility of the open text, the so-called ‘fragment’, . . . activated in the process of reading/making/collaborating” (Presley and James 2001, p. 16).

In conjunction with these perhaps inexplicit self-problematising habits, ‘Stone settings’ never falls entirely prey to the (quasi-)geometries of Exmoor’s pre-historical settings. As Moretti dryly notes: “A

[13] The following footnote, again drawn from *Ancient Exmoor*, is embedded in Presley’s poetic text: “Kinsford, earlier Kensford and Kentsford, implies a river name like the Kennett in Suffolk . . . and the Avebury Kennet, which in Roman times was pronounced *Cunet(io)*. It must be one of the very oldest river names; in Sanskrit *Kunti* was a spring, and still, in Hindi, Kunti is a girl’s name and the village well is a *Kund*. The stream rising at White Latter is Kinsford Water . . . ’ *Ancient Exmoor* 25.

geometrical pattern is too orderly a shape to be the product of chance. It is a sign that something is at work here" (Moretti 1998, p. 56). For all the impossibility of decoding its original purposes, Presley's decision to bring the site of White Ladder and its immediate locale to the domain of the poetic page, to shape the setting in the fabric of the printed text, seems motivated in part by mischievous anticipation of the failure of the enterprise. After all, Barry Stocker remarks, "Geometry as ideal object must be contaminated by the empirical event of its expression, which must be explained by words at some point; however self-evident its truths, the symbolism cannot be ostensive in such an absolute way as to exclude language" (Stocker 2000, p. 129).[14]

Presley's own treatment of White Ladder suggests some scepticism about how far the lines which the stones etch on their environs might be claimed to testify to pre-historic geometrical knowledge. As she confides to Edmund Hardy, the "most geometric page layouts" of her own poems, constructed out of their own context of frustration, interruption and (in the case of the ladder, of course) failure in some senses have no choice but to "express both perfection and an underlying irony about perfect form" (Hardy 2006, p. 2). Certainly, whether or not Exmoor's stone settings can be understood as the product of ancient geometry, an impossible prefiguring of Euclidean exactness, the sequence contrives that they rescue from their long-occluded history something much more richly provisional and ambiguous.

In the final analysis, Presley's knowingly imperfect re-presentation of her antique subjects seemingly affirms that, whatever their originary motivation, now (as then) the settings depend for their existence chiefly on being read; poem-like, in that unavoidable process and practice they fall mute subject to whatever interpretative code (geometric, geological, archaeological, geo-historical) is produced in or by their reading or reader. In this fundamental recognition, the sequence does more than rehearse the "incompleteness, approximation and the limitations of language . . . congruent with broad cultural anxieties about explanatory systems" which Culik discovers in the mathematical inflections of Samuel Beckett's modernist aesthetics (Culik 1993, p. 147). Arguably, in fact, the verbal geometries in and out of which Presley conjures some of the most suggestive poetic text/topoi of her 'Stone Settings' seem intended less to summon the places "where words cannot go" than to figure a terrain where (unlike numbers) words have hardly, if ever, been at all (Culik 1993, p. 137). Such an aspiration, successful or not, seems indebted partly to the (literally) inscrutable geometry in which the occluded White Ladder silently accounts for itself, and partly of course to the woman whose self-deprecating voice brought its features to light.

3. Field as Fold: Enumerating the Pastoral Landscape

> "Place fluctuates, gives way to other spatial topologies: site, field, milieu, terrain. Grid, fold, mesh" (Watts 2012, p. 282).

Like 'Stone Settings', Watts's open-ended *Zeta Landscape* reaches out of the topological and material entanglement of human and natural towards the organising abstractions of geometry.[15] Like Presley, Watts discovers in geometrical forms and theorems instruments with and in which to conjure and address a remote location she finds suggestively rich in gender-implications. However, where the familiar classical forms confronting Presley point the former to Euclid, in an ongoing project to explore "the boundaries of [her own] loco-descriptive writing", Watts turns instead to the 'projective' or 'analytical' geometry which emerged in the nineteenth century, thanks to Bernard Riemann among others (Watts 2012, p. 294).

In place of Presley's arguably uninhabitable sites, Watts studies the environs of Rhosybreidden, a small hill-farm situated in rural Powys, and a place she has visited often enough to know well. To this

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[14] I am indebted to my colleague Kevin Mills for this citation.

[15] A footnote explains: "The first nine poems, first season, of *Zeta Landscape* are anthologized in Tarlo 2011, pp. 111–19. Five are also online in the ecopoetics issue of *How*" (Watts s.d) [sic]. Poems from the second season are published in (Watts 2008, 2011, 2012, p. 282).

familiar and familial setting, trailing centuries of inhabitation and contoured by the cultural-economic "shapes that things and events make in time and space", as its title signals, Watts's *Zeta Landscape* summons the eponymous mathematics of non-Euclidean geometry, a constellation of propositions and theories addressing the puzzle of the prime numbers which find focus in the so-called 'zeta' function (Ranta 1978, p. 715).

For Marcus Du Sautoy, the prime numbers are "the very atoms of mathematics": "the jewels studded throughout the vast expanse of the infinite universe of numbers . . . the mathematician's own periodic table". Paradoxically, however, for all their instrumental value, as Du Sautoy goes on to warn, "prime numbers remain the most mysterious objects studied by mathematicians. In a subject dedicated to finding patterns and order, the primes offer the ultimate challenge. Look through a list of prime numbers and you'll find it's almost impossible to predict when the next prime will appear . . . The list of primes is the heartbeat of mathematics, but it is a pulse wired by a powerful caffeine cocktail" (Du Sautoy 2004, p. 5). Quite apart from their habit of emerging in unexpected places (they turn out to govern the relationship between pitch and frequency in the production of harmonic sound, for example), the apparently infinite resistance of the primes to predictable sequencing lies at the root of their magnetism for mathematicians; unless and until a satisfactory mathematical proof is discovered for Riemann's legendary 'Hypothesis', of course. Put simply, Riemann's work feeds the mathematics of the infinitesimal, also known as 'calculus', which underpins non-Euclidean (that is, projective or analytical) geometry. Broadly speaking, the Prime Number Theorem and Riemann's Hypothesis work in concert to refine aspects of the calculus which mathematicians use to try to explain the behaviour, distribution and frequency of the prime numbers: the so-called 'zeta' [ζ] function.

John Derbyshire explains the significance of the zeta function, at root, as helping to bridge the epistemological space "between counting and measuring" in a theoretical domain which reaches to infinity in any and every direction (Derbyshire 2003, p. 310). Combining exactness (which we could call "enumeration") with approximation (or "evaluation"), the zeta function constitutes an algorithmic multi-tool which can be used to calculate (thus pinpoint the position or frequency of) primes of exponentially increasing size. At the same time, however, the function can never escape the horizon of infinity which renders its calculations—many of them unimaginably complex—hypothetical; at some point, the empirical precision of enumeration is always forced to give way to the more imprecise but still usable results produced by approximation.

Watts's sequence is less interested in the Hypothesis *per se* than the sinuous three-dimensional landform-like features produced when the co-ordinates which the function yields are plotted or mapped on the horizontal x-y or ('east-west') and vertical ('north-south') axes of a graph; that is, when the function is spatialized. [See supplementary file for a three-dimensional and dynamic representation of the function when the mathematical calculations are graphed in this way.] (originated from https://sketchfab.com/3d-models/riemann-zeta-function-b6ed0fac6170446f941d6f02e64ac067). The two series of poems comprising Watts's *Zeta Landscape*—each of its nineteen-line lyrics identified with a different prime number—crisscross the farm "whose name carries the eighteenth-century trace of its enclosure, once a 'hill-common'"[16]

> The farm is off the beaten track, part of a complex history of land ownership in the region shaped by everyday Welsh and English exchange. . . . The poems walk this particular place with its contours, the three fields . . . rising up from the banks of the river, picking up on the rhythms and sounds of the birthing and accounting of sheep, the daily ordering of work (Watts 2012, p. 283).

For Watts, an attachment both emotional and commercial binds the farm's human and animal inhabitants together in the equivocal traditions and practices of husbandry, "a form of conducting—and

[16] In correspondence, my colleague Dr Jess Lewis—a native Welsh-speaker—translates this phrase as 'tapered/tapering moor', a description which is, as she points out, geometrically inflected.

at the same time provision of subsistence, care, a daily watching over" (Watts 2012, p. 285). Conjuring and conjured from the steep pastures which shelter and sustain the farm's income source, the poems are saturated in the enumerative/evaluative habits directing and directed by "the seasonal and daily flow of animals. I went out at night . . . counting eyes in the torchlight. Looking out for crows, foxes. At times I went out in the moonless dark and could only hear them close by, the deep rumination the ewes make, moving on at the sound of some intruder" (Watts 2009, p. 26):

> 1
> the feeding of one into the landscape results
> in a climbing to infinity this opens the labour of a day
> the task is to find a distribution of fields
> and from these the truth of this place: hill common
> in its own pitch said rhos y breidden
> and from this one point sines of all hills and valleys
> as if pastoral could predict them by counterintuitive
> measure in the dark meadow its starless spectrum
> at night where the ram is sleeping its breath
> barely rising the mound is a shadow the reservoir
> pumped down the hill leading to a thought
> of depth or scarcity and thinness (. . .)

Discontinuous, disjointed, the lyrics seem straightforwardly to present themselves, much like the figurative (but apparently solid) terrain produced by graphing the zeta function, as "land that might be walked, north to south, east and west, with peaks and valleys". The white spaces which are scattered through and punctuate each line fracture the words into cryptic paratactic clusters, brief phrase-like fragments which sometimes seem connected, sometimes not. Each momentary break is also a rupture, a pause offering the chance to replay and reflect on whatever precedes and follows. In one discussion of the sequence, Watts explains, illuminatingly, that for her site-specific poetry is definitively concerned with "the practice and nature of its taking place". The ambulatory self-inspecting way in which each line of *Zeta Landscape* unfolds itself seems to replay this stringently "sustained and exploratory mode of attention *to*", which practices itself and in turn echoes the business and function of any farm, a form of labour whose productivity is predicated on care-giving:

> The word "pastoral" comes from shepherd, or pastor, and combines the notion of "to lead to pasture, graze" with "to tend, keep, pasture, feed, guard". So pastoral names a kind of movement—direction, understood as a form of conducting—and at the same time, provision of subsistence, care, a daily watching-over and enumeration (Watts 2012, p. 285).

In this powerfully three-dimensional environment, compassion and care displace *topos*. The poem draws (*folds*) the topos of the farm—delineated by the intersecting vectors of the routine practices which sustain and safeguard its future—into the textual-sonic space it occupies. In these ways, *Zeta Landscape* intently folds and re-folds its defining and cognate terms ("field", "fold" and "manifold") into the "distributive" contemporary pastoral which, as Watts reminds us, Michel Foucault himself dubs "the matter of the sheep-fold" (Watts 2012, p. 281). The fields themselves are addressed more as backdrop or afterthought than front-and-centre subject, in a belated or deferred (to quote the poet again) "folding back on what has occurred, a form of afterwardsness" (2012, p. 281). As the topographical enclosure (or 'fold') of the farm is unfolded, it reveals in Rhosybreidden a dynamic and compound construct closely resembling a Foucauldian "milieu": a "space in which a series of uncertain elements unfold" (Foucault 2009; qtd Watts 2012, p. 287). It seems partly thanks to Foucault, then, that the terms in which Watts's 'loco-descriptive' poem addresses the farm in its Powys setting are neither straightforwardly material nor straightforwardly temporal: "To think the fold of Rhosybreidden in terms of a pastoral imaginary is to think not simply of a spatial set of relations sliding one of another, but a complexity of

relational foldings in space-time" (Watts 2012, p. 302). Those terms of address are also, at least partly as a consequence, relentlessly dialogic:

> The matter of pastoral mov[es] between the two types of multiplicity or "manifold", one discrete and enumerated, the other in continual affective modification: intensities of care … The first a vision of a flock, contained; the second, on the move, continuously flowing across the bounds of enclosures … (Watts 2012, p. 300).

The sequence presses the precarious economics of the farm through the mesh of these lexical figures, their metaphoric resonances overlapping in a complex weave of rural husbandry, calculus and literary convention

> describing the world of the farm as well as a spatialized zeta world, a means of conceptual "slurring", as if the tropes of the poems, and the sheep themselves in their generation, are "sieves" for the discovery of the primes [which in turn] become sieves for something irreducibly … given in nature (Watts 2012, p. 299).

To appropriate a trope of classical mathematics, the sequence "sieves out" the many dialectics which inscribe and animate sheep farming, among them the familiar archetype at its heart. The poet's immersive night-time experiences in the lambing field and on the darkened mountainside teach her to re-see the apparently humdrum work of sheep-counting as less stupefying or comforting so much as provisional and equivocal: "Flocks are aggregates, subject to wandering and itinerancy, gathering and rounding up" (p. 299). The sequence uncovers other equally powerful dialectics—certainty and uncertainty, care and calculus—likewise interlocking in "the deeper accountancies" which quite literally resound in this ancient-modern site and its ancient-modern routines:[17]

> The counting of animals on the other hand gave way to encounter with the nature and movement of a flock. The waywardness of particular ewes. The mysterious timing of oestrus. The sound of rumination in the dark. The limit of the anthropomorphic. Irreducible biology" (Watts 2012, p. 286).

Mathematicians have known since Pythagoras that "the very physics of music has at its root the basics of mathematics", captured in the relationship between 'pitch' (how high or low a note sounds) and 'frequency' (how loud or soft it sounds), the numerical prime-led patterns of which are called "the harmonic series" (Du Sautoy 2004, p. 78). To Watts's cultural-politically tuned ear, the gendered geographies of the farm's poem-like landscape, and the fragile economic "milieu" it sustains, resonate as suggestively as they can be numbered or read, and especially in the seasonal female-centred dramas of lambing time, the moment in the year when perhaps above all the habits of care-giving and accountancy intersect in the focus on maternal biology and instincts. These twin seasonal exigencies converge and are troped in one sheep in particular: "Number 37, the twelfth prime … named for her auction lot number, who lived until her thirteenth year; a 'lucky' prime, she moves in singular ways through the sequence of the first two seasons" (Watts 2012, p. 299). The first appearance of this unlikely seeming heroine (in the third lyric of the text's first series) is framed by sound production, expression which is both spatial and—being without concrete three-dimensional form—not, which, as such, simultaneously invites and implacably resists interpretation:

> the further east the louder the note waking early
> to orchestras of demand not quite synchronous
> as a swarm is knowing the constancy of waiting

[17] "The shepherd … does everything for the totality of his flock but he does everything also for each sheep of the flock" (Watts 2009, p. 128; 2012, p. 287).

has its consequences the muscle of congregating

number 37 sings what is a well (. . .) ('3', *Zeta Landscape* Tarlo 2011, p. 113)

Explicitly intermingling the "hallucinatory and material" in this way (that is, doing no more than any more conventional lyric), the ambulatory, self-attentive mode of *Zeta Landscape* constructs in each new stanza a fresh "site for superimposition", readied for the "series of translative acts" that the mode demands of itself as well as its readers (Watts 2012, p. 285). In its blockish sonnet-like stanzas, shot through by the gender emphases etched everywhere, *Zeta Landscape* might seem to reprise and refresh for its twenty-first century moment something of "the experimental energy" which issued in the seventeenth-century European sonnet (Chiasson and Rogers 2009, p. 55). In the eponymous '37', the final poem of Season Two (the second of the series comprising the sequence), the ewe conjures both the shade of Robert Recorde, the mathematician from Pembrokeshire who invented the equals sign, and his *The Whetstone of Witte* (1557)[18] in which it is used, alongside plus and minus signs, for the first time:

37 bred from a whetstone wit equals

as long as each recording is mistaken

stone for thing (. . .)

Folding such a figure into the elements which it counts, or takes into account, *Zeta Landscape* returns us again to the layers of dialogue which resonate—across a variety of dimensions—in a landscape which both is and is not entirely abstract; is and is not entirely material. Individually and sequentially, the texts tirelessly "interrogat[e] physical space . . . where it connects most directly with mathematics", iteratively confirming Connor's view that if "number is the direction in which nature moves . . . that movement is not all in the same direction. It is not a steadily rolling river, but tidal, vortical, polyvectorial" (Connor 2017, p. 44). At the same time, in the central trope of its title if nothing else, *Zeta Landscape* affirms in mathematics itself—like language and unlike nature—a signifying system; insists that its representational function is dialogic in nature, function and effect. To make sense of the relationships between the abstract elements (conjecture, proposition, theorem or proof) which their symbols notate, mathematicians depend as much on hermeneutic engagement, on interlocution (virtual, imaginary and/or abstract), as any form of expression, linguistic or otherwise. The very assumption of equivalence which the equals sign inscribes is, of course, dialogic.

Watts links the "combination of chance and dependency" which she discovers in Rhosybreidden to the cultural-economic ecology of pastoral, the socio-economic as well as literary traditions anchoring both farm and sequence which are marked by "often violent accumulation and removal, and yet intimations of a translative surplus, gift" (Watts 2012, pp. 295, 297, 300). It is in this way that the dialogues which anchor and animate Watts's *Zeta Landscape* do more than simply recall or equate with the ambivalent and discreetly gendered geometries of Presley's site-specific poetic addresses. Coincidentally or not, those dialogues also recollect the argument of 'White Mythology', Derrida's powerful theoretical deconstruction of metaphor as a bi-directional figure of thought, as illustrated by the synonym he finds, with characteristic dexterity, in the French *usure*. As the translator's note explains, this term "means both usury, the acquisition of too much interest, and using up, deterioration through usage" (Derrida 1984, p. 209 fn2). Like the double-faced coin which Derrida's agile re-metaphorizing of metaphor rescues in the essay's exergue, the activity of metaphor is ghosted by the "double import of usure: erasure by rubbing, exhaustion . . . [and] the exchange which far from losing the original investment would fructify its initial wealth, would increase its return in the form of revenue . . . the two histories of the word remaining indistinguishable" (Derrida 1984, p. 210). The result of this construction

[18] A note explains: "The whetstone is a play on the Latin word 'cos', and 'cosa', thing. Algebra was known as cossike practise [sic], and the sharpening of intelligence, cos ingenii . . . " (Watts 2009, vol. 10, p. 27).

is the recognition that as a figure of explication or illumination, metaphor must be understood to adopt or mimic the equivocal stance of the supplement. Simultaneously enacting both generation and loss, the movement of metaphor is consequently always and only interrogative; it marks neither equivalence nor difference, neither commensurability nor incommensurability but rather the ineradicable condition of difference. Pertinently, indeed, we might argue that in the bewitching deconstructive manoeuvres laid out in the essay, Derrida calls the dialogic operation of the equals sign into question.

Kevin Mills has argued that, "In the drawing of boundaries that can never belong to the place itself, every place is made up of other places; it is the product of difference and articulation; not an identity, but a mobile economy of discursive relations" (Mills 2017). If the written page can be acknowledged as a place, Mills' assertion holds as true of text as of any site, domain or location. The site-specific poem utters the complexities of the *topos* in which it has been produced by re-framing it as the spatio-aesthetic textual construct: in this reciprocal process, text and landscape adopt and become mutual and (in Derridean terms) mutually insufficient referents of and for each other. It might therefore seem inevitable that the "incommensurable and uncertain relations" sought out in Watts's *Zeta Landscape* echo Presley's textual unpicking of the dialogues between topographical and arithmetical in and on Exmoor (Watts 2012, p. 297). In their different ways both women mobilise a recognisably Modernist literary sensibility to argue that the metaphorical consonance between number and terrain can be gestured at, if never exactly represented, in the *textual landscape*—the material formalities—of the poem.

It seems worth returning, at this juncture, to Tarlo's description of poetic form as "a landscape in which language can come alive" (Tarlo 2011, p. 10). My own reading of Presley and Watts causes me to wonder whether those defining terms might not be more usefully swapped over; whether, and not unlike the different kinds of geometry which both poets mobilise, poetic form is not in fact better conceived as "a *language* in which *landscape* can come alive". Certainly it does not seem unreasonable to conclude from my examples that it is perhaps above all through the unobtrusive geometries framing their very different fields of address that these absorbing texts perhaps most suggestively express their shared and knowing in/capacity to represent an equivalence which is not, quite.

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Article

"Sing the Bones Home": Material Memory and the Project of Freedom in M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!*

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Abstract: M. NourbeSe Philip's 2008 book-length poem *Zong!* represents maritime materialities below the sea's surface in relation to aesthetic geographies of the sea in the aftermath of slavery as an abyss of loss, thereby extending modernist aesthetics while offering a strategic and revisionary response to male-centered modernist writing. Keen attention into the sea as an innovating and renewing source reveals that the poem imagines the sea as a literal, formal, and thematic agent for the "decontamination" of language—which, Philip maintains, is contaminated by imperialism—and of the received history about slavery. The poem focuses its investigation on the case of the 1781 *Zong* massacre and the *Gregson v. Gilbert* maritime insurance case that arose in its wake. *Zong!* mourns the massacre of 150 Africans who were thrown overboard so that owners of the slave ship could collect insurance money on lost "cargo". In conversation with Caribbean poets and thinkers, such as Grace Nichols, and African oral traditions, the poem explores forms of memory that go beyond the non-history officially afforded to the enslaved and their descendants. Throughout the poem, the sea is a site of decontamination through which *Zong!* stages its attempt to recover the unrecoverable. While many scholars have understandably focused on the events aboard the ship, a small number of ecocritical readings have highlighted the poem's engagement with the materiality of the sea. Drawing on postcolonial ecocriticism and black feminist theories of the human, this article will discuss the sea as a material geography, going deeper to investigate the poem's rarely discussed focus on biological and chemical materiality as juxtaposed to representations of black women's flesh, arguing that it functions as a feminist provocation to both human exceptionalism and the racial boundaries of the human.

Keywords: geomodernisms; modernist poetics; Caribbean poetry; *Zong!*; M. NourbeSe Philip; black poetry; critical ocean studies; multispecies; materiality; ecocriticism

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> Our entrance to the past is through memory. And water. In this case salt water. Sea water.
>
> —M. NourbeSe Philip, "Notanda"

The sea has long held a storied place in the imaginations of poets and thinkers concerned with history. Take, for example, T. S. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land*, in which Eliot works with fragments to illustrate that, while everything in his world has been ruined, he might preserve its beautiful pieces, which, though no longer authoritative, might be used to create something new and whole. As Pound opens *The Cantos* in the voice of Odysseus lost at sea—a figure for the Lost Generation poet who must find his way home through the writing of a poem—so Eliot invokes shipwrecks and drownings to represent cultural crisis marked by disruption and the broken promises of liberal modernity. Eliot aestheticizes the decomposing body of Phlebas, his drowned Phoenician Sailor—"A current under sea/Picked his bones in whispers"—as he imagines it restored in a new form that is much

like Alonso's body in *The Tempest* (Eliot 2006, p. 67).[1] When Ferdinand mourns Alonso's supposed death, Ariel attempts to comfort him with the promise of such transformation. Her song will become one of Eliot's fragments:

> Full fathom five thy father lies,
>
> Of his bones are coral made;
>
> Those are pearls that were his eyes;
>
> Nothing of him that doth fade
>
> But doth suffer a sea-change
>
> Into something rich and strange. (Shakespeare 2008, p. 123)

In Eliot's poem, Phlebas, as other fragments, is made into "something rich and strange", like dead eyes turning to pearls. The sea holds the ruined past yet can wash away that past. Steeped in nostalgia, Eliot's poetic revolution meant to use the fragments of ruined Western high culture to "shore" against further ruin and to produce order and authority on a mythic scale as a guide for the early twentieth century. Though the desert wasteland is paramount in Eliot's vision of modernity, he can nevertheless imagine the paradoxically effacing and renewing function of the sea in the brief, lyrical fourth section "Death by Water".

Caribbean poets respond pointedly to the cultural authority of *The Waste Land* and Eliot in their explorations of the sea as a source of new formations and as a repository for history.[2] Extending modernism's aesthetic innovations, they reshape Eliot's formulation by responding to the Caribbean cultural situation (Pollard 2004, pp. 18–19).[3] For example, Shakespeare's representation of a purifying drowning is taken up by Caribbean poets in their attempts to make sense of slavery and its legacy as they navigate through trauma and loss. In Césaire's *Une Tempête*, Ariel sings, "Ocean stream comes home/Nothing is, all becomes . . . This close, strange season//Living eye is precious pearl/Heart is coral, bone joins atoll/Ocean stream comes home, Bringing a sea-change" (Césaire 2000, p. 23). Césaire's rewriting of *The Tempest* imagines the decomposition of the dead in which they remain alive to haunt the present. This decomposition and the eventual recomposition into something new brings "a sea-change". Kamau Brathwaite's theory of "tidealectics" responds to this transformation by sea. He describes tidealectics as "like the movement of the ocean... coming from one continent/continuum, touching another, and then receding" (quoted in Jenkins 2004, p. 188).[4] Similarly, new formations appear in Derek Walcott's "The Sea Is History", in which bone is "soldered by coral to bone,/mosaics/mantled by the benediction of the shark's shadow", and "white cowries clustered like manacles/on the drowned women" (Walcott 1986, pp. 364–65). Manuela Coppola notes the formal and thematic importance of the sea as a symbol of mourning and memory in Walcott's work: "the sea has been represented as the repository of the memory of the Middle Passage, as in Derek Walcott's famous lines:

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1 Melody Jue (2014) identifies in this same fragment of *The Tempest* the chemical makeup of seawater that makes it capable of transformation (p. 246).

2 In Elizabeth DeLoughrey (2017) explication of the "oceanic turn", she comments that during the spatial turn of the 1990s "the ocean became a place for theorizing the materiality of history, yet it rarely figured as material in itself"; however, "[i]n the Caribbean the ocean has long been understood as a material entity; it is an ecology for 'subtle and submarine' poetics in the words of Derek Walcott" (p. 243).

3 Complementary rather than derivative, Caribbean modernisms revitalize "the Eliotic version of tradition . . . as a much more fluid and radical formulation, where the new text extends, qualifies, and transfigures the tradition with which it conducts its dialogue" in order to respond to the complexities of the Caribbean experience (Jenkins 2004, p. 10; Pollard 2004). Further, while both reflect an ambivalence to modernity, European and Caribbean modernisms have distinct and important ideological, aesthetic, and epistemological differences (Pollard 2004). Modernism's aesthetic innovations are not bound to colonialism's ideology: "Forces of colonialism shaped modernism's initial vision, but leading postcolonial writers are reshaping its contemporary expression" (ibid.).

4 Jenkins also notes that Brathwaite's sister, Mary Morgan, described tidealectics as "a way of interpreting [Caribbean life] and history as sea-change" (quoted in Jenkins 2004, p. 188).

> Where are your monuments, your battles, martyrs?
> Where is your tribal memory? Sirs,
> in that great vault. The sea. The sea
> has locked them up. (Walcott 1986, p. 364; Coppola 2013, p. 75)

Walcott locates the beginnings of history in the sea, where history is locked up but where it also breaks apart and merges into new forms and sounds. Through its vastness and tidal processes, the sea comes to signify memory. Working from Walcott and Brathwaite, as signaled by the two epigraphs to *Poetics of Relation*—"Sea is History" and "The unity is sub-marine", Édouard Glissant figures the sea as a "womb abyss", where memory of the past settles in fragments like "alluvium", signaling the fertile ground of the unknown (Glissant 2010, p. 7). Further, for Glissant, both the experience of the ocean on the Middle Passage and the very depths of sea represent an abyss. He imagines loss and trauma as the decomposition of "balls and chains gone green" at the bottom of the sea, "underwater signposts" that mark the drowned and "fugitive memories" of those thrown overboard (pp. 6, 7).[5] These poets understand the sea not only as an abyss where the history of the people and place called "Caribbean" begins, but also as an innovating source that opens the future through emergent forms, not through reproduction and continuity. They put their figurative faith in the sea to purify the ruined culture, often by "picking away" the ruins and effecting a transformation into something new.

Mindful of this long conversation, M. NourbeSe Philip's 2008 book of poetry *Zong!* explores the figure of the sea to challenge both the male-centered tradition outlined above and the historical record surrounding transatlantic slavery.[6] Like Sycorax, black women's voices and experiences have been erased from these archives.[7] The poem mourns the massacre of 150 Africans who were thrown overboard into the Atlantic in 1781 so that owners of the slave ship *Zong* could collect insurance money on lost "cargo" (Philip 2008, p. 189).[8] It proceeds through a poetics of "decontamination", as Philip puts it, by which it imagines Glissant's drowned and "fugitive memories" of those on board the *Zong*. Those memories emphasize the experiences of black women, offering a strategic and revisionary response to male writers in the Caribbean. *Zong!* portrays the sea as a material geography: as the sea breaks matter apart and then pieces it back together in new configurations, so the poem breaks apart language and received history and reconfigures them, thereby decontaminating them, allowing other perspectives and experiences to be expressed. The poem focuses its investigation of the sea as an agent of decontamination on the case of the *Zong* massacre and the *Gregson v. Gilbert* maritime insurance case that arose in the massacre's wake, splintering the judicial report of the case in its formal staging of the archive's aesthetic potential to issue an anti-narrative against this account.[9] Though the *Gregson v.*

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5 Elizabeth DeLoughrey's essay "Heavy Waters: Waste and Atlantic Modernity" (DeLoughrey 2010) reads Glissant's "balls and chains gone green" as making legible Atlantic modernity's "dissolution of wasted lives" (p. 703).

6 Philip's challenge to both colonial language and male-centered canonical formations joins her to a genealogy of black feminist poets that includes Lorna Goodison, Grace Nichols, and Audre Lorde, who have theorized gender as key to understanding the Caribbean (Neumann and Rupp 2016). For a comparative reading of Grace Nichols and M. NourbeSe Philip's work, see Myriam Moïse's article "'Ain't I a Woman?' Grace Nichols and M. NourbeSe Philip. Re-Membering and Healing the Black Female Body" (Moïse 2018).

7 Philip's revisionary response may extend to Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, of which she asks, "what of the Black Woman?" (Philip 1997, p. 165). Sycorax "is present only by her absence" (p. 166).

8 In *The Zong*, James Walvin notes that the historic record shows discrepancies in the exact number of people killed: "One report suggested a total of 150 Africans had been drowned. James Kelsall [the ship's first mate] thought that 142 Africans had perished, but the legal hearings in London later accepted a figure of 122 murdered, in addition to the ten who had jumped to their deaths" (Walvin 2011, p. 98). Walvin's own research suggests that number was 134. I follow Philip in using the figure of 150, because that is what is given in the legal text from which she draws (Philip 2008, p. 189).

9 A large body of criticism has considered *Zong!*, focusing at once on the problem of writing histories of enslavement with the language and logic of the enslavers and the poem's experiments with form to deal with that problem. Most have argued that the poem seeks a form for "not telling", responding to Philip's notes to the poem that announce the story of the *Zong* massacre as "a story that can only be told by not telling" (Philip 2008, p. 191). Kate Eichhorn (2010) locates this dynamic in Philip's use of constraints, arguing that the use of constraints is not merely about extending established innovative writing practices but rather allows for Philip's central aim of "telling a story that cannot be told". Sarah Dowling (2011) too notes that

Gilbert account may seem resistant to revision, *Zong!* deploys disjunctive formal practices to disorder this found text, going beyond an aesthetics of fragmentation to one of decontamination, breaking the archive of enslavement's hold on this story. Thus, *Zong!* responds to historical, material, and aesthetic geographies of the sea. While the poem proper reduces the legal text to the status of a fragment, the book as a whole grants the legal document a qualified restoration through a textual apparatus that allows it to exist whole again at the end of the book, ironically and unexpectedly shoring that now fragmentary text against ruin.[10] Looking at the sea as an innovating and renewing source reveals how *Zong!* imagines the sea as a literal, formal, and thematic agent for the decontamination of language and traditional forms of history polluted by imperialism.[11] Throughout the poem, the sea is a site of decontamination through which *Zong!* stages its attempt to recover what has been unrecoverable.

Many scholars have emphasized how *Zong!*'s formal innovation proposes an anti-narrative revisionary archive that highlights the *Zong* massacre as "a story than cannot be told", confronting conventions of language and history. Philip herself situates the poem as an interrogation of colonial language and accepted history. Yet, few scholars have read *Zong!* as a feminist challenge to women's erasure from established canons and historical archives related to transatlantic slavery.[12] Further, although a small number of critics have remarked on the poem's engagement with the materiality of the sea, even fewer have investigated the poem's attention to marine materiality—let alone its focus on the sea's biological and chemical materiality—as a feminist provocation to both human exceptionalism and the racial boundaries of the human.

Postcolonial ecocritics attentive to materiality have tended to focus on the physical movement of the sea: its tides and currents. Yet, as Melody Jue comments, "the language of flow and fluidity is inadequate to describe what seawater actually does to things" (Jue 2014, p. 244). While Jue emphasizes seawater's transformational capacity, my argument attends to that same capacity in organisms that live in the sea. It considers biological and chemical processes in order to see how the sea asks us to rethink both "how human beings are formed by the ocean" and "how the ocean might be formed by human history" (DeLoughrey 2010, p. 707). Focusing on the movement of water, especially on the surface, overlooks the generative power of other important material aspects of the sea, namely, multispecies relations with fish and other beings that reside in the sea and the chemical processes of which they are a part. Elizabeth DeLoughrey maintains that "submersion may produce alternative knowledges and ontologies" (DeLoughrey 2017, p. 249). Similarly, Stacy Alaimo comments,

> Thinking with marine life fosters complex mappings of agencies and interactions in which—for humans as well as for pelagic and benthic creatures—there is, ultimately, no firm divide between mind and matter, organism and environment, self and world. Submersing ourselves, descending rather than transcending, is essential lest our tendencies toward

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Zong! is motivated by a historiographic problem, but she focuses on how Philip's poem attempts to write the non-person using innovative poetic forms and voices. Erin M. Fehksens argues that *Zong!* shows that the "epistemological crisis" of writing such a history requires a non-narrative epic mode of the catalogue.

[10] In other words, due to the work the poem has done, the *Gregson v. Gilbert* archival document is no longer taken as a whole, stable account of the event but rather as one piece of the history that can be confronted in its entirety now that it has been decontaminated and recontextualized amid the other document(s) (*Zong!* itself) that the poem has put into the record.

[11] Kate Siklosi and Diana Leong both focus on the sea in their readings of *Zong!* Siklosi (2016) locates a resistant "submarine unity" in *Zong!*'s "submarine poetics" that contests the *Gregson v. Gilbert* account of history as "singularly authoritative" by fragmenting the language of the legal decision to release "a fugue of submerged voices, sounds, silences, and stories". Diana Leong positions the question of thirst at the center of *Zong!*, observing that the poem suggests "the manipulation of water is part of a long-standing strategy to police the human" (Leong 2016b, p. 799). Further, she comments that "*Zong!*... provides ecocritics with an opportunity to discover how the history of modern racial slavery and its afterlives is also the history of environmental politics and thought" (p. 800). Both highlight the centrality of the sea in *Zong!* and the conversations about history, memory, race, and the idea of the human that this focus makes possible. See also Birgit Neumann and Jan Rupp's "Sea Passages: Cultural Flows in Caribbean Poetry" (Neumann and Rupp 2016) and Aaron Pinnix's "Sargassum in the Black Atlantic: Entanglement and the Abyss in Bearden, Walcott, and Philip" (Pinnix 2018), both in *Atlantic Studies*.

[12] Nicole Gervasio reads *Zong!* as a "radical feminist challenge to the erasure of women from most canonical formations and archival records surrounding atrocities like transatlantic slavery" through focusing on the character of Ruth (Gervasio 2019, p. 3).

> Human exceptionalism prevent us from recognizing that... we dwell within and as part of a dynamic, intraactive, emergent, material world that demands new forms of ethical thought and practice. (Alaimo 2011, p. 283)

In what follows, I suggest that *Zong!* immerses readers in the materiality of the sea in order to call into question those tendencies toward human exceptionalism, thereby producing alternate ontologies including and extending beyond what DeLoughrey has theorized as "sea ontologies" (DeLoughrey 2017, p. 245).

If *Zong!* contests human exceptionalism by making visible the multispecies entanglements that constitute the living history of transoceanic slavery in the Caribbean, its contestation extends to the racial boundaries of the human, building on the work of black feminist theorists.[13] This essay traces how the poem evokes the process by which black bodies, and black female bodies more specifically, are violently made into ungendered flesh, a process Hortense Spillers terms "pornotoping" (Spillers 1987, p. 67). *Zong!* relates the sexual violence that contradictorily reduces the captive body to "a thing"—flesh, thereby creating "a category of 'otherness'", whereby the captive body comes to embody sheer powerlessness that reverberates "through various centers of human and social meaning" (ibid.). Diana Leong has identified black female flesh as "the quintessentially productive site of modernity's symbolic order, where the value and meaning of our conceptual categories are both challenged or renewed" (Leong 2016a, p. 22). Similarly, Philip's poem locates black female flesh as the limit of the boundary between the human and the not-quite-human. *Zong!*'s exploration of the sea's biological and chemical processes highlights black women's becoming-flesh as a category of "otherness" outside the human.

1. "A Lively and Energetic Materiality"

> This is what we know about those Africans thrown, jumped, dumped overboard in Middle Passage; they are with us still, in the time of the wake, known as residence time.
>
> —Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*

Zong! confronts the sea as a historical agent by exploring the materiality of the enslaved who were drowned there. This exploration manifests as sea creatures, bubbles, murmurs, and words that flow across the page as though pulled along by the tide: "sea fa/ns dance se a cre/atu res ride the b/ones" (p. 148). Oceanic objects and sounds populate the pages of *Zong!* in community with bones and broken memories. In this way, the poem depicts the sea "as a material space characterized by movement and continual reformation" rather than merely treating the ocean as a metaphor (Steinberg 2013, p. 156). *Zong!* considers this movement and continual reformation important to the story of slavery through its use of maritime images that evoke the vitality of the ocean through its nutrient cycle: "the process of organisms eating organisms" (Sharpe 2016, p. 40). Scholars including Erin M. Fehskens have read in *Zong!* a sublime encounter with the sea. In its vastness, the ocean is often the trope of the sublime (Lambert et al. 2006, p. 483). It has been read as a "space beyond representation" that evokes the fear of the unknown (ibid.). But *Zong!* registers another kind of encounter with the sea, one that focuses on the sea as a place where active processes fragment matter to produce new shapes and forms. As a physical geography, the sea breaks apart organic matter thrown into it. This organic matter circulates as nutrients to be taken up into new formations, such as the bodies of other creatures.

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[13] Zakiyyah Iman Jackson (2015) points out that appeals by some post-humanists and scholars of the new materialisms to move "beyond the human" can reintroduce Eurocentric transcendentalism as attempts to move beyond race, even though "*blackness conditions and constitutes the very nonhuman disruption and/or displacement they invite*" (pp. 215–16, emphasis in original). Bringing this insight to an investigation of blackness and matter, Leong adds that "one of the primary figures of the new materialisms—the material body—is defined by and through disavowed social fantasies about black female flesh that are linked to the global legacies of modern slavery" and argues against "against a misrecognition of black female flesh as a resource against the violence of hierarchical differences, rather than the site of their active production" (Leong 2016a, p. 6).

Zong! gives attention to the more-than-human world in its treatment of the sea, acknowledging that the sea is "something with a lively and energetic materiality of its own" (ibid., p. 482). The poem's consideration of the "imaginative, aesthetic, and sensuous geographies of the sea" illustrates that "maritime worlds open up new experiential dimensions and new forms of representation" (p. 479). For example, four section titles point to the historical and material geographies of the Caribbean Sea in relation to slavery: bone, salt, wind, and iron. Bone relates to those thrown overboard for whom no bones can be exhumed in order "to return dignity to the dead" (Philip 2008, p. 201).[14] It also suggests the ribs of a ship. Salt indicates the chemical makeup of the sea but also perhaps the sweat on the bodies on board as well as the sodium content of human blood, which Christina Sharpe notes may remain in the ocean for 260 million years (Sharpe 2016, p. 41). She imagines that the bodies of the drowned exist in the ocean today, because they would have been eaten by sharks, fish, and organisms and become part of the ocean's nutrient cycle. Identifying (sea) salt as "the 'bone' of water" produced by dehydration, Diana Leong describes the jettisoning of enslaved people, given the salt in their bones, as "a salting or 'boning' of the seas", thus making "salt also the medium for a kind of material memory that ensures that the slaves are not lost *to* the seas" though they have been lost at sea (Leong 2016b, pp. 812–13, emphasis in original). Salt inevitably suggests tears, of course, as well. Wind is necessary to move sailing ships. Finally, iron refers to the manacles used to hold enslaved people, irons "made of the same material as our fingers and hands" (Brathwaite 1994, p. 107). Thus, the iron section title may indicate the human body's iron content, an element which endures in the ocean for just 500 years (Monterey Bay Aquarium Research Institute 2017). Elsewhere, *Zong!* invokes Ogun, Yoruba deity of iron and a figure of the iron revolution in West Africa, reflecting technologies of iron smelting tied to ritual and other cultural practices as well as the ironworking that "made the ships of Atlantic modernity possible" (DeLoughrey 2010, p. 710). A symbol of "terrible ambivalence", Candice Goucher argues, associated with West African culture, enslavement, and resistance, iron is another vehicle for material memory (quoted ibid.).

2. Decontamination

Zong!'s exploration of the sea as an agent of transformation proceeds through a poetics of decontamination, with formal procedures derived from the liveliness of the sea itself. For Philip, decontamination is necessary for dealing with the logic inherited with English and other imperial languages. Decontamination—a formal procedure—disrupts imperial language by breaking it apart, dispersing it, and putting it into new configurations. Like Brathwaite, Lorna Goodison, and others, Philip seeks a linguistic and historical revolution to purify or decontaminate language so that it can be used anew to "reduce the gap between the experience and the expression of that experience" (Philip 2017).[15] In a recent interview, she argues that imperial languages, such as English, Spanish, Dutch, and French, must be put through "a decontaminating process" in order to render them capable of expressing what she wants to express:

> I begin from a position of complete distrust of language and do not believe that english (sic)—or any European language, for that matter—can truly speak our truths without the language in question being put through some sort of transformative process. A *decontaminating process* is probably more accurate, since a language as deeply implicated in imperialism as english has been cannot but be contaminated by such a history and experience. The only way I can then work with it is to fracture it, fragment it, dislocate it. And for me this is where

[14] A fifth section title, Ẹbọra, meaning "underwater spirits" in Yoruba, signals a spiritual geography of the Caribbean (Philip 2008, p. 184).

[15] For more on David Dabydeen and Lorna Goodison's desire for the "cleansing and redemption" of language, refer to Jenkins's *The Language of Caribbean Poetry: Boundaries of Expression* (Jenkins 2004, p. 173). See, also, Grace Nichols's poetry collection *I Is a Long Memoried Woman* (Nichols 1987).

> form becomes so very important, because part of the transformative and *decontaminating process* is also to find the appropriate form for what I'm saying. (ibid., emphasis added)

For Philip, "language represents a wound", and *Zong!* submerges the wound in the form of a legal document, in a poetics that, I argue, means to decontaminate both language and history by actively decomposing it into constituent parts—words, letters, and sounds—and recomposing it into ruptured memories through which the past continues to haunt the present (ibid.). Philip breaks up the text as the sea breaks up matter, disperses it and reforms it into new things, including not only words (which produce new meanings), but also sounds and imagined memories that draw attention to the specificity of women's experiences of slavery.[16] Once decontaminated, the language can then express Caribbean experiences and fugitive memories. Philip's urge to "fracture", "fragment", and "dislocate" language in order to decontaminate it results in the decomposition of the legal decision into sounds, letters, and words spread across the page, suggesting a form of rupture that, for Philip, characterizes the Caribbean and the abyss of loss associated with slavery: "The Caribbean is synonymous with rupture and break and hiatus and held breath. And death. And rebirth" (ibid.). While some might argue that decomposition is a passive process that occurs on its own, in actuality it involves multiple active processes by organisms in the sea that constitute new forms.

Thus, a poetics of decontamination can be understood as consisting of two parts that correspond to the materiality of the sea: decomposition and recomposition. Decomposition breaks apart the language of *Gregson v. Gilbert*, using it as a word store, and scatters it across the page, suggesting both physical decomposition and dispersal in water. Conjuring fluidity disrupts the gendered conflation between women and land, making room for fluid histories.[17] In the first section of the book, the words and phrases in the legal text are broken up but remain decipherable. For example, "*Zong!* #1" fragments the words "water" and "good" into letters, phonemes, and syllables (see Figure 1):

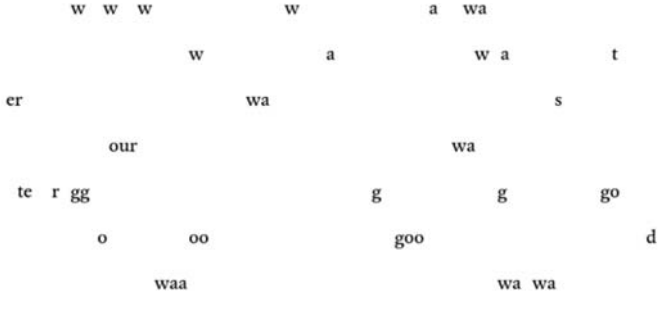

Figure 1. Excerpt from *Zong!* (p. 3).

The formal and thematic importance of the sea in decomposition becomes visible with this first poem, which emphasizes the significance of water and the sea to the collection as a whole and introduces the formal project of the poem with its decomposition of the words "water" and "good", which mimics the material processes of the sea. The ship was surrounded by water, yet the central concern for those on board (and the justification for the murders) was lack of drinking water.[18] Via decomposition, the speaker's words degenerate into regressive infant-like speech with "waa" and

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[16] Laurie Lambert shows that Philip "produces new and unexpected meanings" through fragmenting and reordering the *Gregson v. Gilbert* legal decision (Lambert 2016, p. 122).

[17] While the sea undoes notions of gender, gendered notions of the sea have always been unstable (Helmreich 2017; DeLoughrey 2009). The female body has been conflated with land, rootedness, stability, and stasis; however, gendered conflations of men with mobility invoke "feminized flows, fluidity, and circulation", conjuring the female borderless body and in-betweenness (much as the sea is viewed as an in-between space) (DeLoughrey 2009, p. 5; Neumann and Rupp 2016).

[18] The disintegrating language points to the difficulty of speaking from an experience of profound trauma compounded by the refusal to speak as a result of that experience. The initial "w w w" evokes the stuttering attempt to begin telling what

"goo". The fracturing of the word "water" into individual letters suggests a stammering confrontation ("w w w") with the vast expanse of ocean. In other words, decomposition of language allows the poem to explore other experiences and memories associated with the event beyond those conveyed in the legal report, working against the marginalization of female historical experience. It does so by evoking the breakup and dispersal of organic matter underwater.

Philip takes up the *Gregson v. Gilbert* legal report as one of the few documents related to the massacre extant in the archive of enslavement. The report recounts the massacre and the insurance claim that instigated the legal case: After serious navigational errors that extended an eight-week journey by ten weeks were compounded by leaking water casks, the crew of the *Zong* threw 150 abducted Africans overboard (Walvin 2011, pp. 88, 92).[19] When they finally arrived in Jamaica, the owners of the ship submitted an insurance claim seeking to recoup the costs of their lost "property", because the Africans were "thrown alive into the sea" instead of dying of natural causes. In the report, the ship owner's lawyers claim that the issue "was a throwing overboard of goods" and could not constitute murder (Philip 2008, p. 211). Leong cites Ian Baucom to underscore how both the law and modern finance, via acts of insurance and speculation, rely on the violent erasure of black bodies "that is not only condoned but *anticipated*" (Leong 2016a, pp. 802–4, emphasis in original). Further, the legal text refers to all those thrown overboard as "negroes" or "negro slaves", effacing gender (Philip 2008, pp. 210–11). Yet, a letter from abolitionist Granville Sharp suggests that women and children may have been disproportionately thrown overboard due to their lower sale value compared with men, at least before the trade was abolished: "& how many of the Slaves so thrown overboard at most were not Women & Children & Infants which would have been of no great value & what comparative value individually in proportion to a Prime Man Slave" (quoted in Gervasio 2019, p. 11). Responding to this letter, Philip writes in her notes to the poem, "*women's voices surfacing in the text—which attempts to neutralize everything[;] suddenly references to menstruation and childbirth and rape—in contrast with the larger Caribbean text as it's articulated at present*" (Philip 2008, p. 201, emphasis in original). The poem's many references to blood and "bleeding memories" and the memory-work it depicts challenge the erasure of black female bodies (Nichols 1987, p. 5).

Zong!'s poetics of decontamination fractures the legal text to signal the break of the Middle Passage. In doing this, Philip both fragments the legal language (and its logic) and represents slavery's rupture of history. She then disperses that language in the "sea" of the page to render it newly expressive of the experiences of the enslaved in order to "exaqua" the submerged histories of the incident (Philip 2008, p. 201). As Birgit Neumann and Jan Rupp argue, "Philip retrieves an embodied, resonant, material memory: a memory of bones, cries, and wails of the Middle Passage" through "multiple references to material traces of the sea—salt, wind, the movement of water, the seabed as a liquid grave" (Neumann and Rupp 2016, p. 483). Taking the sea as a creative principle, decomposition produces a form for Philip to express the wound of language and of history, a wound Philip represents with memories that coalesce through recomposition, the second stage of decontamination.

Continual Reformation

Like the reconstitution of matter in the sea through nutrient cycles and energy flows, a process Philip E. Steinberg refers to as "continual reformation", recomposition in *Zong!* builds up fresh yet ruptured forms from the decomposed parts of the legal report. Like continual reformation in the

"cannot be told". At the same time, it registers difficulty and asserts the refusal of naming the thing that brought such terror: water. Fred Moten refers to the transatlantic slave trade as the "long history of water terror that stretches from the Gold Coast to the Leeward Islands, from Birmingham to Birmingham" (Moten 2017, p. 159). Christina Sharpe argues that, in the trauma of this moment, "[l]anguage disintegrates" (Sharpe 2016, p. 69). For her, this evokes the inability to speak because the mouth is utterly dry from thirst: "Language has deserted the tongue that is thirsty" (ibid.)

[19] Walvin reports that the ship had taken ten weeks to reach the Caribbean, and then, once in sight of Jamaica, the crew made a serious navigational error: they mistook Jamaica for Cape Tiburon on St. Domingue, an enemy island, and steered away from it (Walvin 2011, pp. 88, 92).

sea, *Zong!*'s poetics involves creating new forms from the decomposed legal text in order to express what was inexpressible in the received language. In addition to breaking apart the phrases and words of the legal text, Philip's composition process indicates a process of continual decomposition and recomposition to produce new verbal formations:

> Thus, every word of the twenty-six numbered poems (and the six unnumbered poems labeled "Dicta") in the first section of *Zong!*, called "Os" (Latin for "bone"), can be found in the *Gregson* decision. After working with (and working over) the legal discourse in this highly constrained manner, Philip has written the remaining four sections—"Sal," "Ventus," "Ratio," and "Ferrum" (Latin for "salt," "wind," "reason," and "iron")—with a word store composed of the words of the decision as well as any words to be found within each of those words (each word's imperfect anagram, that is). (Shockley 2011, pp. 807–8)

Philip does not simply break apart the legal decision into individual words used to compose the poems in *Zong!*, but she also creates new words from the letters within the legal decision's words. This composition process reflects the sea's capacity for continual reformation. To effect decontamination, Philip applies this capacity to language in the process, revealing both multispecies entanglements and the becoming-flesh of black female bodies through sexual violence.

Recomposition activates memory: *Zong!* seeks a form and language that can express the experience of becoming flesh by allowing the drowned to haunt the text. *Zong!* produces new formations that imagine the drowned and fugitive memories, stories, sounds, quiet, images, and languages of those on board the ship. These new formations are able to express the rupture Philip identifies as central to the Caribbean. Further, they allow the poem to convey what the contaminated imperial language cannot. What emerges at times in Philip's poem is a language for those who were trafficked, especially the memories of enslaved women. *Zong!* gives rise to new forms for imagining the experiences that the archive ignores and obscures. It offers glimpses of the story that the legal document fails to express. In doing so, the poem emphasizes how "black women's fleshly existence remains a structural vulnerability to violence, a condition that is also a 'grammar'—an unconscious system of rules—that marks black women as the 'zero degree of social conceptualization'" (Leong 2016a, p. 22).

Philip re-forms the pieces of the legal text to create a rich soundscape with visual effects that concretize the sea's materialities as useful resources for decontamination. In this example from the section titled "Sal", "she" refers to a woman held captive on the *Zong* (see Figure 2):

The words fracture out of English into phonemes—the diphthong "o" and the unvoiced fricative "s"—and then recombine into the Latin word "os". As the bones of "os" fall down the page, the o's rise like bubbles of air. The sounds "oh" and "es" become the letters "o" and "s" that also graphically suggest the shape of an angelfish or butterflyfish, the rightmost o, o, and s forming its pointed snout. Whereas *Une Tempête* reconstitutes the drowned as coral and pearls—hard substances that are precious, *Zong!* visually reconstitutes its drowned words in the form of a fish. The fish also contains the letter s, o, s repeated three times, indicating the Morse code "SOS"—an appeal for help used by ships at sea.[20]

Moreover, the space between words and letters resists containment, opening up breathing room. This breathing room both aspirates the dead, allowing them to speak, and suggests underwater spirits,

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[20] Here, the poem may gesture to Amiri Baraka's "SOS":

> Calling black people
> Calling all black people, man woman child
> Wherever you are, calling you, urgent, come in
> Black People, come in, wherever you are, urgent, calling
> you, calling all black people
> calling all black people, come in, black people, come
> on in. (Baraka 1971, p. 181)

Ẹbọra, that can breathe underwater.[21] In addition to the "o" air bubbles, such visual breathing space floats around words and individual letters. The poem increases its breathfulness with repetition of the diphthong "o" and the unvoiced fricative "s" sounds that produce what Christina Sharpe has called "audible breath" (Sharpe 2016, p. 109). Readers are meant to feel the puff of air that follows their pronouncing of the "oh" or in the slow exhale of the "s". This white space of decomposition and recomposition breaks the words of the legal text into breath, the breath denied to those drowned in the sea.

Philip's recomposition gives rise to decontaminated language in a form akin to Brathwaite's "nation language", language that can express Caribbean experiences. For Brathwaite, English is the language of a colonial education, of the official, and of the planter. The poems he learned in school explain snow, but he seeks a language that can describe the experience of a hurricane, for example. He defines nation language as "the kind of English spoken by the people who were brought to the Caribbean, not the official English now, but the language of slaves and laborers, the servants who were brought in by the conquistadors" (Brathwaite 1984, pp. 5–6). Characterized as "submerged" and emergent, nation language bears the traces of ancestral languages, including Asian, Amerindian, and African languages, and constantly transforms itself into new forms.[22] Though it may include English words, its rhythms, timbre, and syntax are markedly not English. Brathwaite argues that nation language began to surface in mainstream Caribbean poetry when it broke the pentameter: "The hurricane does not roar in pentameters. And that's the problem: how do you get a rhythm which approximates the *natural* experience, the *environmental* experience?" (p. 10, emphasis in original).

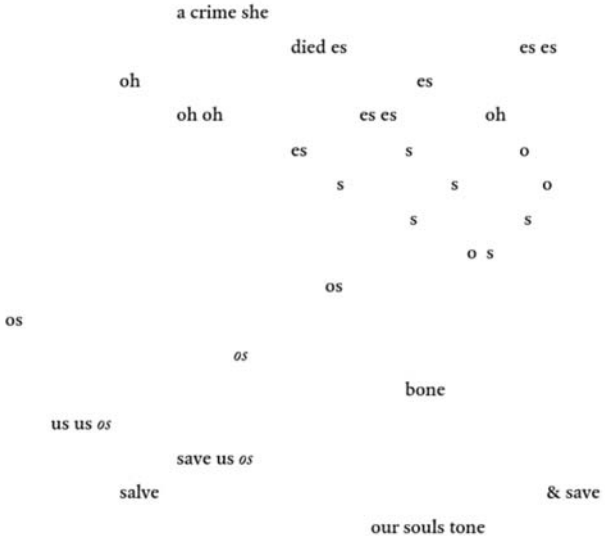

Figure 2. Excerpt from *Zong!* (p. 63).

The urgent appeal in Baraka's "SOS", a poem that calls "all black people" in, echoes *Zong!*'s own plea: "save us".

[21] Some Afrofuturistic works imagine new beings who are the descendants of drowned Africans and who have created their own communities on the floor of the ocean. See, for example, clipping.'s "The Deep" (Sub Pop 2017).

[22] Brathwaite explains that "imported languages" such as the languages of "Ashanti, Congo, Yoruba, all that mighty coast of western Africa" had "to submerge themselves, because officially the conquering peoples—the Spaniards, the English, the French, the Dutch—insisted that the language of public discourse and conversation, of obedience, command and conception should be English, French, Spanish or Dutch. They did not wish to hear people speaking Ashanti or any of the Congolese languages. So there was a submergence of this imported language. Its status became one of inferiority" (Brathwaite 1984, p. 7).

Notably, nation language breaks down one form (the pentameter) through its own form, a move Brathwaite explicitly attributes to Eliot's influence (pp. 17, 30).[23]

Indeed, as words, shapes, and sounds recompose in *Zong!*, the enslaved's voices rupture the text as nation language. These ruptures tell of—"*dem cam fo mi in/de field me run/run*"—and describe the enslavers actions—"*sit dem/seh dem eat beef dem/have beer dem lav a/lav a*" (Philip 2008, pp. 104–5).[24] They also share aspects of Yoruban spirituality: "*ba ba am beg you/do ebo fo mi*", which asks a father "baba" to offer a sacrifice, "ebo", for the speaker (p. 105). Further, an enslaved man asserts his personhood/humanity when called and treated like a dog: "good dog he pats it *me/I be man me man*" (p. 109). When these fragments of nation language first appear, they are in italics, but as the poem progresses, they appear in roman type, which indicates that the process of breaking through the legal text is becoming a new norm. The poem uses nation language to express the experience of those who were kidnapped and forced to migrate on the Middle Passage across the sea.

Nation language, in turn, allows *Zong!* to pull black women's memories from the decomposed legal text. These memories include the moment of capture, as above. Early in "Sal" and across the remaining sections, the poem repeats "she falls falling", referring to a memory of a woman falling into the sea from the ship, one of many repetitions in the poem that evoke ocean waves. This woman often appears in reference to "a rose", which further compares her with Africa, as in the line "she f alls falling/found a rose fou/nd Africa" (p. 63).[25] The memories also illuminate black women's experiences at the hands of the captain and crew on board slave ships during the Middle Passage, particularly continual instances of sexual violence that highlight how "race is constituted by a repeated sadistic white pleasure in black female suffering" (Nash 2014, p. 52). *Zong!* relates some of these experiences through the point of the view of the crew. The white male speaker details how he wins sexual access to a particular enslaved woman in a poker game for "forty days nights" and how "she bend s/over the pain" (Philip 2008, pp. 106–7). The poem refers to the sexual assault of enslaved women throughout and often in the same breath as the speaker addresses the woman to whom he writes, the "Women Who Wait" per the Manifesto appearing in the book's textual apparatus: "dear/ruth dear dear ruth I won her was/wont to bed her bet/ten then forty/guineas first an/ace/of spaces the deuce it was that/got me her forty days nights" (ibid.). For Philip, focusing on violence against black women's bodies is vital to remembering the realities of the Middle Passage. Like rupture, women's experiences are paramount to the story of the Caribbean, and Philip's reading of the Caribbean is gendered for this reason: "Hold the image of the woman's body—the Black woman's body—as central to all that is happening in the Caribbean. Because when we think of the Caribbean we have to think of cut—as in wound—and cunt into which Columbus, emissary of the Old World, would penetrate on behalf of his master" (Philip 2017). In this gendered reading of the Caribbean and the history of colonization, Philip links the rape of the Caribbean, a colonial metaphor for the extraction and exploitation of its resources and people, to the rape of black women.

Emphasizing black women's experiences, *Zong!* takes a revisionary approach to male-authored writing from the Caribbean. It responds to Brathwaite's use of feminine symbolic language in figuring Barbados as Mother in *Mother Poem* and Walcott's "*mer* [as] both mother and sea" in *Omeros* (Walcott 1990, p. 231). More pointedly, *Zong!*'s revisionary response offers a "contradistinction to male-authored literary versions" of the *Zong* massacre, such as David Dabydeen's ekphrastic "Turner",

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[23] Brathwaite continues, "What T. S. Eliot did for Caribbean poetry and Caribbean literature was to introduce the notion of the speaking voice, the conversational tone. That is what really attracted us to Eliot. And you can see how the Caribbean poets introduced here [Claude McKay, George Campbell, John Figueroa, Derek Walcott] have been influenced by him, although they eventually went on to become part of their own environmental expression" (Brathwaite 1984, pp. 30–31). He further claims that it was Eliot's actual voice heard on recordings that drove this shift toward breaking the pentameter. Notably, T. S. Eliot is the only European influence on his poetry that Brathwaite will acknowledge (Pollard 2004, p. 2; Jenkins 2004, p. 95).

[24] Per the glossary that appears at the end of *Zong!*, "lava lava" is West African patois for "talk" (Philip 2008, p. 184).

[25] (*Zong!*)'s use of "rose" to refer to an enslaved African woman recalls Robert Hayden's poem "Middle Passage" in which "That Crew and Captain lusted with the comeliest/of the savage girls kept naked in the cabins; that there was one they called The Guinea Rose" (Hayden 1985, p. 50).

a poem "steeped in maternal imagery" that fails to consider women's experiences (Jenkins 2004, pp. 127, 191).[26] In contrast, in *Zong!*, *Gregson v. Gilbert* is decomposed and recomposed into stories that give prominence to women's experiences of sexual assault. These imagined memories also show the agency of black women. One white male speaker, in a letter home, tells of putting a string ring on the finger of an enslaved woman whom he had raped, as though they were engaged. The black woman throws the string he has tied on her finger overboard and waves her hand to show that she has replaced it with a red string "for *san go* she says/and dives... smiles/and dives ruth pray for me" (Philip 2008, p. 118). The syllables "*san go*" refer to Sango, an Orisha, a god of thunder and lightning and anger who is associated with the color red (Shujaa and Shujaa 2015). The woman angrily rejects the crew member's fantasy of engagement and its assumption of consensual sex. Then, she commits suicide, diving overboard, with a smile, in an act of resistance. Citing Adrienne Davis, Nicole Gervasio comments that "history has all too frequently elided the possibility that enslaved women could have been 'gender activists operating independently of feminisms's official white foremothers or, even more radically, as their predecessors in recognizing and resisting gender subordination'" (Gervasio 2019, p. 3). *Zong!* challenges such elisions through a poetics of decontamination.

Moreover, in *Zong!*, these imagined but fugitive memories become entangled with representations of historical and material geographies of the sea. That is, the poem juxtaposes representations of black women's flesh with imagined historical texts that could very well be part of the archive of enslavement. In the disruptive underwater environment, the book imagines the crews' letters home floating amid sexual activity and fish life, as in this example from "Ferrum" (see Figure 3):

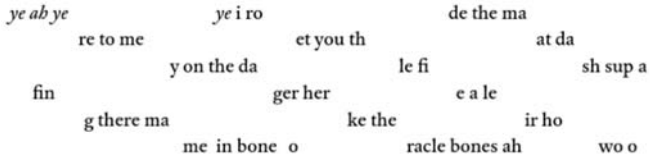

Figure 3. Excerpt from *Zong!* (p. 140).

Here, the poem envisions a crew member's letter home—"I rode the mare to meet you that day on the dale"—interrupted by "fish sup a finger here a leg there make their home in bone" (ibid.). Fish have begun to eat the drowned thrown overboard, and the black female flesh is literally decomposed into parts—finger, leg, and bone—which becomes a home for the fish. The dispersal of the fragmented words on the page also allows "a finger here" to collide with "finger her", producing conflation between beloveds and victims, acts of love and sexual violence—conflation that appears throughout the book.[27] More to the point, "fish sup a finger here/finger her" aptly conveys the contradiction between the captive body's "simultaneous thingness and sensuality" (Weheliye 2014). Violently revealed as flesh, black women stand outside the proper "mode of being Human" (Wynter 2003, p. 263).[28] As the book progresses, the stories, speakers, and species become more entangled, with the text switching more rapidly among speakers, as if memory were supplanting the historical record through interruptions that come in the voices of the enslaved. Speaking back to Eliot's reconstituted whole and to the *Gregson v. Gilbert* text's historical authority, the poem's decontaminated history produces something incoherent and uncertain, partial and abyssal, springing from memory and loss.

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[26] For a more extensive comparative reading of Dabydeen's "Turner" and Philip's *Zong!* refer to Ellen Howley's essay "The Sea and Memory: Poetic Reconsiderations of the Zong Massacre" in *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* (Howley 2019).

[27] For a brief analysis of "the traffic between fact, fantasy, desire, and violence" in the archive of enslavement, see Hartman (2008) "Venus", pp. 5–6.

[28] Wynter's category of "Man" is emblematic of the proper "mode of being Human" (p. 260). In Leong's reading of *Zong!*, she explains that "mechanisms of 'Man' have concentrated on establishing black populations as inferior" (Leong 2016b, p. 807). In other words, "to be 'Man' means to be non-black" (ibid.).

Through decomposition of the legal document, *Zong!* also evokes the sonic aspects of the marine world marked by quiet rather than silence.[29] Not only the memories, but also the quiet of the enslaved break through the record. In *Zong!*, quiet is an expressive sonic disturbance that does not aim to fill the gaps from missing stories so much as to underline them.[30] The poem's quiet dwells at the limit of meaning both to refuse the historical record's violent abstraction of slavery and to undermine the purposes of conventional language. Expanding what can be said, this sonic quality arises by way of formal innovation: the spacing of the words and letters on the page that inserts breath into the poem. In *Freedom Time: The Poetics and Politics of Black Experimental Writing*, Anthony Reed argues that black experimental writing expands what can be thought and said through form (Reed 2014, p. 18). Reading *Zong!*, he proposes that Philip practices "broken witness", which is not "giving voice" but "voicing the silence" (p. 28). Reed's choice of the word "voicing" suggests that the blankness of the white space in *Zong!* is not silent. Again, the poem's breathing space is quiet rather than silent. It is a vibration, hum, or pulse that exceeds words and the expressiveness associated with language to offer another form of expression, a faint "black noise" through which Philip rethinks the past (see Figure 4):

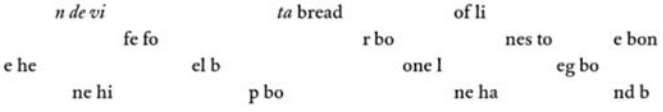

Figure 4. Excerpt from *Zong!* (p. 137).

The space between the words evokes a pulse that undulates between syllables and letters, a vibration that interrupts the words and letters of "toe bone heel bone leg bone hip bone hand b[one]". Indeed, Philip's oral performances of *Zong!* exhibit the expressiveness of this sonic element through pauses, breaths, and the lengthening of letters into soft moans and murmurs (BeguilingAcronym 2010). The decomposition of a word like "water", along with the repetition of individual letters, as in "Zong! #1", creates this sense of the sound persisting and echoing underwater, as though the sounds of the drowned continue to echo underwater: "w w w gg d d d" (3). Philip's poetics of decontamination both helps the hum to persist and invites a practice that allows for hearing it. Philip supports this reading of quiet in *Zong!* when she considers "the idea of sound never ceasing within water" and wonders "whether the sounds of those murdered Africans continue to resound and echo underwater" in "Notanda" (p. 203).[31] Sensing these sounds memorializes those whose stories were left out of the *Gregson* decision.

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[29] This brief discussion of quiet is in conversation with Kevin Everod Quashie's theory of black quiet. He understands quiet as "a quality or a sensibility of being, as a manner of expression" of the interior, or the inner life (Quashie 2009, p. 333). As such, quiet offers a frame for understanding black culture in a "richer, fuller, more complicated [way] than a discourse of resistance can paint" (p. 339). In so doing, it "honors the contemplative quality that is also characteristic of black culture" (ibid.) In contrast with silence, which "implies something that is suppressed or repressed", quiet, he argues, is "presence" and "can encompass and represent wild motion" (p. 334).

[30] A distinguished scholarship explores the poem's formal effects in relation to the gaps and silences in the archive of enslavement, arguing that the poem seeks to tell the story of the *Zong* massacre while highlighting the missing voices from the archive. See, for example, Jenny Sharpe's "The Archive and Affective Memory in M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!*" (Sharpe 2014) and Evie Shockley's "Going Overboard: African American Poetic Innovation and the Middle Passage" (Shockley 2011). In particular, Manuela Coppola (2013) explores how the poem "engages history rather than merely representing it" through its use of gaps and silences that "explode" language complicit in oppression and that question traditional representations of memory (pp. 67, 72).

[31] In a brief reading of *Zong!* in *Black and Blur*, Moten registers Philip's echoing "phonic remains" of "the shipped" as a quiet that is "barely audible, given only in distortion" but ongoing: "Her cryptanalytic immersion in the exhausted, mute, mutating language of animate cargo muffled by socially dead captains marks and extends this persistence" of sound in water (Moten 2017, pp. 160–1).

3. Shoals

In order to understand *Zong!*, we must see how it depicts the sea as a material space characterized by movement, multispecies relations, and continual reformation, not merely on the surface but below the surface as well. Engaging with the biochemical, physical, historical, and imaginative geographies of the sea, the poem enables a reading practice by which these new sonic and imaginative formations might be imagined as shoals. In her book *The Black Shoals*, Tiffany Lethabo King identifies black thought, study, and aesthetics as shoals that "disrupt the time and space reflected by Western disciplinary formations and their seminal texts" (King 2019, pp. 1–2). Shoals, she explains, are oceanic formations, such as coral beds, rock formations, and sandbars, "that cause one to pause before proceeding" and "create a bar or barrier that is difficult to pass": "Materially, it is a site where movement as usual cannot proceed" (pp. 2–3). Shoals are also large groups of fish swimming together. In addition to these meanings, "shoal" is "used in the form of a verb to describe how a ship or vessel slows down to navigate a rocky or rough seabed" (p. 3). I want to repurpose King's use of "shoal" to apply it to the products of continual reformation that emerge from *Zong!*'s decontaminating process. I argue that the new forms produced through this process—the bits of nation language, glimpses of black women's experiences, and the entanglements within multispecies assemblages—might be thought of as shoals. These imagined memories and sonic seascapes *shoal* our usual reading of the legal text.

Reading *Zong!* in this way also enables us to encounter the *Gregson v. Gilbert* legal report anew, newly able to cope with its legacy. Such an argument helps to account for the reprinting of the entire 500-word *Gregson v. Gilbert* legal report at the end of Philip's book. While Fehskens argues that this full reproduction of the legal decision represents the "open-ended yet rational presumptuousness of the Law" (Fehskens 2012, p. 422), I read the restoration of the original text differently, applying Hartman's notion of inheritance in her discussion of enslaver Thomas Thistlewood's meticulously kept diary: "what is more difficult [than 'recovering enslaved lives from the annihilating force' of Thistlewood's descriptions] is to acknowledge as our inheritance the brutal Latin phrases spilling into the pages of his journals" (Hartman 2008, p. 6). Thistlewood daily detailed graphic accounts of physical and sexual violence against the enslaved, the latter of which he recorded in simple Latin abbreviations: "a.m. About eleven o'clock, *Cum* Ellin, an Ebo, by the morass side, *Sup. Terr.* toward the little plantain walk" (Hall 1999, p. 29), meaning he raped Ellin on the ground (*Sup. Terr.*). Hartman signals that we inherit this violent history along with the difficulty of telling the stories of those who lived through such violence using the languages in which it was recorded. Further, Hartman charges that narrating such a history is essential to understanding how the afterlife of slavery licenses violence in the present: "narrating counter-histories of slavery has always been inseparable from writing a history of the present, by which I mean the incomplete project of freedom, and the precarious life of an ex-slave, a condition defined by the vulnerability to premature death and gratuitous acts of violence" (Hartman 2008, p. 4). Her point is that efforts to rewrite the past involve rewriting the aftermath of the past on the present. Philip takes up this mantle by allowing the legal document to exist whole again at the end of the book, because one legacy of the *Gregson v. Gilbert* text is the violence it sanctions in the present. But, through the decontaminating process staged in the poem that precedes the legal text in the book, *Zong!* invites a radically transformed encounter with this text. The poem shoals our reading of the reconstituted *Gregson v. Gilbert* text via decontaminated formations. We might even say that this last concluding fragment of *Zong!* "shoals" us against ruin by allowing us to confront it word for word, acknowledging it at once as inheritance and as a provocation.

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Article

Gwendolyn Brooks and the Legacies of Architectural Modernity

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Abstract: This essay reads the work of poet, Gwendolyn Brooks, in terms of its critical engagement with the architectural modernity of her home city, Chicago. Taking her poetry from *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945) through to the 1968 collection, *In the Mecca*, as a primary focus, the essay traces the significance of Chicago style architecture on Brooks' aesthetic. It was in Chicago that some of the first tall office buildings were designed; it was here that structural steel and glass were first used to distinctive architectural effect, and it was here, in 1893, that the World's Columbian Exposition was held—an event that, for better or worse, was to shape American architecture well into the twentieth century. Brooks' poetry is alert to this history, attuned to contemporary debates about urban design and sensitive to architectural experience and affect. This context informs and shapes her work in often unexpected ways. Her approach is often oblique (registered in metaphor, style, and voice) but nevertheless incisive in its rendering of the relationship between architecture, modernity and power.

Keywords: Gwendolyn Brooks; architecture; modernity; Chicago

This essay reads the work of poet, Gwendolyn Brooks (1917–2000), in terms of its engagement with the architectural modernity of her home city, Chicago. It was in Chicago that some of the first tall office buildings were designed; it was here that structural steel and glass were first used to distinctive architectural effect, and it was here, in 1893, that the World's Columbian Exposition, or Chicago World Fair, was held—an event that, for better or worse, was to shape American architecture well into the twentieth century. Brooks' approach to this legacy is often oblique and her rendering of the everyday architectural environment proceeds primarily through the subtleties of structure, metaphor, style and voice. Nevertheless, the contemporary architectural context is everywhere present. It mattered to Brooks and it informs and shapes poems from *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945) through *Annie Allen* (1949) to *In the Mecca* (1968), providing an important foundation for her emerging politics and her distinctive aesthetic. By reading Brooks through the frame of Chicago architecture (and by reading Chicago architecture through Brooks' lens) we can see how the specificity of the contemporary built environment inflected lived experience and its poetic representation, exposing new layers of meaning and exemplifying Brooks' stature as an acute cultural commentator.

In this essay, I do a number of key things. I trace the history of architecture in Chicago—which is also, as will become clear, the history of racial segregation—and I show how Brooks evokes, or better still, exposes what this history means to black citizens. I offer a reading of her work which is attuned to the ways in which architecture is inflected in poetry—often in subtle or circumspect ways.[1] With Adrienne Brown's recent *The Black Skyscraper: Architecture and the Perception of Race* in mind, I further reflect on Brooks' experience of architectural innovation. Brown's point is that the rise of modern architecture—heralded and thereafter epitomized by Chicago style—was predicated on "processes of racial perception and apprehension" (Brown 2017, p. 3). Specifically, skyscraper architecture (born in

[1] My emphasis on architectural detail provides a different focus to, for example, Courtney Thorsson's reading of "Gwendolyn Brooks' Black Aesthetic of the Domestic" (Thorsson 2015).

Chicago) compromised or "disrupted" accepted hierarchies of race and power; the view from the top rendered the subject below in miniature and as a powerless black dot, thereby problematizing whiteness at precisely the moment when whiteness was felt to be under threat (Brown 2017, p. 22). Brooks' poetry, I propose, traces the ways in which black subjectivity is negotiated in such a context and provides an important perspective on the relationship between architecture, modernity, race and power.

1. Chicago Architecture

Brooks' Chicago is a city of architectural innovation. In the late nineteenth century it was the crucible and testbed for architects and engineers such as John Wellborn Root, Dankmar Adler, Daniel Burnham and Louis Sullivan, and in the early twentieth century, of a new generation of moderns, including Frank Lloyd Wright and Mies van der Rohe.[2] The first group pioneered the use of structural metal frames, for example in Root's Monadnock Building of 1888–92 and Root and Burnham's Masonic Temple of 1890–92.[3] Assisted by innovations such as Bessemer steel (mass-produced, economical and load-bearing) these architects were successively able to build higher, to open out a building's interior and to broaden window apertures thereby maximizing natural light and, of course, freeing up more space for rent. Other new technologies, including electric lighting and elevators, further coincided to make it suddenly possible to build tall, robust, usable and financially viable structures. The skyscraper, soon to be regarded as the defining feature of urban American modernity, was born. More broadly, and as a consequence of these and related developments, what we now identify as "modern" architecture—tall buildings, open plan spaces, clean lines, and the use of steel, glass and other light, transparent or reflective materials—also began to emerge, as characterised by the "silver" and "bright glass" of Chicago's Michigan Avenue (Brooks 1993, p. 47).

Chicago at the turn-of-the century was exactly the place to make one's name as an architect. Originally located on ancient Potawatomi Indian lands at the point where goods coming from the north via Lake Michigan could be transferred via the Des Plaines River to the Mississippi (Dyja 2013, p. xxii), the city grew rapidly—sustained in part by the development of the railways—until by 1871, it covered half a mile and had a population of some 300,000 (Algren 2011, p. 110). In October of that year, the Great Fire burned out most of the city's infrastructure, inadvertently providing a clean slate for investors, developers and architects. At the same time, the transition across America away from agriculture and towards manufacturing, and population shifts including the post-Civil War move north of African American workers, generated a thriving economy and an urgent need for industrial premises, housing and infrastructure. Chicago from the outset was open to, indeed depended on, the spirit of invention. As Thomas Dyja notes in his compelling account of the city's growth, Chicago regarded itself for some considerable time as America's premier city.

The rush to develop was largely predicated on the labour of black and ethnic workers and, particularly in the case of black communities, on their segregation.[4] We see something of the different, and hitherto occluded, experience of these groups in fellow Chicago writer, Carl Sandburg's, poems "Chicago" and "The People, Yes" (Sandburg 2003, pp. 3, 437–617). As Chicago's great new buildings emerged and as the city became more and more crowded, prejudice against black migrants pushed them into certain restricted areas on the city's South Side, the so-called "Black Belt" or, more affirmatively, "Bronzeville," as per the title of Brooks' first collection. In a 1969 interview, she recalled: "I started out talking about Bronzeville, but 'Bronzeville's' almost meaningless by now, I suppose, since Bronzeville has spread and spread all over. Bronzeville, incidentally, was not my own title. That was invented by the *Chicago Defender* long, long ago to refer to the then black area" (Brooks 1972, p. 160). The emergence of

[2] For an idiosyncratic account of the period, see Louis Sullivan's *Autobiography of an Idea* (1956) and for a broader view of the history of modern American architecture, see (Giedion 1967, *Space, Time and Architecture*) and (Waldheim and Ray 2005, *Chicago Architecture*).
[3] On the Masonic Lodge, see (Wolner 2005).
[4] For an early and influential account of this history, see (Drake and Cayton 1945, *Black Metropolis*).

improved transport links to areas outside the city subsequently fostered the growth of the suburbs and the phenomenon which became known as white flight. Brooks' "Beverley Hills, Chicago," discussed later, reflects on these circumstances while "The Ballad of Rudolph Reed" from her 1960 collection, *The Bean Eaters*, traces the violent repercussions for a black family that seeks a home "in a street of bitter white" (Brooks 1987, p. 377).[5] At the same time as white suburbs were expanding, urban housing was subject to onerous restrictive covenants and other discriminatory lending practices which meant that black citizens were denied access to any but the poorest and meanest of areas, or what Brooks in *Maud Martha* calls the "unhandsome gray and decay of the double-apartment buildings" (Brooks 1993, p. 5).[6]

As I will argue later, these larger processes are crystalized—and critiqued —in a number of Brooks' poems, most notably, "kitchenette building" (from *A Street in Bronzeville*) and "In the Mecca" from the collection of that name. Of kitchenettes, as Rashad Shabazz notes, they "were the place and mechanism that enabled blacks to be packed into the Black Belt. Through their tight and incommodious geography, these one-room shacks jammed with people were an assault on black dignity and a physical reminder of containment" (Shabazz 2015, p. 34). Residents of the Mecca building and the other kitchenettes that feature in Brooks' poetry were living Louis Sullivan's influential architectural truism that "form ever follows function" (Sullivan 1947, p. 208; Sullivan 1956, pp. 258, 290). What I mean by this is that if the "function" is perceived by a powerful white culture to be the provision of barely adequate housing for black citizens, then it becomes possible for the "form" of that housing—undersized rooms, decaying infrastructure—to take hold. The adage was fundamental to the development of modern American architecture. It is not a phrase that Brooks ever cites; nevertheless, her poetry exposes and critiques the principle and its consequences.

At the same time as black residents were confined to particular spaces, the move in modern architecture, certainly from the 1930s onwards with advances in technology and new ideas from Europe, was towards the further opening out of space. In the work of Chicago architect, Frank Lloyd Wright, for example (with which Brooks was evidently familiar—see the note in her memoir, *Report from Part Two*, about performing a reading at a home of his design (Brooks 1996, p. 98)) we find a celebration of open spaces, horizontal lines, a lateral and expansive vision and the removal of boundaries. Interviewed by *Time* magazine, Wright reflects "I was working towards the elimination of the wall [. . .] as a means of opening up space" (Usonian Architect 1938, p. 30); it's an important point because so much of Brooks' work is about walls, and the effect these have on black citizens. Another way of putting this is to say that Brooks' work offers a counter-narrative of architectural modernity—or a view of its effects when seen from a hitherto (and in many ways deliberately and structurally) obscured perspective. When Wright proceeds to rationalize his architectural vision as a riposte to the "crowding" which he saw as a characteristic of late nineteenth-century Chicago, and as fundamentally democratic in intent (he wanted to deliver that "sense of space as should belong to a free people" and to open "a new world of thought that would certainly tear down the old world completely" (Wright 1954, pp. 14, 21, 22)), we can see both how his aspirations might speak to the conditions of life in black Chicago but also how, fundamentally, he failed, or stopped short, of making that connection. If Wright's vision is of "a freedom of space [. . .] that was quintessentially modern" (Levine 1996, p. 57), and if black citizens are denied access to that space, are they thereby rendered "unmodern"? Brooks reads the material conditions of her subjects in terms that engage with this abstract rhetoric of space, freedom, lightness and modernity. With Adrienne Brown's work in mind, I suggest that her poems "illustrate the ways the built environment affects the perceptual and affective life of race" (Brown 2017, p. 30).

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[5] Unless otherwise indicated, quotations from Brooks' poetry are taken from her 1987 collected volume, *Blacks*. I have replicated her choices with regards to the capitalization of certain titles, e.g., "kitchenette building," discussed later.

[6] For more on the history of the suburbs see Jackson (1985) *Crabgrass Frontier* and the essays in *The New Suburban History* (Kruse and Sugrue 2006). It is worth remembering the case of Carl Hansberry (father of Brooks' contemporary, the playwright Lorraine Hansberry). In 1938, Hansberry's father, a Chicago property developer who had acquired his wealth by sub-dividing units in black areas, was confronted by a "restrictive covenant prohibiting nonwhite residence" when he tried to move his family into the predominantly white Washington Park area (Jurca 2001, p. 216, n. 50).

2. Bronzeville

Brooks' first collection, *A Street in Bronzeville*, is firmly located in the distinctive architectural environment of mid-century Chicago and has, I will argue, a particular architectural register. "The old-marrieds," the first poem in the title-poem sequence that opens the collection, places its subjects in the "crowding darkness" (Brooks 1987, p. 19). This is at one and the same time, an urban street scene akin to those that we see in Brooks' modernist predecessors (T.S. Eliot and Hart Crane, for example) and, more importantly, a physical and material location. Black housing in Chicago was typically over-crowded, poorly lit (formerly spacious departments were subdivided to form smaller "kitchenette" units) and badly maintained (Shabazz 2015, p. 36). The "crowding darkness" thus has a specifically architectural meaning. The oppressive nature of this environment is evident from the poem's first word, "But," and from the sense of denial and exclusion apparent in the subjects' (self?) silencing: "not a word did they say." The poem tries hard to read this context as a possible site of loving affection, hence allusions to "pretty-coated birds," to "lovers," glimpsed up side streets, and to the auspicious timeframe (a midnight in May). Nevertheless, as line two cautions, and as the repetition in the final line of the sombre initial phrase makes clear, the "crowding darkness" continues to prevent intimacy, paradoxically denying the "old-marrieds" the chance of closeness: "not a word did they say." This initial and terminal repetition, coupled with the flat rhyme scheme (*aabbaa*) produces a clamped and claustrophobic effect commensurate with the built surroundings.

A similar sense of constraint informs the next poem in the collection, "kitchenette building" (Brooks 1987, p. 20). Again, a restrictive architectural environment seems to curtail the subject's experience, opportunities and sense of self. Again, the speaker's self-restraint, revealed in the cautious, qualifying "But" at the beginning of stanza two and the persistent negations—"not well! Not for a minute" (final stanza)—tell us much about the necessary accommodations she must make in order to tolerate such a setting. "Kitchenette building" describes conditions in the multiple multi-occupancy buildings of Chicago's South Side. As a young married woman in 1939, Brooks moved into the first of a succession of such apartments. Here, as her biographer George Kent notes, she "felt the cramped dreariness, the increep of bleakness" (Kent 1990, p. 47). This unsavoury environment dehumanizes its residents; "we are things," as line one of "kitchenette building" explains. "We" are subject to the oxymoronic "involuntary plan"—where "plan" means someone else's dictates and, more broadly, the architectural and urban development policies then determining the size and shape of the city. We are "grayed in, and gray," or sapped of light and space and thus of life.

Chapter 15, "The Kitchenette," from Brooks' 1951 novel, *Maud Martha*, further expands on these conditions—on the rats, the roaches, the atmosphere: "The color was gray, and the smell and sound had taken on a suggestion of the properties of color, and impressed one as gray too" (Brooks 1993, p. 63). "Gray" functions as a metonym for black experience in a dark, decaying environment. In *Maud Martha*, again: "there was a whole lot of grayness there" (Brooks 1993, p. 64). In emphasizing the grayness of the black experience in this architectural context, Brooks signals that it is the black citizens' status in relation to whiteness that determines the conditions in which they must live; whiteness is seen to entitle the bearer to superior accommodation whereas "grayness" and/or black identity ("the properties of color") denies one that right. Race, in effect, is doubly-marked. First by the context—after all, it is only black citizens in this period who are living in this way—and then by explicit reference. The point exemplifies Brown's argument that during this period race had to be carefully delineated in order to avoid the disorientating, vertiginous or "giddy" effects of the new architectural environment; in line two of Brooks' poem, "'Dream' makes a giddy sound, not/strong."

Amidst the grayness, the poem's speaker must find other ways of evoking the particular conditions of the "kitchenette building": through smell ("onion fumes," "garbage"), taste ("fried potatoes") and sound (an "aria"). That her speaker can hear an "aria" is a pointed riposte to received views about appropriate places for (and voices of) poetry, for example, to Edmund Wilson's view, writing in *Vanity Fair*, that the Chicago environment "does not naturally lend itself to the music of majestic verse" (Wilson 1920, p. 66). Indeed, the really interesting thing about this poem is the tension that it generates

between the pervasive, soul-destroying atmosphere of life in the kitchenette buildings of Chicago and the refusal on the part of the speaker to let that environment, or this architecture, control her aspirations. Her "dream," introduced at the beginning of stanza two and suspended through to the end of the next stanza, although tentative and qualified ("could a dream send up [?]"), nevertheless survives. The syntax of these two central stanzas, with the delayed performative "let it begin" at the end of stanza three which answers the question about the dream, keeps open the possibility of change, or of living beyond these current circumstances. The final clause in the poem, referring ostensibly to lukewarm bath water (and her "hope to get in it") nevertheless leaves a vestige of "hope" alive. Brooks is weaving a careful path through a set of circumstances which, although they must be exposed, cannot be taken as wholly determining black residents' lived experience. In this respect, too, Brooks is engaging with a set of contemporary debates about architectural determinism—defined as a preoccupation with the effects of buildings, places and living conditions on the manners and morals of residents, or a perception, that "buildings themselves were […] acting upon people, or social material" (Forty 2000, p. 174). This was a particular bugbear of privileged commentators when concerned about the lower classes and black and ethnic groups. "We" may be treated as "things," the poem notes, "We" may be subject to someone else's "plan." Nevertheless, "we" can mediate our own environment (hence "anticipate a message" in stanza three) and, through our "dream[s]" and "hope[s]," settle our own interpretation and intent.

It is characteristic of Brooks' style, and crucial to its effect, that she articulates or names these conditions in order to recast or deny their influence. In *Maud Martha*, for instance, she describes the dirty, decaying conditions in which the "tiny lives" of the children are played out, precisely so as to demonstrate that their own colour, and noise and energy exceed—erase—their immediate circumstances: "cramp, inhibition, choke—they did not trouble themselves about these" (Brooks 1993, p. 5). Similarly, in "the independent man" from *A Street in Bronzeville*, the addressee seems at first to be confined to a "tiny life/In one room or in two rooms or in three" (Brooks 1987, p. 33). But the form and tone of the poem with its rhetorical flourishes and buoyant and expansive thinking, undermine that premise. No one, it transpires, not "any woman," not even a "wife," and certainly not the strictures of the architectural environment, can curtail his spirit. Turning back to "the old-marrieds," too, we should perhaps modify the view that circumstances render Brooks' subjects entirely mute. Instead, what we see in these and other poems is her speakers negotiating or entering into a dialogue with architectural modernity. There is a refusal in other words to be passive, to live the oppression that the architecture seems to impose, and there is a commitment instead to speaking from and of the nuances of what architectural critic Sophie Psarra terms "embodied experience" (Psarra 2009, p. 13).

Brooks invokes the aesthetics of Chicago style architecture without necessarily explicitly naming buildings, drawing on the distinctive look as a way of reflecting on (black) identity, aspiration and agency. "Hunchback girl: she thinks of heaven," also from *A Street in Bronzeville*, takes the emphatic "verticality" which is characteristic of the new urban architecture (Bender 2002, p. 51) as an implicit backdrop to, and stimulus for, the first-person speaker's upward gaze. "My father," the poem opens, heaven must be "a blue place/And straight. Right. Regular" (Brooks 1987, p. 27). Perfection, taking its cue from the contemporary architectural ideal, must be clear ("blue") and as "regular" and true as the Chicago grid and the steel-framed buildings that had arisen post-1871 from the city's swampy ground. Here, anything "crooked" is to be spurned; the straightness of the speaker's aim and her desire for perfection are rendered in an inescapably architectural metaphor—in the embrace of a "love that runs without crookedness/Along its crooked corridors." Heaven, she goes on to insist, is "a planned place surely" (where, again, the plan refers both to a sense of order and to contemporary urban planning). Other poems from *A Street in Bronzeville*, as we have seen, portray disordered, chaotic, or "crooked" environments. "Hunchback girl" shows us the body itself distorted by its surroundings. Likewise, in "the birth in a narrow room" from her next collection, *Annie Allen*, the labouring woman exclaims: "'How pinchy is my room! how can I breathe!'" (Brooks 1971, p. 3). When the hunchback girl thinks of heaven, she thinks of a place distinguished in terms that reflect the architectural idiom

of the day, in straight lines and planes. This is a "planned" spatial order which, in her imagination, sets right the social and affective disorder (the crookedness) of her reality. Free of her body and of the "crooked corridors" that constrain her, she will, in the words of the penultimate line, "walk straightly through most proper halls" (Brooks 1987, p. 27).

Similarly, in the slightly earlier poem, "southeast corner," the "Madam's" final resting place, "out at Lincoln" is marked by a monument the shape and look of which draws its power from contemporary skyscraper architecture (Brooks 1987, p. 23). Here, "the thickest, tallest monument/Cuts grandly the air." The conceit of "Southeast Corner" is that the "Madam," like the skyscraper magnates of the era (Rockefeller, Woolworth et al) converted her wealth into a memorial made of "cool hard steel." Architecture thus becomes a metaphor for a certain power and a particular legacy. In both cases, what we also see is the speakers, at last, staking a claim to a particular space. To fully understand the implications of this, we need to remind ourselves both of the segregated nature of urban Chicago and of the exponential overcrowding that pertained within the Black Belt (the black population of Chicago "more than doubled in the 1910s, from 44,103 to 109,458" (Bluestone 1998, p. 391)). The irony of both poems is that the black female speakers can only lay claim to this space in fantasy (the dream of heaven) or in death (the graveyard plot).

Another poem from the same period, "a song in the front yard," makes a more cautious claim. "A song" is ostensibly, and allegorically, about a good girl's desire to try a little of life on the wild side, or to give in to the temptations of a "good time" (Brooks 1987, p. 28). But this aspiration, again, is realized in terms of the architectural surroundings and, specifically, of restrictions on space. As the poem's opening lines explain: "I've stayed in the front yard all my life./I want a peek at the back." At issue in each of these cases are black Chicagoans' rights to particular spaces. In the architecture of the period, as we saw with respect to Frank Lloyd Wright, space defines modernity (Giedion notes of early twentieth-century architecture, that it was intent on "organizing space in ways that gave form to contemporary feelings" (Giedion 1967, p. 26)) and access to space is a sign of democracy. A lack of space is thereby unmodern, and the denial of space to black citizens is a covert way of refusing the rights and privileges of a democratic society.

3. Plain Style

I have spoken already about the aesthetic of plainness that shaped modern architecture and the model of clean lines that characterized Chicago style (Wallace Stevens commented that "modernity is so Chicagoan, so plain" (Stevens 1977, p. 53)). In Brooks' work, as in contemporary architectural discourse more widely, this clean, modern ideal masks a persistent tension whereby the pull of the past, or of traditional styles, materials and ornament, continues to exert an influence. The architectural debate mirrors a broader cultural and political dialectic in the interwar period (and, arguably, beyond) of tradition *versus* innovation; conservatism *versus* change; old world *versus* new; the past *versus* the future. Brooks engages with these discussions and draws on specifically architectural metaphors in a number of poems. In "The Sundays of Satin-Legs Smith," for example, the much-lauded Satin-Legs is seen rising in the morning and preparing to present himself to the world, "That no performance may be plain or vain" (Brooks 1987, p. 42, stanza three). In the lengthy fifth stanza, we see him working consciously, if quizzically, on his planned appearance for the day. Should he bathe in lavender or pine, lilies or roses? Which ornament, in other words, will best express his identity and mood? In invoking flower motifs, Brooks is replicating the use of foliage as an architectural embellishment. Bluestone explains that the interior balconies in Chicago's Mecca Building were "heavily foliated" (Bluestone 1998, p. 384) while William Hansell notes Brooks' use in that poem of flowers seen withering on the vine (Hansell 1974, p. 203). There is a hierarchy of values—and of power—here. For all that Satin-Legs fantasizes about draping himself in "gentle garden in the best/of taste" he is forced to remember that his true locus is "alleys, garbage pails." The mode of representation that he seeks is out of reach. Denied floral representation (in stanza six, "No! He has not a flower to his name"), Satin-Legs

must find alternative means of self-projection, perhaps through clothes—although the ermine and diamonds of royalty that he yearns for must needs be replaced with less precious materials.

Here we come to the complex crux of this highly ambiguous poem. Just as Satin-Legs must choose the best mode of self-representation, we are asked to weigh up relative values of ornament and simplicity, richness and plainness, and finally to assess the innate beauty of Satin-Legs' own form with his "neat curve" and "angularity" and his "technique of a variegated grace." Courtney Thorsson notes, with this poem as an example, that "the notion that black is beautiful saturates Brooks' poetry" (Thorsson 2015, p. 154). In this look we find, as the next stanza proceeds, "all his sculpture and his art/and all his architectural design." And we are asked to choose between this simple aesthetic—the angles, curves and grace that are emblematic of modern, unadorned style—and an alternative, formed of "marble, complicated stone." It's a superb manoeuvre; Brooks sets up (traditional) ornament as the aspiration but shows us that the true ideal—one that actually is within Satin-Legs' grasp—is of (modern) simplicity. At the same time, the poem leaves open a question about why Satin-Legs should have to reconcile himself to plainness when the culture that surrounds him continues to value ostentatious display. Ornament in this context, or the embrace of embellishment, becomes a form of self-care to which he is entitled even if some would, apparently, urge him to "think with horror of baroque/Rococo." Thus, even if contemporary architecture is turning to embrace the plain and unadorned, residual value attaches to the highly worked, and Satin-Legs should not be denied this rich, decorative pleasure. That the architectural context is, at least in part, at play here is apparent in stanza thirteen with its brutal reminder that, his ideals notwithstanding, a landscape of "broken windows" and "sore avenues" is his lot.

If black spaces are literally and metaphorically cramped and constrained, white spaces, by contrast are imbued with light. Light in this context signals architectural modernity; it suggests the new, the free, the liberated and unconstrained. We recall the lifeless, lightless "gray" of "kitchenette building." In "Beverley Hills, Chicago" from *Annie Allen*, Brooks works with multiple gradations of light and shade in tracing differential access to particular loci, thus imbuing the poem and its context with connotations both architectural and racial. The poem offers a critical commentary on the rise of the suburbs and of so-called white flight. "Beverley Hills, Chicago" is the eighth in the fifteen-poem sequence, "The Womanhood." It opens with an epigraph from fellow poet, E.M. Price, "'and the people live till they have white hair'" (Brooks 1971, pp. 48–49). The line establishes the theme of dignity, longevity and racial difference that sustains the rest of the poem and the tone of longing that persists throughout. It also introduces one end of the spectrum or colour palette that the rest of the poem proceeds to develop. More than this, it tacitly registers something of the wider context—the contemporary housing crisis—which lies behind the growth of the (white) suburbs and the (black) speaker's visit to it.

"Beverley Hills, Chicago" describes the speaker's drive through this privileged environment. The "people" who live here, we know already, are associated with whiteness and with the luxury of a long and leisured life. In the first line of the poem, shades of brown appear in the image of the "dry brown" leaves heard "coughing" beneath the homeowners' feet. It is a metaphor which both diminishes the black subjects and identifies them with some form of malaise. Moreover, it renders them voiceless (they can cough but they can't speak clearly). This theme is echoed in the muted tones throughout the poem and reinforced in the final line where, silenced by the injustice of what they have just seen, the visitors' "voices are a little gruff." From "brown" we move in line three to the suburbanites' lighter "golden gardens." Later again, in stanza three, the setting is rendered in shades of "everlasting gold" where the residents take tea against a "gold-flecked backdrop." By contrast, the speaker and her peers are associated with "little black dots," sour lemons, and noisy and cramped ("sweatingest") apartments (stanzas three and four). In carefully measured tones, marked by exaggerated courtesy and emphatic—if not entirely successful—denials, the speaker insists; "Nobody hates these people" (stanza six). But she cannot let go of a sense of the injustice by which "these people" in this place with this power have so much when we "have not enough." The smooth, restrained surface notwithstanding, it is clear in the final two stanzas that something is awry (or "crooked" to return to "hunchback girl:

she thinks of heaven"), morally, politically, and spatially. "It is only natural" as the poem concludes, that the speaker should expect something different.

"Beverley Hills, Chicago" is more, though, than simply a complaint or lamentation. Just as "kitchenette building" unexpectedly discovers a voice, or an "aria," thus revealing a hitherto overlooked complexity and quality of experience, so too this suburban poem shows us something we may not have expected to find. It is a poem that proceeds discreetly, with so many subtleties and denials that we might miss its substantial point about the unregistered presence of black people within this suburban enclave; they are, after all, here all the time—as gardeners (sweeping up the "brown leaves"), as tea-makers, as burnishers of golden ornaments, as layers out of corpses (see stanza five). This is a poem about denial (hence the repetition of "Nobody" and "not"), constraint and multiple forms of injustice which are experienced at a personal level and in terms of restricted access to particular architectural spaces.[7] But it is also a poem that exerts control over the situation and that covertly sets an important alternative narrative of experience.

A counterpart poem, "The Lovers of the Poor," from the slightly later collection *The Bean Eaters*, is even more explicit in its comparison of suburban luxury and urban grime (Brooks 1987, pp. 349–52). Again, the poem opens with a pattern of light and shade as though to replicate the racial dimension. Again, a succession of emphatic, often rhetorical, negatives (this is "Not Lake Forest, Glencoe./Nothing is sturdy, nothing is majestic" (lines 41–42)) is used to bring into view the thing ostensibly being occluded. This time the implied speaker, or the focalization, is through the eyes of white visitors to a black tenement, the "Ladies from the Ladies' Betterment League" who have made it their business to visit "the worthy poor." In both poems, defamiliarisation is key to the exposure of architectural and social difference. The league visitors cannot help but exclaim at the "Squalor!" and at "This sick four-story hulk, this fibre/With fissures everywhere" (lines 74–75; note the metaphors of disease). And it is a short step from the ladies noting this to Brooks invoking a larger and crucial context—the "puzzled wreckage/Of the middle passage" (lines 70–80). The line refers both to the narrow confines of the building's corridors and, pointedly, to the history of slavery and racial oppression that lies behind what the ladies see. Nevertheless, the poem closes with an assertion of the perspective of the black residents and with now-unguarded contempt for the white women as, in rising panic (hence the transfer of their hysteria onto the building itself, emphasized by the claustrophobic rhyme of "hall" and "wall") they flee:

> Keeping their scented bodies in the center
>
> Of the hall as they walk down the hysterical hall,
>
> They allow their lovely skirts to graze no wall[.]

4. In the Mecca

The unnamed building that the ladies flee at the end of "The Lovers of the Poor" resembles Chicago's famous Mecca Building, also the subject of the title poem of Brooks' 1968 collection. The Mecca Building, labelled the "strangest place in Chicago" in the December 1950 feature by John Bartlow Martin in *Harper's* magazine that Brooks takes as her epigraph, was built in 1891. Designed as an apartment building by Willoughby J. Edbrooke and Franklin Pierce Burnham, and originally featuring 98 large flats, the building was, in its moment, a model of architectural innovation and, with its use of light, open space and the latest materials, of Chicago style. Bluestone notes that it was constructed as part of "the building boom that accompanied the 1893 World's Columbia Exposition" (Bluestone 1998, p. 388). He further records that the Mecca was designed with two extensive wings, featuring "an enormous interior skylit atrium [. . .] each one measuring 33 by 170 feet. In each wing a

[7] This poem writes back to a body of work on the suburbs and anticipates Langston Hughes's 1967 poem, "Suburban Evening." For more on suburban poetry in general, and Hughes's poem in particular, see (Gill 2013).

ground-story lobby, stairs and heavily foliated ornamental balconies, cantilevered from the atrium's walls, provided access to the individual apartments" (Bluestone 1998, p. 384). In this way, the lives of the residents were made visible even as the separate apartments pretended to the kind of cozy intimacy more typically associated in the period with the individual family home.

In 1900, the Mecca was home to 365 people in 107 units most of whom were working or lower-middle class, and all of whom were white. Some twenty year later, with the rise in Chicago's black population noted earlier, and their restriction to certain areas, there were 510 residents, most of whom were black, in 148 units. By the early 1940s, the period when the poem is set, the Mecca housed more than 1000 crammed into multiple sub-divided units, each in poor repair after decades of neglect at the hands of a succession of absentee landlords including, latterly, and as I'll explain later, the Illinois Institute of Technology, or IIT (Bluestone 1998, pp. 390, 394). Brooks had briefly worked in the building as "secretary to a spiritual advisor who sold lucky numbers and 'magic potions'" (Brooks 1996, p. 150). By 1958, when she first drafted the poem, originally as a novel (Melhem 1987, p. 153), the Mecca was gone, demolished some 8 years earlier, and against considerable resistance from the community who lived there, to make way for the development of the IIT, including for buildings designed by acclaimed modernist architect, Mies van der Rohe. Mies was an important figure in contemporary, and specifically, "international style" architecture.[8] He left Hitler's Germany in 1938, arriving in Chicago to take up commissions for the city's Armour Institute and IIT. For reasons of space, I won't rehearse the long and fraught history of this event (although Dyja provides a good overview).[9] I would note, though, that just as Brooks' earlier poems make tacit, but nevertheless critical (in both senses of the word) reference to the architectural history that determined the particular places in which black Chicagoans were permitted to live and work, so too "In the Mecca," tells a story, albeit sometimes obliquely, of the rise of modernity. Melhem suggests of the poem that, "in the course of Mrs. Sallie's search for her daughter, Brooks sketches a representative number of tenants and addresses a broad range of contemporary and philosophical subjects" (Melhem 1987, p. 159) to which I would add that there is also a crucial architectural concern. If black communities in Chicago are restricted to the Black Belt and crammed into crumbling buildings like the Mecca, what happens when even these spaces are denied to them?

The plight of the Mecca Building exemplifies the larger architectural (and racially segregated) history of Chicago. The IIT had been acquiring neighbouring land and razing buildings to enable its own expansion across the 1930s; it was left the Mecca in a will and thus became, in Dyja's words, the "'reluctant landlord' of some one thousand tenants." The Institution's "opinion of them," he goes on to say, "is evident in a 1940 map showing the status of acquisitions—the corner where the Mecca stands is listed as 'vacant'" (Dyja 2013, p. 17). For the decade that IIT owned the building, the institute neglected to improve or even maintain it, apparently in the expectation that—the current housing shortage notwithstanding—tenants would decide to move out. This is the sorry story that Brooks' poem brings to life. What is apparent is that the conditions of life for Chicago's African American communities are inextricably linked with the larger story of architectural advancement. Brooks is clear about the architectural foundation: in her notes on "Work Proposed for 'In the Mecca'" she explains that her aim is "to touch every note in the life of this block-long block-wide building" and thereby to "capsulize the gist of black humanity in general" (Brooks 1972, p. 190). The loss of amenity, the denial of the right to occupy certain spaces and to live in a humane way is the price, it seems, to be paid for progress.

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[8] The concept of an "international style" captured some of the changes evident in the early decades of the century as transnational influences, developments in other artistic fields, and innovations in techniques and materials coalesced. A 1932 exhibition at New York's Museum of Modern art, "Modern Architecture: International Exhibition," and the subsequent catalogue *The International Style* helped disseminate the term. See (Hitchcock and Johnson 1995).

[9] See also the essays in (Lambert 2001).

The poem traces the trauma of one family and one mother, Mrs. Sallie, as she returns to her home in the Mecca only belatedly to realize that one of her children, the aptly named Perdita, is lost. In seeking this child, she sets off on a hopeless quest through the labyrinth of the building. Her journey in and out of dark corners and up and down precipitous steps and lengths of balcony shows us architecture as lived experience and as reification of her vulnerability, confusion and fear. The building was designed for looking, or as a space of "urban spectacle" (Bluestone 1998, p. 392). Here that capacity is pushed to its limit; the architecture itself has allowed someone to be taken. Its lines of sight have either inured the watchers or have proved to be inadequate—for every clear view, there is an equal and opposite corner of obscurity—thus preventing her discovery. Architecture has failed. It is in this context that the opening stanza, with its reference to an acclaimed proponent of modern architecture, is to be read:

> Sit where the light corrupts your face.
>
> Miës Van der Rohe retires from grace.
>
> And the fair fables fall.
>
> (Brooks 1968, p. 5)

Brooks' metaphor of "light" is particularly significant. It recalls "The Ballad of Rudolph Reed" with its exposé of the hegemony of architectural modernity, realized in the "bitter white streets" that violently, murderously, repel him (Brooks 1987, p. 376). She draws on, while also critiquing, the use of light as an important medium in modernist architecture—a tendency which developed from the light-inducing steel structures and horizontal window apertures of turn-of-the-century Chicago style. These opening lines suggest something, to return to Adrienne Brown, about the anxious defence of whiteness in this culture, especially among those who saw the novel perspectives of contemporary architecture as somehow threatening established racial categories. And it sets the whole poem in a broader figurative frame whereby all that is right and good and proper (line two's "fair") is both posited as a virtue and put under question. The fact that "light" here is twinned with corruption and then associated with Mies who, in turn, "retires from" (not "retires in") "grace" suggests that we are in the presence of a fundamental rethinking of the hierarchies of value which might otherwise pertain. In her notes towards the poem, Brooks is clear about the relationship between light and dark: "I wish to present a large variety of personalities against a mosaic of daily affairs, recognizing that the *grimmest* of these is likely to have a streak or two streaks of sun" (Brooks 1972, p. 189; emphasis original). In line three, where "fair fables fall," there is an aural echo of sables (or blacks) and thus a telling oxymoron (light or "fair" *versus* dark or sable) and there is a trace of rhyme ("fall"/wall) which speaks to the wider context of containment and suggests, perhaps, that certain walls—of ignorance or prejudice—might be about to "fall." That the "fair fables fall" implies also that Brooks' mission is to expose the stories, or "fables," which would determine our understanding of life in the Mecca. The *Harper's* article she cites as a lengthy epigraph has been regarded since as perpetuating a highly damaging narrative of black squalor and passivity—a kind of othering which Brooks, as Daniela Kukrechtová indicates, is determined to resist. Light and dark; white and black function in complex and sometimes unexpected ways to structure the poem's meaning.

The architectural framework to this poem of fifty-seven extended stanzas, although skeletal (and thus not explicitly visible) persists throughout, complementing other structuring features. As Karen Jackson Ford argues, "ancient social structures undergird the human architecture of the Mecca building" (Ford 2010, p. 385) while for Kukrechtová, the stanzas "reflect the design of the building, namely the long corridors punctuated by numerous doors" (Kukrechtová 2009, p. 460). We can further trace the architecture in fleeting references to stairs (stanza two); doors and steel (stanza three); to the "threshold" (stanza four) and, later, to windowsills, glass, grilles, gargoyles and so on. In stanza four, where we might expect the oppressive architecture to determine black experience, or subjectivity, we find that the subjects themselves mediate or modify their surroundings, hence "Hyena/The striking debutante" who "bursts" free of her "dusty threshold" to become "One of the first and to the tune of hate,/in all

the Mecca to paint her hair sun-gold." The moment marks a refusal, akin to that of "Satin-Legs Smith" or the residents of the "kitchenette building" to wholly succumb to the dust and the decay.

Shortly thereafter, we are introduced to Mrs. Sallie and straightaway to her dissatisfaction with her environment; "It is bad, is bad," she observes, of her "sick kitchen." Again the metaphor of light is used to invoke contemporary architecture and specifically the loss of access to certain spaces and amenities: "all my lights are little!" she exclaims. The utterance registers her frustration with her lot in general, with the specificity of her living conditions and with her failure or powerlessness to change them:

> 'I want to decorate!' But what is that? A
>
> pomade atop a sewage. An offense.
>
> First comes correctness, *then* embellishment.
>
> (Brooks 1968, p. 8; emphasis original)

Ford suggests that "associating embellishment with the appeasement of suffering, Brooks [. . .] recruits lyric effects to calm the poem after its storm of sorrows and terrible losses" (Ford 2010, pp. 385–86). More than this, Brooks engages with contemporary debates about relative forms of architectural value—the familiar ornament of traditional styles *versus* the austere look of the new, epitomized by Mies van der Rohe and other scions of modernity. Just as Satin-Legs Smith did in "The Sundays of Satin-Legs Smith," Mrs. Sallie is defending her right to rich ornamentation, even as she acknowledges that to get the embellishment right, or to achieve the look she desires, there needs first to be a level of order or "correctness." Elsewhere, for example in "A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi, Meanwhile, a Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon" from *The Bean Eaters*, Brooks' poem on the Emmet Till murder, it is the erosion of the decorative surface that signals the rupture in the social fabric beneath. There, the white woman implicated in Till's fate recognizes "with terrible clarity" that "her composition/Had disintegrated" and that "although the pattern prevailed,/The breaks were everywhere" (Brooks 1987, p. 335). Another way of reading the images in both poems is to say that Brooks is conceding that even simplicity (aesthetic "correctness") is an effect which is achieved only by careful work—an insight which stands for this very poem. Its ostensibly straightforward ballad form, its narrative thrust, its cast of characters, all are the fruits of "correctness, *then* embellishment." The point confirms one of Wright's principles of modern architecture: the idea that ornament should be "integral to building as itself poetry" (Wright 1943, p. 347). What he means by this is that ornament should be structural, or part of the integrity ("correctness") of the design and not something that is applied only superficially.

In the end, as the rest of "In the Mecca" seems to confirm, the aspiration to improve this place is in vain, or comes too late. Yet the final stanzas do revert to some of the decorative or ornamental motifs which Mrs. Sallie has yearned for (roses, singing birds) in order to invoke the possibility of something better and, to return to Martin's *Harper's* article, "The Strangest Place in Chicago," to give voice to the otherwise silenced. The image of singing birds in particular responds to Martin's closing assertion that as he leaves the Mecca building, he can hear only "unintelligible" words, or "just a human voice, muttering, and it is impossible to tell whether in anger or in joy; it is only sound" (Martin 1950, p. 97). For Brooks, what can be heard is more than "unintelligible [. . .] sound." It is the echo of Perdita's voice, proclaiming her subjectivity against the odds. As Ford observes, "at the end we hear her song, as the child comes alive for us for the first time" (Ford 2010, p. 386).

Gwendolyn Brooks' poetry from the mid-1940s through to the late 1960s, shows us how contemporary urban architecture looks and feels from an unanticipated and usually overlooked perspective. Where much poetry of the period, for example, Sandburg's "Hats" (Sandburg 2003, p. 160), makes the most of the view of the city from above, Brooks' work shows us the experience of urban architecture from below, from crowded corridors and dark corners, or—as in the case of "Beverley Hills, Chicago"—from the outside. This is a body of work that refuses to be overwhelmed by the spectacular buildings that tower above, or to be silenced by the dominant narrative of architectural

progress. Brooks offers a different sensibility; one that is highly attuned to contemporary debates and alert to—and critical of—unintended architectural effect.

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Article

Living up to Her "Avant-Guardism": H.D. and the Senescence of Classical Modernism

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Abstract: In a journal entry from 1957, H.D. writes that Adorno's description of the aging of modernist music might easily apply to the fate of her own work in the post-war period: "Among other fascinating things, he [Adorno] says that Bartók 'could not quite live up to his own avant-guardism' [sic] [. . .]. I felt the phrase applied, in a way, to myself and my Helen sequence" (H.D. 2015, p. 40). H.D.'s remark refers to her long poem, *Helen in Egypt* (1960), which, with its engagement with classical sources and epic themes, seemed to some to be a throwback to an earlier modernist period in which Pound, Joyce, Eliot and H.D. herself had looked to ancient models as a means of reinvigorating modern literature. What did it mean for H.D. to feel that her work had outlived its time, to be a first-generation modernist still writing in that mode after many of her peers and their achievements had passed into history? This article explores H.D.'s sense that her practice was at odds with contemporary demands for poetry to answer to immediate historical concerns. It also considers her case against the critics in letters, notes and in *Helen in Egypt* which contains its own defense of the relevance of classical modernism to the post-war present day.

Keywords: H.D.; *Helen in Egypt*; Adorno; late modernism; epic; avant-garde

1. Introduction

In a journal entry from 1957, H.D. touched on the work of the Frankfurt School theorist, Theodor Adorno. She wrote that Adorno's description of the aging of modernist music might apply to the fate of her own late work: "Among other fascinating things, he [Adorno] says that Bartók 'could not quite live up to his own avant-guardism' [sic] [. . .]. I felt the phrase applied, in a way, to myself and my Helen sequence" (H.D. 2015, p. 40). H.D.'s remark refers to her long poem, *Helen in Egypt* (1960) which, with its active engagement with classical sources, might easily have seemed to be a throwback to an earlier modernist moment, a belated example of the Joycean mythic method or the classicizing style of Imagism—the product of an avant-garde that had had its day. This was not just, however, a case of being artistically behind the times. H.D. worried that her poem did not live up to the increasing demand for art to be responsive to present-day realities and, indeed, that her choice of an epic subject could be seen as an attempt to eschew the difficult realities of history *altogether* in favor of the consolations of the distant past. These fears were not unfounded. H.D. had, and would again, be accused of being an "anachronism" by critics and art-theorists who preferred the conspicuous social and political commitments of realist or documentary forms to the opacities and indirections of modernism (Burnett 1990, p. 92). But they were, she felt, misplaced because her poem *was*, after all, a reflection on "actuality" albeit in an epic guise. While there is now little doubt about the quality and significance of H.D.'s writing in the 1940s and 50s, questions remain about the context in which it was produced: To what extent was H.D. working against what she took to be the prevailing artistic and political tide? And to what purpose? How might we understand her adherence to a "high" modernist aesthetic in explicit defiance of critics and art-theorists who were talking about its demise?

This article builds on studies of late modernism which have generally focused on the succession of a first generation of writers by a second late generation (Miller 1999, Davis 2016) or on the ways in which

modernist lives and careers often extended beyond, and sometimes went on to question, the artistic moment from which they emerged (Whittier-Ferguson 2014, MacKay 2007). Among this second group, changes in practice are often related to wider social and historical developments and in particular to what Thomas S. Davis calls "the disorder in the world-system" that led to transformations in Britain's global status, sovereignty and sense of "political belonging" (Davis 2016, p. 16). Until recently, H.D. had rarely been considered in this context although, as Lara Vetter and John Whittier-Ferguson have both pointed out, she fits the framework well (Vetter 2017, pp. 20, 21; Whittier-Ferguson 2014, n. 211).[1] Having made her name in the 1910s as part of the Imagist movement, H.D. continued to write across a range of genres into the 1940s and 50s, producing poetry, experimental memoir and a series of "historical" novels, as well as the epic poem *Helen in Egypt*. This late phase of H.D.'s career has often been dismissed as *belatedness* and her output in these years criticized for its focus on mythical and ancient worlds rather than the concerns of the present day. Yet as Vetter points out in the first book to take H.D. seriously as a late modernist, H.D. had never been so closely interested in politics as she was in the period during and after World War II and, while she understood why some thought her work remote from contemporary issues, she nonetheless resisted the idea that to write of the classics was in any way an avoidance of present-day realities: "H.D. was dismissive of allegations of escapism, for she did not believe that the only way to write about a war was to describe its battlefields" (Vetter 2017, p. 14). Vetter finds evidence to support this claim in H.D.'s neglected late prose where rather than abandon her modernist aesthetic H.D. transformed it to better accommodate an analysis of the social and historical dynamics of her own times.

I follow Vetter's lead in seeing H.D.'s late modernist aesthetic in *Helen in Egypt* as an intervention into the contemporary, but suggest that the intervention is more reflexive in nature than that seen in other genres. *Helen* raises questions about the fate of poetry after WWII and whether art necessarily becomes ideology by continuing to invoke classical sources and methods that not only seemed remote from the present but whose express purpose, in the case of the Homeric epic in particular, was the commemoration of heroic actions performed in war. It speaks broadly in other words, to the question that has since become closely, if not always accurately, associated with Adorno's name and, as H.D.'s brief comment on his work suggests, was already linked with him in the period in which she wrote her last works: How, and whether, art can ever be adequate to the representation of the destruction of life in WWII. As scholars have long pointed out, for Adorno the question is not about the difficulty of thinking or of representing the magnitude of the suffering because the means of destruction was entirely in keeping with a technologized and rationalized culture and society in general. Rather, as J.M. Bernstein argues, the destruction can no longer be made culturally intelligible because culture itself is subject to the same processes. This essay does not seek to provide detailed analysis of Adorno's thinking on this subject: His significance here is that for H.D. he briefly captured the attitude of the times towards her own aging generation of artists, a significance that is increased by the fact that Adorno's theories regarding the senescence of modern art have since become part of the standard account of late modernism from which others take their cue. The first part of my article explores some key contributions to this standard version of late modernism before describing the means by which H.D. came to her own understanding of what it meant to have outlived one's own aesthetic moment. Adorno is the spur to thinking more broadly about the demand felt by H.D. in the post-war period for art to be responsive to its times. The second part of the article reads H.D.'s "heroic epic", *Helen in Egypt*, as an answer of sorts to the problem it might otherwise be seen to manifest: The poem certainly does not offer a direct and realistic treatment of war, but nor is its engagement with classical and epic materials a flight from actuality, far less an argument for art to continue in the Homeric tradition of remembering heroism in battle. *Helen in Egypt* asks whether the epic tradition was, or

[1] John Whittier-Ferguson does not consider H.D. in his book on late modernist literature as some of her late works, *Trilogy* most obviously, have long been the centre of critical attention. He nonetheless observes in a footnote that she would 'fit admirably into the frame I have constructed' (Whittier-Ferguson 2014, p. 211).

ever could be, a transparent response to the "actuality" of war and, in suggesting that it could not, drives towards an insistence on the ultimate ambiguity and unknowability of what really happened in war. In concluding his discussion of Adorno on the condition of art after WWII, Bernstein argues that, "the only legitimate cultural practices now would be ones that reflectively put themselves and their past in question" (Bernstein 2001, p. 422). By this measure *Helen in Egypt*, which goes back to the primal scene of Western culture to ask what it means to write about war in the contemporary, would seem altogether more responsible to its times than the more present-focused and realistic modes to which it was unfavorably compared.

H.D. was not alone among first-generation modernists in her use of "anachronistic" sources to reflect on post-war politics and society. Pound was involved in his own epic project, the Cantos, in the same period and the fascist associations of the late additions to this poem undoubtedly compounded the view that the genre was ideologically and politically suspect. William Carlos Williams published *Paterson* between 1946 and 1958 and, although he had always distanced himself from the classicizing modernists, he viewed his own epic as Joycean in character. H.D. does, however, seem to have been particularly vulnerable to charges that her art had outlived its moment. This was certainly connected to her iconic status as the original Imagist, a label that she found difficult to shake. As Burnett points out, critics often took no account of the fact that H.D. had realigned herself with other avant-gardes in the 1920s and 30s from the *Close Up* group to the set around Eugene Jolas's *transition* (Burnett 1990, p. 96). Gender also had a role to play in the sometimes hostile reception of her late works and, although H.D. found more academic success later in life than her contemporaries Djuna Barnes and Mina Loy, she did not benefit in the same way as T.S. Eliot from the entry of modernism into the American academy and nor was she given the same license to re-invent herself and her work. Not all of H.D.'s late readers, it should be said, were critical. At the same time that commentators such as Randall Jarrell were announcing H.D.'s obsolescence, a younger generation of poets, including Denise Levertov and Robert Duncan, were taking her mythic methods and use of classical sources as the template for their own "timely" creations.

2. The Senescence of the Avant-Garde

The essay which came to H.D.'s attention in 1957—Adorno's "The Aging of the New Music"—is a key point of reference in the debate over the lateness and/or out-datedness of modernism. Georg Lukács, for example, draws on this essay in "The Ideology of Modernism" as part of his argument that literary modernism is bourgeois art in its final, decayed form of allegory (Lukács 1963, p. 37).[2] "The Aging of the New Music" is also prominent among the essays discussed in Edward Said's *Late Style* where Said seeks to recuperate the awkwardness and difficulty of late modernist art as a means of disrupting imperial fictions of progress and national destiny. According to Said, "The Aging of the New Music" offers two main insights. Firstly, "new music" cannot simply reproduce the traumatic effect on the audience of the first performances of Berg or Stravinsky by slavish adherence to a "system" of dissonance or shock (Said 2006, p. 16). To transform Schoenberg's "compositional freedom" into Webern's "strict domination of 12 tone procedure" is, by definition, to destroy it (Adorno 2002, p. 187). Secondly, Said notes that the genuinely late work refuses assimilation. It functions neither as the crowning achievement of the composer's career, nor as the final seal on his posthumous reputation, but as a manifestation of an "increasing sense of apartness and exile and anachronism" (Said 2006, p. 17). There appear, then, to be two senses in which avant-garde art might age: Either regressively, as its shock value dissipates and it is absorbed into the academy, or disgracefully, by refusing such absorption along with what Said terms "the rewards offered up by being comfortable inside society, not the least of which was to be read and understood easily by a large group of people." According

[2] Lukács picks up on Adorno's notion that the '*angst*-obsessed vision of life' has diminished among bourgeois intellectuals. This has led, he argues, to the loss of authenticity in the modernist artwork.

to this second definition, Adorno himself proves the very model of a late writer, refusing his readers the crutch of summaries or specialisms and producing an "overabundance of material none of it compressible into an Adornian system" (Said 2006, pp. 21, 22). For Said, Adorno rejects the option of growing old comfortably in the academy in favour of cultivating a more awkward and implacable form of lateness that refuses assimilation to the end. The difference between Said's subversive late avant-garde artist and Luckác's complicit late modernist is indicative of the way lateness has been revised and reclaimed in recent years and Adorno's essay with it. H.D.'s work, it should be said, fits neither paradigm especially well. Few would now claim, as did Jarrell and others, that her late work is an "anachronism". But nor is she easily reclaimed as Said's "disgraceful" late modernist either. She very much hoped to see her difficult late prose works in print and, although not successful in this particular respect, she did, as noted above, enjoy recognition and academic plaudits in the latter part of her career.

The essay by Adorno on which both of these critics draw is less interested in tracing the fate of a particular career than in analysing a dialectic that is internal to avant-garde music itself:

> Music wanted to do justice to the Kantian idea that nothing sensuous is sublime and the more the market debased it as a childish game the more it pressed to maturity through spiritualization. [. . .] Music had to pay a price for all this, which Valéry suspected was the case with all new art. In New Music this price is its senescence. (Adorno 2002, p. 188)

"The Aging of the New Music" identifies in the avant-garde resistance to the market a pull to "spiritualization" that is both a rationalization and what Peter Dews has described as "desubstantialization" (Dews 1989, p. 42). By rationalization, Adorno designates the process by which the artist impresses a subjective form and unity on to nature to create the autonomous art-object. Desubstantialization describes the obverse side of this process: The artist *subtracts* himself from the equation and fetishistically worships the art-object for its illusory "freedom". To return to the example given in "The Aging of the New Music", when Schoenberg's "compositional freedom" becomes a "twelve-tone system", man thinks he has found the musical "thing-in-itself", the essence and life-form of modern music: "Deluded man sets up something artifactual as a primal phenomenon and prays to it; an authentic instance of fetishism" (Adorno 2002, p. 194). At this point, both subject and object disappear. The artist forgets himself as the subjective origin of the unified object and forgets the object in its affinity to nature in order to worship an illusory "system" instead.

The senescence of modern art is shorthand, then, for the process by which art, keen to retain its autonomy from the market, denies its artefactual nature (its man-made origins), and in so doing effectively speeds up its own disappearance. Adorno recognizes as one of the catalysts in this process the attempt to reconcile art with science. Rather than ensuring the survival of art in a rationalistic world, this endeavour serves to hasten its end because the transformation of art into a science only emphasizes its uselessness in a world in which everything must have a purpose:

> The vain hope of art, that in the disenchanted world it might save itself through pseudomorphosis into science, becomes art's nemesis. Its gesture corresponds to what is psychologically termed identification with the aggressor. (Adorno 2002, p. 193)

Adorno draws on the language of psychology to suggest the perversity of art's attempt to prolong its existence by these means. This language is more pronounced in the first English translation of the essay and perhaps provided a point of entry and comparison for H.D. who employed, as she often did, psychoanalytical frameworks and vocabularies in *Helen in Egypt*.

H.D. knew Adorno's essay second hand. She had read an article in *The Listener* published in 1957 titled "The Modernity of William Walton" in which Donald Mitchell provides a digest of Adorno's essay recently, and very loosely, translated by Rollo H. Myers in *The Score* as "Modern Music is Growing

Old".[3] In Myer's hands, "senescence" loses its dialectical character and becomes a more straightforward description of art's failure to be responsible to its times, a failure that he reads as a form of repression. The most recent translation of Adorno's essay describes the "danger of dangerlessness" proceeding from the tendency for the "once shocking to be absorbed back into the tradition" (Adorno 2002, p. 181). This is the institutionalization of the new, the process that Edward Said describes in *Late Style*. In Myer's translation, however, the artwork is personified, even pathologized and the result is to transfer the agency of the institution to that of the individual artwork itself: New music, he says, has repressed the element of anxiety—it is afraid of being afraid (Adorno 1956, p. 19). Seeking a reason for this repression, Mitchell points to a deficiency in "conscience" curiously attributed both to the composer and to the "character of certain central works":

> Both "anxiety" and "duty" imply the existence of a conscience; and when we come to inspect the nature of Walton's output, and the character of certain central works, we find, I suggest, on the one hand, an alert artistic conscience promoting a valid (even anxious) modern idiom; on the other, a comprehensive conservatism, markedly free of an anxiety, private or socially induced, maintaining traditions not normally associated with the role of the modern composer. (Mitchell 1957, p. 245)

Mitchell's interpretation observes a direct correlation between "an alert artistic conscience" and the production of works in a particular style that he describes as "a valid (even anxious) modern idiom". It is difficult to know of what exactly he imagined this idiom to consist—the key point is that it must not reproduce "traditions" that are not usually thought of as "modern", presumably classical and epic traditions among them.

Mitchell thus simplifies what is, in Adorno's essay, a complicated relationship between art and actuality post-WWII. Here as elsewhere Adorno argues that since Auschwitz all art must have a "bad conscience" because confronted with an event that cannot be made ethically intelligible, and a form of death that cannot be made meaningful, art is forced to admit the lie in its past claims to self-sufficiency as well as the limits of its claims to universality. As Bernstein remarks with reference to *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno implies that "the only legitimate cultural practices now would be ones that reflectively put themselves and their past in question" (Bernstein 2001, p. 422). In *Negative Dialectics*, culture is revealed as "garbage", while in "The Aging of the New Music", it takes on the appearance of ruins: "Since the European catastrophe, culture hangs on like houses in the cities accidentally spared by bombs" (Adorno 1990, p. 367; 2002, pp. 199, 200). For Mitchell, on the other hand, art might assuage its bad conscience by manifesting a level of anxiety consonant with both private and "socially induced concerns", in other words, by developing an "alert artistic conscience" (Mitchell 1957, p. 245). The sense of rupture, the "World Catastrophe" in Adorno is curiously muted. In its place is a historical scale of anxiety—greater in some ages, lesser in others—to which the artist must respond appropriately according to his or her conscience.

3. "Living [. . .] Aesthetically above [One's] Means"

The Hirslanden journal entry for 12 February 1957 seems at first to concede that *Helen in Egypt*, written between 1951 and 1955, is a belated contribution the modernist (and thereby no longer avant-garde) poetry H.D. produced earlier in her career: "Adorno is quoted as from The Score, in The Listener. Among other fascinating things, he says that Bartók 'could not quite live up to his own avant-guardism and was living, so to speak, aesthetically above his means.' [. . .] I felt the phrase applied, in a way, to myself and my Helen sequence" (H.D. 2015, p. 40). The influence of Mitchell is evident in the manner that H.D. reads "senescence" in this passage. It would seem to mean the

[3] In the notes to *Essays on Music*, Robert Hullot-Kentor and Frederic Will are less than complimentary about Myers's translation efforts for *The Score*: "A peculiar, abbreviated and completely confabulated paraphrase of Adorno's essay, translated from the French, was published in *The Score* in December 1956" (Adorno 2002, p. 200).

"repression" of anxiety about the times and is manifest (or not) in the form and idiom of the artwork. H.D. sees the relevance of this condition to *Helen* but ultimately pushes back against the idea that an "epic" idiom is necessarily evidence of "repression":

> I escaped from the epic Angst of which again Dr. Adorno says (in regard to music) that "the distinguishing feature of the 'finest moments' of this heroic epoch was the 'element of anxiety (Angst)' an element that in our own day has been 'repressed'." (I quote from *The Listener* article, Adorno's distinction between "modern" and "contemporary" music). Superficially, I feel kinship with this, though my heroic epic was the actuality of war, re-emerging in the heroic Greek legend, in which Paris takes over in reverse, as it were, after Helen's parting with Achilles. (H.D. 2015, p. 40)

This passage is clearly indebted to Mitchell's tentative interpretation of "angst" as akin to "duty". The first word (incompletely translated by the English word "anxiety" as Mitchell notes [245]) describes a condition of dread that although existential in character is said to be felt especially strongly in the "epoch" of the first avant-garde. The second word, "duty", suggests that it is incumbent on the artist to somehow acknowledge this condition in an art that is appropriate to the times. To do so, in Mitchell's terms, is to manifest an "alert artistic conscience." H.D. acknowledges, albeit "superficially", that since the passing of this epoch the sense of "angst" has been repressed and that, no longer able to do its duty in responding to this condition, art has been impoverished as a result. To continue to use the modes and idioms of the first avant-garde might be, then, to "liv[e] asthetically above [one's] means" in the sense that they are an empty currency, disconnected from the moral and existential imperative that gave rise to them in the first place. This is a gloomy prognosis but it is not one with which H.D. entirely agrees. There is, she thinks, still value in the old clacissizing ways and this value inheres in their capacity to do precisely what Mitchell thinks can only happen in a "modern (even axious) idiom": To give thought and representation to present-day concerns, specifically the "actuality of war", and, further, to examine the impossibility of doing so *without* invoking the past or, as H.D. puts it in response to criticism from Harriet Monroe, "drag[ging] in a whole deracinated epoc[h]" (H.D. 1997, p. 9).

This argument brings the journal entry into line with H.D.'s other notes and prose works from the pre- and post-WWII period in which she frequently tries to reconcile her concern for suffering in the present with her use of ancient and mythological models. In *The Sword Went Out to Sea* written in the 1940s and published in recent years, H.D. offers W.H. Auden as an example of the kind of politically-committed poet whose contemporary significance she thought to have outstripped her own: "He's a gifted young man and I'm trying to catch up to him" (H.D. 2007, p. 28). Elsewhere she responds more directly to her critics who sensed, precisely, a lack of "conscience" in H.D.'s recourse to the classics. In "Notes on Parsanius, Euripides and Greek Lyric Poets", H.D. compares these critics, ironically, to the Furies bent on punishing her for failure to live up to moral expectations: "I am not fleeing from the present, pursued by present-day art-theorists, serpent crowned Erynnes. I think myself rather beyond the fashion, ultra-modern" (H.D. 1990, p. 96). "Ultra modern" is a term that recurs in H.D.'s writing not to suggest an extreme degree of modernity—the avant-garde of the avant-garde—so much as the condition of seeing the present as connected to and reanimating all that has come before. In her translation of Euripides' *Ion*, for example, the "ultra-modern" is defined as time that is "accordion-pleated" allowing for concentration and distension so that past and present are potentially proximate (H.D. 1937, p. 83). In a note to Norman Pearson (sometimes referred to as "Note on Poetry"), H.D. recalls a letter she received from Harriet Monroe in the midst of the Zepplin raids in WWI "when I had staggered home, exhausted and half asphyxiated." Monroe demanded that she should "get into 'life', into the rhythm of our time, in touch with events". H.D. counters by arguing that the "tragic spectacle of our times" is not to be approached by recording events as they unfold in the present. Instead, the poet needs to address the "suppressed" memories that condition our experience of these events (H.D. 1997, pp. 9, 8). This is a Freudian approach to an Adornian problem—art's "bad conscience"—that, as mediated by Mitchell, appears conveniently as a problem of collective repression. *Helen in Egypt*'s return to classical sources—to some of the earliest poetic accounts of war—is a way

of reflecting obliquely on the "actuality" of the recent war as well as a refusal to accept the critics' definition of what counts as the actual.

4. "Was Troy Lost for a Kiss?"

Helen in Egypt thus resists the solution to the problem of art's bad conscience offered by the "art-theorists" and critics referenced in H.D.'s notes and letters. This poem is not written in a "modern idiom" and in any case, as H.D. argues, this would not guarantee the presence of an "alert artistic conscience" because it cannot account for the way that disavowed artistic practices and traditions nonetheless condition the cultural record in the present (Mitchell 1957, p. 245). In *Helen in Egypt*, H.D. looks to ancient models—to what the Hirslanden journal calls the subject matter of "heroic epic"—as a means of representing the "actuality" of war. "Actuality" in this context suggests reality in a factual (independently existing) and, as I will suggest below, artefactual (man-made) mode as well as, in a sense close to the French *actualité*, a current or newsworthy state of affairs. *Helen in Egypt*'s claim to represent actuality can be understood in two ways. Firstly, it describes the manner that *Helen* sifts through the fragmentary remains of ancient cultures to recover images that prefigure the events of WWII. As Elizabeth Willis points out in an essay on H.D. and the Bomb, phrases including the "holocaust of the Greeks" and the "flash in the heaven at noon that blinds the sun" are charged with contemporary significance (H.D. 1985, p. 229). Lines such as "The break in the Wall" (H.D. 1985, p. 170) and "a blasted shell, my city, my Wall" (H.D. 1985, p. 133) point via numerous similar images in H.D.'s war poems to the buildings destroyed during the Blitz as well as to the breach made by the RAF in the "Steel Wall" of the Luftwaffe during the Battle of Britain (Willis 2007, p. 82). (H.D. herself traces the origins of this phrase to Goering in *The Sword Went Out to Sea* (H.D. 2007, p. 6)). Secondly, as I argue below, *Helen in Egypt*'s engagement with actuality is reflective in nature: It considers exactly *how* art might be supposed to manifest an "alert artistic conscience" as regards history and the misunderstanding of both art and actuality that resides in the expectation that it should. H.D.'s poem uses the deficiencies of the epic record to show why "getting in touch with events" might be precisely the wrong demand to make of art and *never more so* than at the present time. A version of post-enlightenment reason (calculating, skeptical and scientific) operates in *Helen in Egypt* to turn what Adorno describes as "events worth reporting" into artefacts falsely created by the method of enquiry and then worshipped as if they had a life of their own (Adorno 1991, p. 24). H.D. does not give up on the idea that art might reflect on actuality—her answer to Adorno suggests that she thought this is precisely what she was doing in *Helen in Egypt*. Rather, perhaps more Adornian than some of her critics, she thought that modern methods, *especially* when they pretended to a direct and realistic treatment of events, were not necessarily more truthful than the old. Moreover, insofar as modern practitioners failed to put their new methods into historical context, they might be unaware of their complicity with tradition in this respect.

From the beginning, *Helen in Egypt* refuses the idea that the classical record as it stands is an objective or disinterested account of events. H.D. does not expect to find in the work of the Homeric poets in particular an alert artistic conscience, especially not when it comes to the representation of Helen and the role she played in the Trojan War. Helen has been misrepresented, firstly, by members of the "powerful war-faction" who identified Helen as "Hecate and a witch" (H.D. 1985, p. 18) and, a second time over, by the poets who depicted her as the immediate cause of the conflict. *Helen in Egypt* pays tribute to a counter-tradition which, beginning with Stesichorus's *Pallinode* and continued in Euripides' *Helen*, holds that Helen herself was never actually present in Troy at all. Instead, she was "rapt" (H.D. 1985, p. 242) away to Egypt by Zeus and her place on the walls taken by "a cloud".[4]

[4] The line is spoken by a servant in Euripedes' *Helen*: "Were all our toils in vain, then, for a cloud?" (Euripedes 1997, pp. 140, 210). The sentiments expressed, which as the Oxford editor points out are those of the 'ordinary solider', echo throughout *Helen in Egypt* in lines such as 'Was Troy lost for a kiss?' (H.D. 1985, p. 230).

It seems at first as though the purpose of H.D.'s poem is to set the record straight, to fix the inaccuracies and inconsistencies that are present in the dominant Homeric account. *Helen in Egypt* demands to know the truth as to Helen's actual whereabouts: "Is this Helen [in Egypt] actually that Helen [of Troy]?" (H.D. 1985, p. 8) Further, it offers to restore to the story those elements that had not previously been thought worth reporting:

> tender kisses, the soft caresses,
> given and received; none of these
> came into the story,
>
> it was epic, heroic and it was far
> from a basket a child upset
> and the spools that rolled to the floor; (H.D. 1985, p. 289)

The voice, that of Helen in this instance, gives equal weighting to the values set up as opposites in this section. Matriarchal are played off against patriarchal values, familial against national interests and the compassion revealed in the intimate embrace against the heroism manifest in public actions. The "bowman" who shot the arrow is arguably Eros, not Apollo: "I, Helena, know it was Love's arrow" (H.D. 1985, p. 83). The musical motif of the poem is sounded by the lute not the trumpet: "was Troy lost for a subtle chord? [. . .] because Apollo granted a lute-player, / a rhythm as yet unheard, / to challenge the trumpet-note?" (H.D. 1985, p. 229). And finally, although *Helen in Egypt* tackles an epic subject, it does so, as Susan Stanford Friedman points out, in a lyric voice which allows for the expression of intimate thoughts and feelings that are little in evidence in the heroic versions of the story (Friedman 1986, p. 215).

The suggestion that intimate exchanges are just as worth recording as heroic and epic deeds means that *Helen in Egypt* has often been read as a feminist and pacifist rewriting of its Homeric sources.[5] There is little, however, to be gained in the way of a good artistic conscience by doing so. Instead of acknowledging and making reparation for violence, upending the values of the "powerful war-faction" (H.D. 1985, p. 18) merely brings to light another source of conflict and dislocation, one that has been more completely repressed. As Susan Edmunds points out, the spools referenced in the passage quoted above are suggestive of Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and the child's attempt to master the absence of the mother. Edmunds adds that the poem as a whole might be read as a study of the dire consequences of a mother's abandonment: "Male rivalry is the cause of war, but its secret cause is woman's neglect" (Edmunds 1994, p. 134). The spectre of Achilles's mother, Thetis, hovers over *Helen in Egypt* and her carelessness in failing to dip her son's heel in the river Styx—"O careless, unspeakable mother" (H.D. 1985, p. 253)—has repercussions beyond her death: "O Thetis . . . / so she failed at last, / and worse than failure, / the mockery, after-death" (H.D. 1985, p. 254). By contrast, while Achilles might be blamed for his failure to save Iphigenia, his actions are given a rational explanation by the person we might expect to be most sympathetic to Iphigenia's fate as a pawn in the game of war: "Achilles himself, Helen argues, would have been stoned to death by the 'elect,' if he had tried to rescue Iphigenia" (H.D. 1985, p. 87).

Responsibility in general, regardless of whether it is directed at an individual or at a group, a worldview or a set of values, is not as easily apportioned in this poem as might at first seem to be the case. This is partly a consequence of the way that H.D. uses voice to undercut narrative authority. As Robert O'Brien Hokanson points out, much of *Helen in Egypt* is told as if it were Helen's own story but she is neither a reliable nor authoritative witness to events and consistently questions the

[5] See for example Susan Stanford Friedman's essay "Gender and Genre Anxiety: Elizabeth Barrett Browning and H.D. as Epic Poets" in which she argues that *Helen in Egypt* is a "feminization of the epic" to better represent the female point of view (Friedman 1986, p. 206). See also Rachel Blau Du Plessis who reads the brother-sister dyad in *Helen in Egypt* as H.D.'s most successful attempt to overcome the model of romantic thraldom (Du Plessis 1985, p. 67).

veracity and value of her recollections. Other voices intrude throughout, including notably that of a Freud-figure, Theseus, whose psychoanalytically orientated attempts to help Helen understand herself lead to altogether more questions than answers. Hokanson reads the "formal indeterminacy" of *Helen* as a "commitment to modernist self-reflexiveness and detachment" (Hokanson 1992, p. 344). I would add that this is not just a formal choice, and one that might once again have marked her work as senescent, but also an answer to critics who impressed on the artist the necessity of giving a straight or truthful account of what happens in war. There is no way back to the facts of the matter in *Helen in Egypt*, not least because even Helen herself has come to doubt what the truth might be. My focus in this article is not, then, on H.D.'s experiments with voice which have been comprehensively covered by others, including Hokanson and Morris but on the cumulative message offered by these voices regarding the impossibility of making impartial or even defensible judgements as to the integrity of past actions and the reliability of the representation of these actions in the cultural record. Helen's very first and most pressing question in *Helen in Egypt* concerns culpability and its misplacement: How can she be responsible for the disaster that befell the Greeks in Troy if she was in Egypt at the time, if the "Helen" who appeared on the walls in Troy was a phantom conjured up by Zeus? The obvious answer to this is that she could not be. Yet the poem refuses to let go of the idea that even if she is not responsible in *actuality* she might be burdened with guilt of a phantasmatic or illusory nature. Helen frequently assumes the culpability of other women mentioned in the poem, especially other mother figures: First Hecuba who, after dreaming that her unborn son would destroy Troy, allowed the newborn Paris to be exposed by a shepherd (and by analogy Jocasta in her plot to kill the infant Oedipus), then Clytemnestra who led her daughter to sacrifice at the hands of Achilles, and finally Thetis who abandoned her own son Achilles. Edmunds points out that Helen's "repressed guilt" for Achilles's death appears in the form of a hysterical symptom. She arrives on Leuké limping as if she has phantasmatically assumed the injury to the heel that killed her lover: "your feet are wounded" (Edmunds 1994, p. 107; H.D. 1985, p. 151). H.D.'s verse is punctuated with prose passages—suggestive of stage directions or a commentary on an ancient text—which initially promise to hold fast to actuality in the face of this free-floating sense of responsibility: "it was not her fault" (H.D. 1985, p. 15). But even this discursive voice gradually loses conviction "He [Achilles] did not *seem* to blame this death on Helen"—and eventually succumbs to the same suspicion voiced by other personae in the poem: "Was Troy lost for a kiss?" (H.D. 1985, p. 230).

The attempt to reach the truth as to "who caused the war" (H.D. 1985, p. 111) ends repeatedly in this kind of uncertainty. To dig into the backgrounds of the protagonists in this story is to discover, as Freud might have done, that not one of them is free of a sense of guilt that originates in the family. Thetis bears the burden of the "mésalliance" with a mortal that led to the birth of Achilles, Helen for abandoning her daughter to flee Sparta with Paris, Clytemnestra for the murder of Agamemnon, Theseus for stealing Helen away from her family, and Paris for dallying too long with Helen: "was it seven years?" (H.D. 1985, p. 235) Here the epic tradition is not simply a record of someone else's culpability whether that someone is Helen as in the usual story or, to follow the pacifist line offered by the poem, the collective will of the "powerful war-faction" (H.D. 1985, p. 18) which valorises heroic and epic-worthy deeds over compassion and love. Although the poem sets out to defend Helen from the false accusations made by the heroes and poets, it is unwilling finally to condemn these forces in her place or to suggest in any reductive way that it is men and patriarchal values that caused the war. "[W]hat", Helen asks, "can a woman know / of man's passion and birthright?" (H.D. 1985, p. 294) The question is unsettling coming as it does near the end of a poem which seems to argue for the restoration of women's voices to an epic tradition which, for the most part, had neglected to record them. Like the uncertainty which still remains as to Helen's innocence—"Was Troy lost for a kiss?"—this question as to women's knowledge of a male world appears to undermine the purpose advertised at the beginning of the poem (H.D. 1985, p. 230). *Helen in Egypt* is not, then, in any straightforward way, "a defence, explanation or apology" (H.D. 1985, p. 1) for a woman wronged, nor can it recover the events that were left out of the official record. In fact, the harder the protagonists try

to remember the actual events of the war, to see through the distortions which meant that the values of the polis ("passion and birthright") have been privileged over those of oikos ("compassion and tender kisses"), the more opaque and confused these events seem to become: "I seemed to know the whole, / but as a story told long ago" (H.D. 1985, p. 55); "is it a story told, / a shadow of a shadow, / has it ever happened [. . .] do I myself invent / this tale of my sister's fate?" (H.D. 1985, p. 69) *Helen in Egypt* cannot deliver on its promise to recover the "actual" Helen—"Is this Helen actually that Helen?" (H.D. 1985, p. 8). Instead, this ever-shifting and recoiling poem exemplifies the instability and unreliability of the cultural record—in the present as much as in the distant past—as a means of access to the truth of what really happened in war.

5. Outliving the Expected Ending

H.D.'s engagement with the epic tradition responds to contemporary events at a second-order level: Rather than approach them directly, it turns to the genre that makes arguably the most naïve claim to record memorable events for posterity and interrogates the validity of that claim. In an essay collected in *Notes to Literature*, Adorno suggests that epic cannot help but seem anachronistic because beneath its claims to universality its interests are altogether specific and local: "The epic poem wants to report on something worth reporting on, something that is not the same as everything else, not exchangeable, something that deserves to be handed down for the sake of its name" (Adorno 1991, p. 24). In this respect, it retains a "naïve" fidelity to "material concreteness" which is opposed both to the "spell" of mythology as a universal and all-encompassing system of thought and to bourgeois reason which resembles mythology in its drive to classify and to systematize. Thus, for Adorno, "a critique of bourgeois reason dwells within epic naiveté" (Adorno 1991, p. 26). We might, then, imagine a defence of *Helen in Egypt* that turns the argument of H.D.'s critics on its head: Epic's specific form of anachronism—its naïve fidelity to the unrepeatable, non-exchangable event—might be a way of resisting the fate of the avant-garde in its drift towards systematization and senescence. But the poem does not easily accommodate such a reading because, for all that it would like to be a record of events "worth reporting" and an argument for a new bottom-up approach to what does and does not fall into this category, it knows and admits this desire to be naïve. The message of the poem is that *nothing* can be taken at face value and the more we press towards the specific and the local, often through scientific or rationalistic means, the more even "small things"—"a certain sheen of cloth, / a certain ankle [. . .] a pearl, a bead, / a comb, a cup, a bowl" (H.D. 1985, pp. 164, 165)—threaten to give up their particularity to the magic of a system.

H.D.'s writing has often been said to attempt a synthesis between reason, or in H.D.'s preferred term "intellectuality", and mystical or occult forms of knowing (H.D. 1997, p. 11). Adalaide Morris, for example, suggests with reference to *Helen in Egypt* that H.D.'s "epic ambition" was fostered by what appeared to her to be the magic of new acoustical technologies: Radio and television "restored some of the conditions of primary orality by [. . .] making perceptible a cosmos in which voices routinely emerged [. . .] out of nothing" (Morris 2003, p. 61). Miranda Hickman emphasizes the personal nature of H.D.'s quest to accommodate science to her own version of an enchanted cosmos: "H.D.'s use of scientific models is in part a way of dealing with the 'ghost' of her scientist father, a means of yoking her mystical insight to his rigorous intellectual standards" (Hickman 2005, p. 243). In *Helen in Egypt*, however, the synthesis of reason and magic gives way to a dialectic that operates in a similar way to Adorno and Horkheimer's dialectic of enlightenment: The attempt to discover the facts through the application of post-enlightenment methods of classification and measurement results only in the transformation of those facts into fetish objects invested with the magical power to be exchanged with other objects.

This process is most noticeable in *Helen in Egypt* in Achilles's preoccupation with calculating the value of the lives and livelihoods lost in war. Peter Middleton expresses something of the peculiarity of this endeavor in his description of how as readers we are invited to approach the poem as "Insurance adjusters". In this role, he suggests, we pick over the remains of the battle—"sort over and over,

/ [Helen's] bracelets, sandals and scarves" (H.D. 1985, p. 232)—in order to "assess the extent and priorities of the damage" (Middleton 1991, p. 358). This exercise in costing extends not only to the destruction of the war but to the value of the artwork itself. *Helen in Egypt* repeatedly invites the reader to join Achilles in weighing the transcendental capital of art—love, beauty, eternity (as captured in the fleeting glance)—against the tally of lives lost in the war: "Will he forever weigh Helen against the lost?" (H.D. 1985, p. 30); "Was it a trivial thing? To have bartered the world for a glance?" (H.D. 1985, p. 62). At the same time, other voices intervene to point out the futility of this game; it amounts, as Helen states at the beginning of the poem, to weighing "a feather against a feather" (H.D. 1985, pp. 30, 67). None of these losses—personal or collective, abstract or material (the actual number of corpses)—amounts to much at all when calculated in this rigidly formulaic way. Nevertheless, *Helen in Egypt* continues to play off one element of the story against another as if by these means they could be brought into relation according to a mathematical law: "Helen [is set] against the lost"; "the thousand ships / against one kiss in the night"; "the world [against] a glance" (H.D. 1985, pp. 30, 39, 67). For Adorno, the attempt to turn art into mathematics results in fetishism: "One thinks that one is following the laws of nature, whereas the organizations of the material, however cosmically they gesture, are themselves already the product of human arrangements" (Adorno 2002, p. 194). In *Helen in Egypt*, however, the objects to be reckoned with—the remnants of war—are already fetish objects, and none more obviously so than the "veil" which is glimpsed by Paris as "Helen" flees from the ramparts and then reappears in various different guises throughout the poem: "the rent veil", "the fluttering veil", "the veil of Cytheraea", "the veil to which Paris refers" and "the woven veil by the portal" (H.D. 1985, pp. 145, 238, 45, 125). There are multiple substitutions and doublings at work here, not least the first one in which Helen on the ramparts is magically spirited-away and replaced by the part-object, the veil—all too easily suggestive of the Freudian fetish. The phantasmagoric nature of things in *Helen in Egypt* does not, however, mean that they cannot or should not be represented: Rather, that even if their meaning is not self-evident, we should resist the temptation to impose meaning by means of a schema of any kind. Thus, for all that the repeated appearance of the veil seems to demand interpretation, the discursive voice insists that there is no secret to be explained: "This veil to which Paris refers as well as that other, 'caught on a fallen pilaster,' seems to have no occult significance, only that in both cases they suggest finality" (H.D. 1985, p. 125). This observation is unexpected coming as it does in the work of a poet who frequently draws on the symbolism and vocabulary of the occult in her poetry. In *Helen in Egypt*, however, even substituted and doubled objects have their own particularity and finality. If they cannot be returned to the absolutely singular and the local (which would be an impossible return to an imagined state of epic naivety), then nor should they be sacrificed to the magic of a system, even when the system is one which admits to its magical effects from the outset. Pre- and post-enlightenment epistemologies both fail here as a means of approach to the actual because they deny the transformations that have already taken place in the object and, in the case of science, those brought about by the scientist who wrongly thinks to have isolated the bare facts.

In his discussion of the primal scene, Freud confronts as he does on many similar occasions the charge that psychoanalysis is not a science. The particular objection he has in mind is that it cannot tell the difference between reality and "an artefact" falsely produced by the method of inquiry (Freud 1955, p. 48). In *Helen in Egypt*, H.D. confronts the same problem and discovers, as Freud did, that there are no reliable means by which we can distinguish what really happened from the erotic fantasies which have been conjured up after the fact to cover over the disavowed truth. H.D. cannot undo the multiple layers of "repression" which permeate and structure the historical and cultural record of war and thereby return her readers to an imagined state of epic naivety (H.D. 2015, p. 40). But she could, and did, find, *specifically* by turning to classical sources and models, a way of approaching actuality obliquely as well as critiquing the received view of what the actual is and the means by which the artist was meant to get at it. In *Helen in Egypt*, the desire to know the truth—to know which was the "actual Helen"—generates all manner of uncertainties, insubstantial objects and apparitions: In short, the Pallinode (defence, explanation or apology) at the beginning inevitably gives way to an Eidolon

(an astral double) at the end. This is not a failure, far less evidence that H.D.'s methods had had their day, but the condition of all art that tries to remember war—a truism that she felt was at risk of being forgotten in a period that set great store by art's purported ability to get directly at actuality.

H.D.'s critics claimed that her belated modernism was inadequate to the task of representing present-day concerns either because it represented a rote continuation in a classicizing mode that had little relevance to the contemporary and/or because it reanimated a Homeric epic tradition whose express purpose was to record and commemorate the deeds of "the powerful war-faction" (H.D. 1985, p. 18). H.D. had her own concerns on this score, as her response to Adorno suggests, and, indeed, she had good reason to be wary of too close an identification with other classicizing late modernists. Pound had claimed that the epic was a poem containing history and yet, in writing the Cantos, showed how easily "history" could be appropriated to serve a political, social and economic agenda that was anathema to H.D. In spite of these concerns, however, H.D. felt her critics had misunderstood her aims in relation to her use of classical forms and materials and had done so in regard to *Helen in Egypt* in particular. The problem, she felt, was the understanding of actuality which subtended the demand for the artist to get "in touch with events" (H.D. 1997, p. 9). Engaging with the epic tradition in *Helen in Egypt* provided her with a means of interrogating this misapprehension as well as giving representation to the recent past in the only way she felt she could—by pressing towards a mode of artistic practice that put itself and its past(s) into question.

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Article

"Always Trembling on the Brink of Poetry": Katherine Mansfield, Poet

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Abstract: Today, Katherine Mansfield is well known as one of the most exciting and cutting-edge exponents of the modernist short story. Little critical attention, however, has been paid to her poetry, which seems a strange omission, given how much verse she wrote during the course of her life, starting as a very young schoolgirl, right up until the last months prior to her death in 1923. Even Mansfield devotees are not really familiar with any poems beyond the five or six that have most frequently been anthologised since her death, and few editions of her poetry have ever been published. Mansfield's husband, John Middleton Murry, edited a slim volume, *Poems*, in 1923, within a few months of her death, followed by a slightly extended edition in 1930, and Vincent O'Sullivan edited another small selection, also titled *Poems*, in 1988. Unsurprisingly, therefore, critics and biographers have paid little attention to her poetry, tending to imply that it is a minor feature of her art, both in quantity and, more damagingly, in quality. This situation was addressed in 2016, when EUP published a complete and fully annotated edition of Mansfield's poems, edited by myself and Claire Davison, incorporating all my recent manuscript discoveries, including a collection of 36 poems—*The Earth Child*—sent unsuccessfully by Mansfield to a London publisher in 1910. This discovery in 2015 revealed how, at the very moment when Mansfield was starting to have stories accepted for commercial publication, she was also taking herself seriously as a poet. Indeed, had the collection been published, perhaps Mansfield might now be celebrated as much for her poetry as for her short stories. Therefore, this article explores the development of Mansfield's poetic writing throughout her life and makes the case for her reassessment as an innovative poet and not just as a ground-breaking short story writer.

Keywords: Katherine Mansfield; symbolism; *fin-de-siècle*; decadence; modernism; poetry; Arthur Symons

1. Introduction

Today, Katherine Mansfield is well known as one of the most exciting and cutting-edge exponents of the modernist short story. Indeed, Peter Childs goes so far as to state that she was "the most important Modernist author who wrote only short stories" (Childs 2002, p. 94). Little critical attention, however, has been paid to her poetry, which seems a strange omission given how much verse she wrote during the course of her life, starting as a very young schoolgirl, right up until the last months prior to her death in January 1923. This article explores the development of Mansfield's poetic writing throughout her life, and in the light of new discoveries of her poems, makes the case for her reassessment as an innovative poet, not just as a ground-breaking modernist short story writer.

2. Publication Chronology

Even Mansfield devotees are not really familiar with many of her poems beyond the five or six that have most frequently been anthologised since her death: for example, the poignant "To L. H. B.", written

after the death of her only brother in WW1 (CP, pp. 109–10).[1] Indeed, until recently, there had been very few editions of her poetry published. Mansfield's husband, the critic John Middleton Murry, edited a slim volume, *Poems*, in November 1923, within a few months of her death. The volume complemented his posthumous publications of some of her unpublished manuscripts during 1923 and 1924 in his newly-founded literary magazine the *Adelphi*, which he personally edited from 1923–1930. As I noted in my book, *Katherine Mansfield: The View from France* (Kimber 2008), in the aftermath of Mansfield's death in January 1923, Murry started printing some of Mansfield's unpublished manuscripts, including poetry, in every issue, beginning with the very first one in June 1923, and this editorial policy continued for two years. Jeffrey Meyers called it Murry's "cult of Katherine Mansfield", stating that it was "unique in modern literature":

> In a repetitive torrent of forty books, articles, introductions, poems, and letters to the press, published between 1923 and 1959, he [. . .][2] deliberately constructed his myth of Katherine and established a posthumous reputation far greater than she had enjoyed in her lifetime.
>
> [. . .] Murry's guilt about his selfish and irresponsible treatment of Katherine led directly to the egotistic enshrinement of his wife. As high priest of Katherine's cult, Murry wrote an *apologia pro sua vita* and glorified his own role, image and importance. (Meyers 2002, p. 254)

The amount of space given over to the Mansfield publicity machine in the *Adelphi* became such that even those friends and admirers closest to her during her lifetime turned away in disgust. As Frank Lea, Murry's biographer, subsequently remarked, Mansfield "became the presiding genius of the paper [*Adelphi*]—till even the friendly Bennett was forced to remonstrate, whilst with the unfriendly it became an article of faith that Murry was 'exploiting his wife's reputation'" (Lea 1959, p. 113). The subsequent vilification of Murry for his actions tainted not just his own reputation but also his dead wife's in England for many years. Jenny McDonnell confirms how "Sylvia Lynd described his generation of a Mansfield industry as 'boiling Katherine's bones to make soup', while Lawrence claimed he 'made capital out of her death'" (McDonnell 2010, p. 170). In particular, Mansfield's poems started appearing regularly in the *Adelphi* from issue 2 onwards. Issue 3, for example (August 1923), contains a selection of six poems, published under the heading "Poems of Childhood by Katherine Mansfield".

The *Adelphi* poems were subsequently republished in Murry's 1923 edition, *Poems by Katherine Mansfield*, an imposingly large-sized, gilt-edged volume of 69 poems, designed not so much as to enhance Mansfield's reputation as a poet, but rather to enforce his own hagiographical Mansfield project. In his introductory note to the volume, he states:

> [Mansfield's] "special *prose*" was the peculiar achievement of her genius. It seems to me that nothing like *Prelude* or *At the Bay* or *The Voyage* or *The Doves' Nest* had ever been written in English before. English prose was turned to a new and magical use, made crystal-clear, and filled with rainbow-beauties that are utterly undefinable. What might, in another writer of genius, have become poetry, Katherine Mansfield put into her stories.
>
> Nevertheless, she [. . .] continued to write poetry. [. . . Her poems] have the same simple and mysterious beauty, and they are, above all, the expression of the same exquisite spirit. To my sense they are unique. (Murry 1923, pp. xi–xii)

This sort of puffery is hard for any author to live up to and his selection of the more sentimental of Mansfield's poems only did her a disservice. This edition was subsequently followed in 1930

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1 All references to Mansfield's poems are taken from the *Collected Poems of Katherine Mansfield* (Kimber and Davison 2016a) and referenced in the text as CP followed by page number.

2 Mansfield frequently uses ellipses in her writing. To differentiate her style ellipses from my own omission ellipses, I have placed all instances of the latter in square brackets and double-spaced the former.

by an almost identical selection (and identical introductory note), but this time in the recognisable green-grey, ribbed cloth boards to be found in the other volumes of her work thus far published by Constable (Murry 1930). There were only two additions (making 71 poems in all): "A Sunset" and "Old-Fashioned Widow's Song", both following the style choices of the first edition in their emotive sentimentalism, such as we find in the first stanza of "Widow's Song":

> She handed me a gay bouquet
> Of roses pulled in the rain,
> Delicate beauties, frail and cold–
> Could roses heal my pain?
> (CP, p. 137)

Following the publication of these two almost identical editions, Mansfield's poems were more or less ignored for almost sixty years, until Oxford University Press produced another selection, titled *Poems of Katherine Mansfield*, in 1988, comprising 71 poems, plus a handful of Mansfield's short story vignettes, here renamed "prose poems", several of which had been published in 1907 in the Australian little magazine, *The Native Companion*. This personal selection, by editor Vincent O'Sullivan, represented his own agenda as editor, in much the same way as Murry's first edition 65 years earlier, though, of course, from different starting points. In his introduction, O'Sullivan justifies the omission of certain poems using the terms "mawkish", "weaker" and "repetitive" (O'Sullivan 1988, p. ix), stating, "We may regard her poetry now as Mansfield herself intended to think of it—unassuming, often slight, serviceable enough for occasional published excursions into inherited effects and derived styles" yet also noting how she is "capable too of unexpectedly inventive turns and intensity" (p. xiii). And yet, O'Sullivan makes the—what we now know to be erroneous—claim, that "Mansfield made no claims to being a poet" (p. ix), and that she "clearly thought of her verse as secondary to her main business as a writer" (p. xii). Such an assertion was overturned by my discovery in 2015 of an entire poetry book manuscript by Mansfield, as I shall shortly reveal.

Overall then, it was unsurprising that critics and biographers paid little attention to Mansfield's poetry, tending to imply that it was a minor feature of her art, both in quantity and, more damagingly, in quality. This state of affairs was comprehensively addressed in 2016, when Edinburgh University Press published a complete and fully annotated edition of Mansfield's poems, edited by myself and Claire Davison, incorporating all my personal discoveries of new poems, including an unpublished book manuscript collection of 36 poems—*The Earth Child*—sent unsuccessfully by Mansfield to a London publisher, Elkin Mathews, in 1910—which had remained unnoticed in the archives of the Newberry Library, Chicago. My discovery of it in 2015 affirmed how, at the very moment when Mansfield, now back in Europe, was starting to have stories accepted for commercial publication, she was also taking herself seriously as a *poet*. Indeed, had the collection been published, perhaps Mansfield might now be celebrated as much for her poetry as for her short stories. Some of the poems in the collection had been referred to by Murry in his introductory note from the 1923 edition, when he commented: "I remember her telling me when first we met, that the beautiful pieces now gathered together [… in the section] 'Poems, 1911–1913' had been refused, because they were unrhymed, by the only editor who used to accept her work" (Murry 1923, pp. xi–xii), (these poems having been erroneously dated by himself). He was referring, of course, to the editor of the literary weekly the *New Age*, A. R. Orage, who published a good deal of Mansfield's work, especially during 1910–12, before she met Murry and changed her allegiance to his own little magazine, *Rhythm*. It would take some time for Orage to forgive Mansfield and start publishing her work again. The only poems she had accepted for publication in the *New Age* were parodies of other poets, such as we find here, written in the style of then Poet Laureate, Alfred Austin, and part of a larger piece, co-written with Beatrice Hastings, parodying many of the well-known writers of the day:

> Droop ye no more—ye stalwart oaken trees,
> For mourning time is spent and put away–

> Red, white and blue unfurls, the morning breeze
> Bring leaves—strew leaves for Coronation Day.
> (CW3, p. 389)[3]

3. The Influence of Symbolism, the *fin-de-siècle*, Decadence and Modernism on Mansfield's Creativity

It is only in the last few years that Mansfield has been accorded her rightful place in the canon of modernist women writers. In the first edition of Michael Levenson's *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism* (Levenson 1999), she was only accorded a few brief mentions, an inexplicable oversight demonstrating how short story writers have frequently been marginalised. However, in Levenson's revised edition of the same book (Levenson 2011), space devoted to criticism of Mansfield was considerably enhanced, especially in the chapter "Modernism and Colonialism" by Elleke Boehmer and Steven Matthews. One of Mansfield's early biographers, Ian Gordon, had written as early as 1954: "She had the same kind of direct influence on the art of the short story as Joyce had on the novel. After Joyce and Katherine Mansfield neither the novel nor the short story can ever be quite the same again" (Gordon 1954, p. 17).

Jane Dowson's comments concerning modernist women poets are certainly pertinent to Mansfield's own experiences:

> They lived as independent women, in reaction against the cultural complacency of their families and were sensitive to class as to gender divisions. One of their concerns was how to express a social conscience according to modernism's principles of impersonality, and their poetry negotiates between anti-realism and psychologically realist representation. Writing in opposition to the idealised 'feminine', they avoided gendered identity in their writing and offered new models of the women poet. (Dowson 2002, p. 6)

Although female modernists might have been less overtly experimental than their male counterparts, nevertheless, they were frequently more radical in their personal politics. Jeff Wallace also notes how modernism "is characterized by a transnational exchange of ideas and by the experiences of the émigré artist" (Wallace 2011, p. 212), which is again pertinent to Mansfield's situation. For most of the twentieth century, literary historians of modernism, for the most part, concentrated on a select band of male authors, such as Eliot, Pound and Joyce in England, and Gide and Proust in France, ignoring the work of the female writers of the time, believing them to be of little or no interest. For example, Bonnie Kime Scott relates how:

> In 1965, […] Richard Ellmann and Charles Feidelson assembled *The Modern Tradition*. Of its 948 pages, fewer than nine were allotted to women writers (George Eliot and Virginia Woolf) […] While modernist studies are rolling off the presses at an unprecedented rate, a surprising number still find interest only in canonised males. (Scott 1990, p. 7)

Most modern critics agree that Mansfield's own unique form of modernism was not derivative of other contemporary writers but was rather a product of her symbiosis of late-nineteenth-century techniques and themes, for the most part introduced through her reading of Arthur Symons, from her late teens onwards, when her tastes and preferences started to take shape and she began, with the symbolists and the decadents as her dominant influences, to write, as Sydney Janet Kaplan notes, the sort of fiction which was committed to the possibilities of narrative experimentation (Kaplan 1991).

In 1909, for example, travelling in the north of England on a train, Mansfield wrote in her diary: "And a man enters the carriage, very fair & full blooded—he reads a book of Meat Inspection, I the poems of Dante Gabriel Rossetti—the Fleshly School of Poetry" (CW4, p. 106). The "Fleshly School of

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[3] The four volumes (2011–2016) of the Edinburgh Edition of the Collected Works of Katherine Mansfield (Kimber and O'Sullivan 2012; Kimber and Smith 2014; Kimber and Davison 2016b) are henceforth referenced in the text as CW1, CW2, CW3 and CW4, followed by the page number.

Poetry" was a scathing label used in 1871 by the Scottish poet Robert Buchanan to castigate the sensual aesthetics of late-nineteenth-century decadent poets, of whom Mansfield was clearly besotted. This influence manifested itself not just in her fiction, but especially in her poetry, as she came to appreciate in symbolist poetry, not just its dreamlike qualities, but also, as she matured as writer, its complexity, its use of precise images, and its use of conversational tone and rhythm. As such, Mansfield was emulating a *fin-de-siècle* convention, which in itself had been endorsed many years before by Baudelaire; indeed, her early experimental prose poems reveal the influence of the French Symbolists, such as we find here, in "Study: The Death of a Rose": "So now it dies. And I listen for under each petal fold there lies the ghost of a dead melody, as frail and as full of suggestion as a ray of light upon a shadowed pool. Oh, divine sweet Rose. Oh, exotic and elusive and deliciously vague Death" (CW3, p. 138).

Mansfield also developed a youthful infatuation with the aesthetic movement and especially the works of Oscar Wilde, which matured into a lifelong admiration; his influence on all her writing was considerable. For Clare Hanson and Andrew Gurr, "[in] her early attempts to piece together an aesthetic [she relies] almost entirely on the writings of Symons, and to a lesser extent, Wilde. From these two, she took ideas which continually influenced her art" (Hanson and Gurr 1981, p. 22). Indeed, Hanson develops this point elsewhere, stating that "Mansfield is a symbolist writer, taking from her early reading of Arthur Symons, Walter Pater, and Oscar Wilde the belief that in literature abstract states of mind or feeling should be conveyed through concrete images rather than described analytically" (Hanson 1990, p. 301). The Wildean influence encouraged Mansfield's own radicalism and, as Pamela Dunbar notes, "her own life became, like Wilde's, largely the result of a conscious decision to challenge restrictive social and sexual norms in the interests of broader experience and a deeper 'truth'" (Dunbar 1997, p. xi). This wholly 'modern' outlook would play out not just in Mansfield's life, but in her prose—and her poetry.

In particular, as noted above, Mansfield early on read and absorbed the works of Arthur Symons, especially his 1899 volume, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, which he dedicated to W. B. Yeats. Indeed, as Hanson and Gurr affirm, "The Symbolist belief in the artist's ability to create himself, to *become* his mask, sustained her throughout her career" (Hanson and Gurr 1981, p. 11). Symons, the central English decadent writer and critic of the 1890s, was also a poet of urban life, who found stimulation and metaphor in the music-hall and the city street. He dealt with aspects of London other writers usually avoided—prostitution and casual sex in particular—pursuing fleeting impressions without making moral connections, closely adhering to and therefore derivative of the tenets of Baudelaire, as expressed in the latter's collections *Les Fleurs du mal* and *Le Spleen de Paris*. Indeed, the *Pall Mall Gazette* of 1895 expressed its shock at Symons's literary output:

> Mr Arthur Symons is a very dirty-minded man, and his mind is reflected in the puddle of his bad verses. It may be that there are other dirty-minded men who will rejoice in the jingle that records the squalid and inexpensive amours of Mr Symons, but our faith jumps to the hope that such men are not. (Anon 1895, p. 4)

Despite such protestations, the volume was to profoundly influence the next generation of writers and poets, including the Imagists and poets such as T. S. Eliot. It would introduce many English readers to French literature—including Mansfield; indeed no one was more influential than Symons in importing French literary ideas to England and fostering a new spirit of internationalism. (Yeats, Eliot and Pound all stressed their debt to Symons for having introduced them to Symbolism. See Levenson 1984, pp. 9–10).

Of his own attempts at poetry, Symons explains that, 'I tried to do in verse something of what Degas had done in painting. I was conscious of transgressing no law of art in taking that scarcely touched material for new uses' (Symons 1974, p. 93). The symbolist movement struggled on into the early part of the twentieth century, but its lofty ideals and inspirations could not be sustained in a modern world; its followers found themselves unable to uphold tenets which were so artificial and divorced from reality, and so moved on to form the tenet of what we now refer to as modernism. Kaplan confirms how Mansfield's early mature work was symbolist in nature:

> Mansfield's devotion to the '90s went deeper than fashionability and had a permanent effect on her literary career. [It] provided her with an ideal of the city which became linked with her own intensifying sense of sexual ambivalence and urge toward sexual experimentation. She had perceived that the world of the decadents was one of sexual ambiguity, a place where sexual boundaries broke down for the pure artist, where experience led to artistic creation. (Kaplan 1991, p. 72)

The practical aesthetics of symbolism include fluidity of rhythm, repetitions, echoes, and delicate evasions, all of which would eventually become trademarks of Mansfield's modernist, narrative technique. Her use of symbols increases the emotional and intellectual capacity, not just of her stories, but especially in her poetry, working on the reader in a powerful yet subliminal way. Mansfield even went so far as to copy the title of one of Symons's own poems, 'Leves Amores'—('Casual Love') and use it as the title for a youthful prose poem:

> Come this Old Age. I have forgotten passion, I have been left behind in the beautiful golden procession of Youth. Now I am seeing life in the dressing-room of the theatre […] Yes, even the green vine upon the bed curtains wreathed itself into strange chaplets and garlands, twined round us in a leafy embrace, held us with a thousand clinging tendrils. (CW3, p. 90)

Here Mansfield deliberately omits any reference to the gender of the narrator, thus rendering the text sexually ambiguous at a time when she herself was experimenting with lesbian relationships, producing, as Stephanie Pride points out, 'a very differently structured discourse from that displayed in the texts of the male Symbolist writers' (Pride 1991, p. 98). Indeed, in modern day terminology, the title might be translated more aptly as 'Casual Sex'.

In Symons's *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, Mansfield would have read the following passage where he quotes a translation from Gérard de Nerval: 'Everything in nature assumed new aspects, and secret voices came to me from the plants, the trees […] All things live, all things are in motion, all things correspond; the magnetic rays emanating from myself or others traverse without obstacle the infinite chain of created things' (Symons 1958, p. 17). Mansfield must surely have been under the influence of Symons's book when she wrote to her younger sister Jeanne from Bavaria in 1909:

> Last night, sitting working here, the great jug of scarlet blackberry vine threw a twisted shadow on the wall—rather, my lamplight, more than a little fascinated, stencilled for me the trailing garlands with a wizard finger, and so I thought of you. Did you get the thought. Did you find it hanging on to the edge of your skirt ('Good gracious, is that a cotton. Where can I have picked it up') 'My dear, allow me to present you with a Bavarian mind wave!'[4] (*Letters* 1, pp. 93–94)

4. The Poems

4.1. 1903–1908

Eighty of the 217 poems in the 2016 volume of Mansfield's *Collected Poems* were written before she left New Zealand at the age of nineteen to return to England to become a writer, attesting to the importance of poetry composition in her creative life from a young age. Indeed, in 1903, aged just fifteen, on the steamer taking her from New Zealand to Britain for the first time, she wrote a verse collection called "Little Fronds", comprising seventeen poems (CP, pp. 9–17), the first extant poems of Mansfield's to have survived. As is only to be expected, Mansfield's early poems are juvenile in form and content, yet the sheer number attests to Mansfield's absolute need to find an expressive

[4] The 5-volume (1984–2008) of Mansfield's letters (O'Sullivan and Scott) is referenced throughout this article as *Letters*, followed by the volume and page number.

outlet for her burgeoning creative talent. And they are not all bad; glimmers of the later mature writer are occasionally evident, such as we find in the fourteen-stanza poem "Friendship (2)", written once Mansfield was established at Queen's College, Harley Street, where she and her two older sisters were educated from 1903–1906:

> He sat at his attic window
> The night was bitter cold
> But he did not seem to feel it
> He was so old–so old–
>
> The moonlight silvered his grey hair
> And caressed his furrowed face
> The clock at the old church tower struck twelve
> But he did not change his place.
> [. . .] (CP, p. 7)

The first line: "He sat at his attic window", is situated within a domestic arena which features so prominently in Mansfield's short stories, where at least one character will, at some point, be looking out of a window. These myriad references to windows by Mansfield reveal for Antony Alpers how a 'trick of her mind is evident: she is constantly inhabiting one space while observing another, and has her characters doing the same' (Alpers 1980, p. 53). This anticipates the concept of liminality in Mansfield's short stories: how the view from a window—*a place-in-between*—can alter perceptions from the present to the past, from the past to the future, and invite the crossing of a metaphorical threshold to an event yet to be realised or understood. In standard ballad form, the poem has a clear narrative structure, and suggests the influence of Heine's ballads, especially those in his *Book of Songs* (1827), a volume from Mansfield's childhood that she kept with her all her life. Indeed, just four pages after this poem in the notebook in which it appears, is her transcription of a poem from that collection, "Der Tod, das ist die kühle Nacht" [Death is the cool night] (CW4, p. 11).

Back in New Zealand in 1907, Mansfield composed a book of children's verse (see CP, pp. 28–47)—her first collection of poetry intended for publication—to be illustrated by a talented professional artist Edith Bendall, nine years her senior (with whom she conducted a youthful affair for a short time). The venture was inspired by her cousin Elizabeth von Arnim's hugely successful publication, *The April Baby's Book of Tunes*, first published in 1900, a mix of little tales, songs and nursery rhymes, with beautiful illustrations by Kate Greenway. The manuscript and drawings were sent off to a publisher in America without success; Mansfield's poems were eventually returned, but the illustrations sadly lost. Four of the poems would go on to represent some of her earliest professional publications.[5] Claire Tomalin notes how the collection is "essentially a pastiche of Robert Louis Stevenson's *A Child's Garden of Verses*, with touches of Hans Christian Andersen" (Tomalin 1987, p. 35). Mansfield's poem "When I was little", exemplifies this mix of styles:

> When I was quite a little child
> Just three o'clock or even less—
> I always fell and hurt my knees,
> And once I tore my party dress.
>
> It's such an awful thing to do
> Because folks say:—'What not again!'

[5] 'The Lonesome Child' was published in the *Dominion*, Wellington, 1: 217, 6 June 1908, p. 11, a month before Mansfield left New Zealand for the last time. Similarly, 'A Little Boy's Dream' was published in the *Dominion*, Wellington, 1: 221, 11 June 1908, p. 5. 'A Day in Bed' was published in the *Lone Hand*, Sydney, 1 October 1909, p. 636, with its third verse omitted. 'The Pillar Box' was published in the *Pall Mall Magazine*, London, 45: 202, February 1910, p. 300.

I wish they'd do it by themselves
And feel perhaps, the awful pain.

I used to creep away and think–
'I'll die today, to make them sad'
The tears came always rushing down,
Because I felt so very bad.

But when my daddy found me there
And kissed me—heaps of times—you know
I used to say—'Perhaps then, dads –
I'll live another day or so.'

Walter de la Mare's *Songs of Childhood* (1902), is almost certainly another source of inspiration, especially his delight in combining childhood innocence with wry humour and pathos. Mansfield's poem, "A Fairy Tale", written in 1907, combines de la Mare's fairy whimsy with the lonely huts and snow-bound characters of Hans Andersen or even the Brothers Grimm:

Now this is the story of Olaf
Who, ages and ages ago,
Lived right on the top of a mountain
A mountain all covered with snow.

And he was quite pretty and tiny
With beautiful curling fair hair
And small hands like delicate flowers
Cheeks kissed by the cold mountain air.

He lived in a hut made of pine wood
Just one little room and a door
A table, a chair, and a bedstead
And animal skins on the floor.

Now Olaf was partly a fairy
And so never wanted to eat
He thought dewdrops and raindrops were plenty
And snowflakes—and all perfumes sweet.

In the daytime when sweeping and dusting
And cleaning were quite at an end
He would sit very still on the doorstep
And dream—O—that he had a friend.
[. . .] (CP, pp. 48–49).

During the time Mansfield spent back in Wellington, badgering her parents to let her to return to London to become a writer, her artistic impulse was frequently to write poetry, as evidenced in a diary entry for 1907:

> Oh, do let me write something really good, let me sketch an idea & work it out. Here is silence and peace and splendour, bush and birds. Far away I hear builders at work upon a house, and the broom sends me half crazy. Let it be a poem. Well, here goes. I'm red hot for ideas. More power to your elbow, my dearest Kathie. That is so, and I shall do well.

> Fitful sunshine now—I am glad, it will be a beautiful afternoon. But I pray you, let me write. (CW4, pp. 44–45)

In another diary entry in the same year, she notes: 'O thank God that I have written five poems' (CW4, p. 82).

Over a dozen previously unknown poems by Mansfield feature in the 2016 *Collected Poems*, discovered by me in the Alexander Turnbull Library in Wellington, New Zealand, in early 2013. One of them, "To Pan", is possibly the last poem she wrote before leaving New Zealand for the last time in July 1908:

> [...]
> So we would laugh, your arm round my shoulder,
> Laugh at the world that was ours to keep,
> Cry that we two could never grow older,
> We were awake though the world lay asleep.
> Laugh until Pan the munificent giver,
> Woke from a slumber to play his part,
> Plucked a reed from the frozen river
> Fashioned the song of our firebound heart.
> 'Capable of a subjective passion,'
> So you stigmatise me, today –
> Well, my dear, we pass in this fashion
> But Pan, God Pan, continues to play.
> (CP, pp. 60–61)

In later years, Mansfield would codify references to sexual passion in letters and elsewhere with the word, "Pan", such as we find in her story "Epilogue II" from 1913:

> 'We danced together seven times and we talked the whole time. The music was very slow——we talked of everything. You know about books and theatres and all that sort of thing at first, and then—about our souls.'
>
> 'What?'
>
> 'I said—our souls. He understood me *absolutely*. And after the seventh dance. No, I must tell you the first thing he ever said to me. He said, "Do you believe in Pan?" Quite quietly. Just like that. And then he said, "I knew you did." Wasn't that extra-or-din-ary!' (CW1, p. 335)

4.2. 1909–1910

The period 1909–1910 was perhaps the most fruitful of Mansfield's poetic writing career, in terms of quality and quantity. This became clear in 2015, when I uncovered a complete manuscript of poems she had sent to the London publisher Elkin Mathews in the second half of 1910, representing her second serious attempt at publication of her poetry, at the age of 22, this time with far better, more mature verse. All knowledge of the manuscript's existence had been forgotten until 1999, when it was bequeathed by the estate of Jane Warner Dick (1906–1997) to the Newberry Library in Chicago, where its importance remained unnoticed by scholars until discovered by myself. Of the thirty-six poems in the collection, only nine had previously been published. The others were completely unknown and yet they represent some of the finest poems Mansfield ever wrote. The collection affirms yet again that, although Mansfield was starting to have stories accepted for commercial publication, she was still very much taking herself seriously as a *poet*.

Mansfield's choice of publisher is revealing. Charles Elkin Mathews (1851–1921) was a British publisher and bookseller who played an important role in the literary life of London in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with strong contacts with the Irish Literary Society, Rhymers

Club and the Arts and Crafts Movement. His catalogue included names such as Oscar Wilde and Arthur Symons, and later on volumes of poetry by W. B. Yeats, Lionel Johnson, James Joyce, Ezra Pound and Robert Bridges, among others. From 1892 to 1894 he worked in partnership with the publisher John Lane, culminating in the publication of *The Yellow Book* in 1894, which had exerted a deep fascination for Mansfield during her late teenage years. Death, love, decay, extreme emotion: all were expressions of Mansfield's mind-set at this time, culminating in the first of her stories written in dialogue form, "The Yellow Chrysanthemum" (CW1, pp. 116–19), written in March 1908 at the height of her fascination with Wilde and the decadents, influenced, of course, by the notorious *Yellow Book*.

As a collection, the *Earth Child* poems comprise a fascinating record of Mansfield's literary endeavours in 1909–1910, as well as offering an incisive illustration of her ability to forge a new literary voice assembled from personal memory, intercultural experimentation and contextual echoes. Had Elkin Mathews published the collection instead of rejecting it, Mansfield might have trod a much more assured—and renowned—poetic literary path. Mansfield intended *The Earth Child* sequence to be read as a poem-cycle rather than as individual poems, since the first 28 poems are numbered rather than titled. It shows the development of Mansfield's lyrical voice and poetic persona away from the influences of Oscar Wilde and fin-de-siècle symbolism, towards the more complex neo-Romanticism and early modernism of continental Europe. In addition, it provides a fascinating bridge from those earlier poems, sketches and vignettes through prose-poetry and on to narrative fiction, offering new insights into her evolution and apprenticeship as a writer.

Later in her life, Mansfield destroyed as much personal material—diaries, notebooks, letters—from the years 1909–1911, because she was embarrassed—and possibly ashamed—of much of her conduct during this time. These were Mansfield's "experimental", hedonistic years, where she could be found smoking hashish with Aleister Crowley, where she had one—possibly two—abortions, where she suffered a traumatic stillbirth alone in Bavaria in June 1909, and where she conducted an intense affair with a Polish émigré Floryan Sobieniowski (from whom she almost certainly contracted the gonorrhoea that would blight her health until a formal diagnosis and treatment in 1918), and then another affair when back in England during 1910–11, with both young schoolmaster William Orton, and his then girlfriend, Edna Dixon. She had also become addicted to Veronal (a barbiturate), whilst in Bavaria, a habit she found hard to conquer. As a result, uncovering any material from this period, such as the *Earth Child* collection, offers a rare glimpse into her mindset at this time.

In May 1909, Mansfield had been taken to Bavaria by her mother, who believed a water cure would turn her daughter away from lesbianism, the only reason she could come up with as to why she had left her then husband, George Bowden, the morning after her wedding. In reality, Mansfield had married the hapless Bowden to provide legitimacy for her unborn child, the result of a previous liaison. Mansfield stayed in Bavaria for another six months and elements of the writer's love affair with Sobieniowski are chronicled in this unpublished poetry. Indeed, some of the poems are directly written for or about him, with many poems suggesting a Central and Eastern European influence. For example, number XXII begins, "In the swiftly moving sleigh/We sat curled up under the bear skin rugs/And talked of the dangers of life" (CP, p. 86), reflecting, perhaps, their intimate relationship in Bavaria, whilst of course also bringing to mind images from the pages of the Russian writers Mansfield so admired, such as Tolstoy, where descriptions of winter outings by sleigh under bearskin rugs can be found in both *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*.

Two letters from Mansfield accompany the *Earth Child* manuscript. Dated 8 November 1910 and 15 January 1911, they chronicle her failed efforts to persuade publisher Elkin Mathews to print the poems. The second letter is written in a tongue-in-cheek style, pleading with the publisher to put her out of her misery on whether her material will be accepted or not:

> Dear Mr. Mathews
> May I hear from you soon the fate of my poor 'Earth Child' Poems—I really am worrying about her immediate future—yea or nay.

Love her or hate her, Mr. Mathews, but do not leave her to languish!
Sincerely yours
Katharina Mansfield
(CW3, p. 463)

If Mansfield did receive a note of rejection, it has not survived. This collection of unpublished poems would have almost certainly earned Mansfield early recognition as a poetry writer, since they clearly reveal her early maturity as a poet and surely makes the case for her reassessment as a talented poet all the more compelling.

Despite Mansfield's hedonistic behaviour at this time, there are some touching poems in the collection, redolent with metaphors about children and love. The generic versatility that is a hallmark of Mansfield's poetry—her ability to move between lyric, satire, parody and elegy—is much in evidence here. There is, yet again, a striking comparison to be made with Heine's poem cycle "The North Sea", from his *Book of Songs*. *The Earth Child* shares with Heine's, the mixture of elfin and human characters, fairy-tale elements in setting an event, the lyrical first-person voice, reflections on childhood, pastoral memories and a sometimes ironical distance. Heine's poetry was much in vogue in early twentieth-century Germany and Central Europe on account of its Romantic anti-authoritarianism. Although Mansfield had been gifted her copy of the *Book of Songs* in 1903, she may well have encountered them anew through Sobieniowski and his circle of émigré writers, during her stay in Bavaria in 1909. In poem III, for example, the lyrical "I" takes the reader into an eerie, fantasy world reminiscent of much late Romantic German and Central and East European poetry—Goethe, Heine, Lermontov, Kuprin and Mickiewicz, for instance. Mansfield's familiarity with such works can be traced back to London, where, since the 1830s, translations of Russian and Central European poetry had circulated, to discussions in the *New Age*, or to Sobieniowski's émigré circle in Germany:

III
Through the dark forest we walked apart and silently
Only the dead leaves beneath our feet kept up a ghostly conversation.
As we touched them—they cried out: 'It is all over you are killing us'.
Yet with swift steps and joyfully, we walked through the muffled forest.
A wild scent burst from the ground and broke over us in waves
The naked branches stiffened against the black air.
Behind us an army of ghosts mimicked our steps
They caught at the trailing shadows and fashioned them into cloaks.
And pretended that under their cloaks, like us, they were trembling and burning.
On the brow of the hill we stopped—the ghosts forsook us
The forest drew back and the road slipped into the plains.
A moon swung into the sky—we faced each other
He said! 'Do not fly away'.
I said: 'Are you a dream'
We touched each other's hands.
(CP, p. 77)

Additionally, her reworking of classic fairy-tale motifs such as we find in poem XIV, reveal a mature, "modern" voice creeping through, where modernity meets fantasy in her poetry for the first time:

XIV
A little wind crept round the house
It rattled the windows and door handles
'Let me in—let me in', it lamented.
But I pulled the curtain and lighted my lamp.

'O, how can you be so cruel', sobbed the wind
'My wings are tired: I want to go to sleep in your arms
There is peace in your heart, and a soft place for a tired child'.
I bent low over my books
'The night is so dark and the shadows are hurting me'.
I opened my window, leaned out and took the wind to my bosom
For a moment he lay silent
Then drew a long breath and opened his eyes
Maliciously smiling.
He sprang from my arms—blew out the lamp
Scattered the book leaves, leapt and danced on the floor
'Did you know', he sang,
'There was a spark in your heart
I have kindled it into flame with my breath—
Now rest if you can'.
(CP, p. 82)

4.3. 1911–1922

After the excitement of Mansfield's first real publications of prose-poems and vignettes in Australia and New Zealand in 1907–1908, back in London in the early autumn of 1908, she entered the publishing world with verse as well as prose, her poems featuring in arts reviews such as *Rhythm*, published both in her own name and under pseudonyms such as "Boris Petrovsky", attesting to the importance she was placing at the time on literature from Central and Eastern Europe. In addition, in her own work as a literary reviewer during the early 1910s, we find examples of her sensitivity as a reader of poetry, and particularly her eloquently expressed belief of how best—and why—poetry should be translated from foreign languages (see, in particular, her review of Paul Selver's *Anthology of Modern Bohemian Poetry*, in *Rhythm*, CW3, pp. 436–7). Nor does she make any bones about disparaging bad poetry or self-indulgent, second-rate versifying. Her review of Kenneth Hare's collection, *The Green Fields*, in July 1912 declares:

> The writing of slight verse is the easiest thing in the world—far simpler than the writing of prose—and perhaps it is the most valueless thing in the world. Mr Hare, having nothing to say, says it in rhyme, the which unfortunate state of affairs happens to most young ladies and gentlemen before they have learnt the gentle art of self consciousness. (CW3, p. 431)

In a notebook jotting in January 1916, Mansfield made the following candid admission: "I feel always trembling on the brink of poetry" (CW4, p. 192). Even if Mansfield's poetic output has been traditionally side-lined, readers of her notebooks and diaries cannot fail to notice how her need for poetry—both her own compositions, and her constant reading of other poets' work—remained a constant throughout her life. Reading notes in her notebooks and diaries, listing the poetry she was reading point to how very well read Mansfield was, and offer a first indication of the lasting influence of poetic styles and idioms, echoes of which can then be traced back through her own work. Rarely are these explicit references; they are resonances and half-allusions pointing to the literary recollections buzzing round her mind, which then resurface and enrich the intertextual tapestry of her own textual production. There are striking echoes of Hardy, Blake, Symons, Whitman, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Tennyson and Dowson, to name a few of the English-language influences; the European voices include Goethe, Heine, Wyspianski, Mallarmé, Baudelaire and Carco. Nor are these fleeting allusions restricted to the canonical or 'serious' poets. Mansfield's sense of poetic pastiche can recall Lear and Belloc; she can interweave uplifting snatches from popular hymns and The Book of Common Prayer, and set these alongside traditional nursery rhymes and sing-song ballads, before shifting just as suddenly, to tones reminiscent of some of the contemporary poets of her era—John Davidson and "the Rhymers",

Walter de la Mare and T. S. Eliot. Here is perhaps one of the greatest challenges of reading Mansfield's verse: the beguiling simplicity that contains so much. Notebook entries also abound in the last ten years of her life attesting to her *need* for poetry, such as in these examples, covering a span of ten years:

> Then Catherine [*sic*] what is your ultimate desire—to what do you so passionately aspire? To write books and stories and sketches and poems. (1911, CW4, p. 121)

> The day felt endless. Read in the evening and in bed read with J. a good deal of poetry. If I lived alone I would be very dependant on poetry. (1915, CW4, p. 148)

> Then I want to write poetry. I feel always trembling on the brink of poetry. (1916, CW4, p. 192)

> 'I have been a worm this morning & read poetry when I should have worked. (1918, CW4, p. 238)

> Oh God! I am divided still. I am bad. I fail in my personal life. I lapse into impatience, temper, vanity & so I fail as thy priest. Perhaps poetry will help. (1921, CW4, p. 390)

Increasingly isolated as she spent more and more time abroad searching for a cure for her tuberculosis, she did indeed come to depend on poetry as a much-valued emotional support. Much of her own poetry is, of course, autobiographical and personal, but, as the above diary entry from 1921 reveals, it can also serve as an escape from the immediacies of life. Nevertheless, there is a striking difference between the number of poems written from 1903 up to 1910 (when Mansfield was 22): 150 extant poems, when compared with the number which survive that were written between 1911 and her death in January 1923—just 67.

The latter poems range widely in content and style. "Limbo" (1911) discovered by myself in the National Library of New Zealand in 2013 amongst her papers, is a particularly fine example of Mansfield's poetry, and worth quoting in full:

> A wreath of pipe smoke rising in a ring;
> A tin clock ticking hollow on a shelf;
> Outside a ceaseless hammer-hammering;
> Next door shrill children's voices—and myself.
> The ticking is of dead men's bleaching jaws
> Wearily wagging in eternity,
> Marking the measure of the stroke and pause
> Of Death forging new sickles endlessly.
> The smoke is all my little vapour seal
> That flickers in a sudden gust of air,
> Wearily seeking for a long-lost goal,
> A goal that it shall find not anywhere,
> Nor find a home for all its wandering.
> The voices are the past calling to me
> From some old world of toil and hammering
> Across dim frozen wastes of icy sea.
> The clock ticks on. The rhythmic hammer noise beats
> Beats on. The pipe smoke writhes on overhead
> Terribly still. The piercing children's voice
> Stabs on relentless. Living, I am dead.
> (CP, p. 95)

The title of the poem and the bleak solitude of the speaking persona caught between conflicting worlds, spaces and times make it one of the most succinct and most explicit studies of liminality in Mansfield's oeuvre, a theme, as noted earlier, that recurs throughout her poetry, prose vignettes, fiction,

correspondence and personal writings. The repetitive rhythm of the hammering, the references to death, ambuiguity and frozen wastes recall Eliot, Yeats and other modernist poets.

Mansfield's poetic output declined during the war years, but the death of her beloved brother Leslie Beauchamp, killed in a training accident in Belgium on 6 October 1915, prompted one of her most personal and moving poems, "To L. H. B." (CP, pp. 109–10). Not long after his death, Mansfield wrote in her diary: "Yes, though he is lying in the middle of a little wood in France and I am still walking upright, and feeling the sun and the wind from the sea, I am just as much dead as he is" (CW4, p. 171). Haunted by his death until her own in 1923, she would write to Ottoline Morrell in November 1918: "I keep seeing all these horrors, bathing in them again and again (God knows I don't want to) and then my mind fills with the wretched little picture I have of my brother's grave. What is the meaning of it all?" (Letters 2, p. 290, 17 November 1918). The final three lines of the poem: "By the remembered stream my brother stands/Waiting for me with berries in his hands/'These are my body. Sister, take and eat'" (CP, p. 110), evokes the physicality of her brother's dead body, while her words echo the taking of Communion in a Christian church service.

"Night-Scented Stock" (1917) is poem Mansfield wrote for Ottoline Morrell, following one of her visits to the Morrells' country home, Garsington Manor. It contains a tongue-in-cheek evocation of the latter's house-parties and lavish hospitality—something of a myth in Bloomsbury folklore—with invitations generously extended to all her friends and their acquaintances. However, Garsington was far more than a mere country house for parties. It had a working farm providing employment for a number of conscientious objectors during the war years and offered refuge for often impoverished artists, exiles and writers. Nevertheless, the poem is a powerfully evocative piece in its own right, irrespective of its biographical allusions. Partly a pastiche of exalted *fin-de-siècle* impressionism, comic patter and genteel posturing, its powerfully rhapsodic tone and setting produce a wholly "modern" effect:

> [. . .]
> But one with a queer russian ballet head
> Curled up on a blue wooden bench instead.
> And another, shadowy—shadowy and tall
> Walked in the shadow of the dark house wall,
> Someone beside her. It shone in the gloom,
> His round grey hat like a wet mushroom.
>
> 'Don't you think perhaps 'piped someone's flute
> 'How sweet the flowers smell!' I heard the other say–
> Somebody picked a wet, wet pink
> Smelled it and threw it away–
>
> 'Is the moon a virgin or is she a harlot?'
> Asked somebody. Nobody would tell.
> The faces and the hands moved in a pattern
> As the music rose and fell.
> [. . .] (CP, p. 118)

Mention of the Ballets Russes, a particular favourite of Mansfield's brings a touch of exotic modernism to the poem, as does the line "Is the moon a virgin or is she a harlot?",[6] referencing the typical sort of highbrow conversation to be had at Garsington gatherings.

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[6] See the Book of Revelation, 12, 1: 'a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars'.

During 1919–1920, Mansfield published eight poems in the prestigious literary weekly, the *Athenaeum*, during Murry's editorship, all under the pseudonym "Elizabeth Stanley", the maiden name of her paternal grandmother. The first one, "Fairy Tale" is strikingly reminiscent of her earlier fairy-themed poems, recalling similar motifs and imagery:

> [. . .]
> Now a strain
> Wild and mournful blown from shadow towers,
> Echoed from shadow ships upon the foam,
> Proclaims the Queen of Night.
> From their bowers
> The dark Princesses fluttering, wing their flight
> To their old Mother, in her huge old home.
> [. . .] (CP, p. 128)

"Sorrowing Love", a flower-themed poem, bringing to mind similar poems by H. D., provides a strange blend of childlike fairy tale and chilling *fin-de-siècle* decadence. This is reinforced by the tone of the second and third stanzas, where the voice of the persona distributing flowers recalls Ophelia's speech in Hamlet, IV, v. (l. 19):

> And again the flowers are come
> And the light shakes
> And no tiny voice is dumb,
> And a bud breaks
> On the humble bush and the proud restless tree.
> Come with me!
>
> Look, this little flower is pink,
> And this one white.
> Here's a pearl cup for your drink,
> Here's for your delight
> A yellow one, sweet with honey.
> Here's fairy money
> Silver bright
> Scattered over the grass
> As we pass.
>
> Here's moss. How the smell of it lingers
> On my cold fingers!
> You shall have no moss. Here's a frail
> Hyacinth, deathly pale.
> Not for you, not for you.
> And the place where they grew
> You must promise me not to discover,
> My sorrowful lover!
> Shall we never be happy again?
> Never again play?
> In vain—in vain!
> Come away!
> (CP, pp. 131–32)

Mansfield's final extant poem, "The Wounded Bird", was written in the Hôtel d'Angleterre, Sierre, Switzerland, in July 1922, where she had moved in the hope that the air would be beneficial to her

ever-worsening tuberculosis. It clearly reflects the desolate frustration of a once freedom-loving, now fragile patient forced to endure the well-meaning intentions of those who come to nurse her. Mansfield habitually referred to her lungs as her "wings", and it is therefore poignant to note that her last two poems (the previous one was called "Winter Bird", written in 1921), penned just months before her death, should focus on birds. However, the theme also links back to some of her earlier poetry, notably in the *Earth Child* sequence, where bird imagery makes a frequent appearance. In tone and motif, "The Wounded Bird" bears comparison with Emily Dickinson's "Hope is the thing with Feathers" (1891) and Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" (1820), with the line: 'O lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud! I fall upon the thorns of life, I bleed". Here is Mansfield's poem in full:

> In the wide bed
> Under the green embroidered quilt
> With flowers and leaves always in soft motion
> She is like a wounded bird resting on a pool.
>
> The hunter threw his dart
> And hit her breast,
> Hit her, but did not kill.
> O my wings, lift me—lift me
> I am not dreadfully hurt!
> Down she dropped and was still.
>
> Kind people come to the edge of the pool with baskets
> 'Of course what the poor bird wants is plenty of food!'
> Their bags and pockets are crammed almost to bursting
> With dinner scrapings and scraps from the servants' lunch.
> Oh! how pleased they are to be really giving!
> 'In the past, you know you know, you were always so fly-away
> So seldom came to the window-sill, so rarely
> Shared the delicious crumbs thrown into the yard.
> Here is a delicate fragment and here a tit-bit
> As good as new. And here's a morsel of relish
> And cake and bread and bread and bread and bread.'
>
> At night—in the wide bed
> With the leaves and flowers
> Gently weaving in the darkness
> She is like a wounded bird at rest on a pool.
> Timidly, timidly she lifts her head from her wing.
> In the sky there are two stars
> Floating, shining–
> Oh, waters—do not cover me!
> I would look long and long at those beautiful stars!
> O my wings—lift me—lift me
> I am not so dreadfully hurt
> (CP, pp. 140–41)

5. Conclusions

Mansfield's verse is richly evocative of the poetic works she absorbs, with lingering memories of cherished lines, images and styles, but also it is always, unmistakably, her voice that we are hearing. Often her poetry can mark some sort of alchemy, as sights, sounds and memories are transmuted

into literature; similarly, many of her stories can be seen to start life as intensely poetic moments that gradually expand just enough to push poetry beyond its own constraints of rhyme and rhythm into prose. The hallmarks of her very best fiction are all to be found in condensed form in verse—her focus on the telling detail that captures some essential flavour or feel of a scene, the swift, sure strokes of a description that capture beauty or idiosyncratic quirks. In many poems, just as in the stories, diction and form are often simple and traditional: floating trochees, sing-song iambics, a certain sentimental sweetness that might just appear too cloying. But even the naïve effects can prove sophisticated, reflecting, as she matures as a poet, a denser modernist poetic fabric beneath the apparent simplicity: strong, regular metres suddenly slipping into free-running lines, crisp social niceties that change tune midway, predictable patterns that are suddenly transformed by casually thrown in hiatuses and subdued climaxes, flat-footed commonplaces and playful nonsense rhymes that abruptly acquire sinister overtones, and lyricism or fey innocence that carefully hides an underside that is faux-naïf or positively wicked. Such poems share resonances with symbolist poets like Arthur Symons, but also with her own unmistakable "modern" voice.

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Article

Tourism and Taxonomy: Marianne Moore and Natasha Trethewey in Jefferson's Virginia

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Abstract: In the poetry of modernist Marianne Moore and contemporary American poet Natasha Trethewey, we find tours of historic places that are associated with the country's founding history. How does the activity of the tour contemplate the ways in which historical knowledge takes shape and around what priorities and ideals? Exploring this question, these poems stage touristic encounters that serve not only to document the places visited but to question the frames by which a site is "seen" in relation to—often in support of—selected versions of American history. The impact of systems of classification and categorization that are common to the development of taxonomic thought, embraced by Thomas Jefferson and other early Americans, comes under inspection in these touristic poems.

Keywords: race; tourism; taxonomy; poetics; Marianne Moore; Natasha Trethewey; Thomas Jefferson

"Observe the terse Virginian", Marianne Moore instructs in "Virginia Britannia", calling our attention to historical and natural details while leading her reader on a poetic tour of the colonial sites of Jamestown and Williamsburg, taking us past the "church-floor brick/and Sir George Yeardley's/coffin-tacks and tomb" below the "church tower" marking America's first settlement (Moore 1936, pp. 3, 5).[1] Moore wrote the poem after visiting the restorations of these early colonial places in 1935. Some eighty years later, Natasha Trethewey flings open the doors to Monticello, the home of Thomas Jefferson, drawing our attention in her tour to the "portrait of Jefferson" hanging in the entrance hall and observing the play of light and dark across his face (Trethewey 2012, p. 68). Observe, suggest both poets, but then question how you are observing in these tours of places rich with history and evocations of America's nation building. How does the activity of the tour contemplate the ways in which historical knowledge takes shape and around what priorities and ideals? Exploring this question, these poems stage touristic encounters that serve not only to document the places visited, but also to question the frames by which a site is "seen" in relation to—often in support of—selected versions of American history.

These frames, for both Moore and Trethewey, reveal the power of the Enlightenment development of taxonomy, with its classifications and catalogues, to shape the presentation of place in line with particular versions of American history. This essay will consider each poet's exploration of the tourist site as a way of contemplating American history. Significantly, both of the poets explore how prevailing historical narratives shape touristic sites around ideas of nation, national identity, and place; moreover, such historical narratives are subject to interrogation and change. Moore's visit to Virginia and Trethewey's visit to Monticello occur, respectively, at important moments of physical and narrative renovation in places that are associated with America's founding. When Moore visited Virginia in the 1930s, architectural and structural renovations taking place in Williamsburg aimed to enhance tourism's role in educating an American public through celebrating American principles; at the same time, Williamsburg's presentation of America's past elided difficult questions regarding that history,

[1] This essay references the presentation of "Virginia Britannia" appearing in Moore's 1936 *Pangolin and Other Verse*. All page numbers for this poem reference Moore's volume, which has been reprinted in facsimile form in White (2008).

particularly in relation to structures of inequality. For Trethewey, visiting the home of Thomas Jefferson in the twenty-first century, the aftermath of DNA tests establishing genetic links between Jefferson and African American descendants of his slave Sally Hemings compels Monticello's efforts to re-develop the touristic experience to more fully admit this erased history; however, old habits of thinking regarding racial identity linger.

Moore and Trethewey stage touristic encounters that serve not only to document the places visited, but to question the frames by which a site is seen in relation to—and often in support of—selected versions of American history. For both poets, the touristic experience reveals a history of racial contradictions, motivating poems attentive to the relationship of taxonomy with racial bias. Indeed, the impact of systems of classification and categorization common to the development of taxonomic thought, as embraced by early American Enlightenment thinkers, comes under inspection in these touristic poems. The taxonomies shown to be structuring the tourist site and experience reveal how classifications of race have always been central to the histories of America told (and concealed) through places central to those histories.

To think about taxonomy as a way in which the Enlightenment attempted to order and understand the natural and social worlds recalls the American figure most responsible for bringing such practices into this country, Thomas Jefferson. Touring Jefferson's home in the twenty-first century, Tretheway's poem "Enlightenment" explores the persistence of taxonomies of race that he endorsed, as the poem inter-splices her contemporary biracial experience in private, familial, and public contexts. Trethewey quite directly interrogates Thomas Jefferson's taxonomies of race within broader systems of racial identification in the early Americas. This poem, part of her 2012 volume *Thrall*, joins a collection of poems explicitly foregrounding natural history's logic of taxonomies as a way of organizing race in the "new world", most systematically explored in the sequence "Taxonomies".

While "Taxonomies" focuses upon the Spanish conquest of the Americas, *Thrall* links the past and present of the United States to the racial classifications emerging from the larger European colonial project and the concurrent slave trade. Moore's "Virginia Britannia", the first of four poems in the sequence "Old Dominion" and published in *The Pangolin and Other Verse* (1936), considers this founding colony in relation to the paradox of the American experiment, the justification of racial hierarchies, and oppressions as part of a Manifest Destiny of nation building. For both Moore and Trethewey, Jefferson represents an American contraction, haunting both poems in the "shadows" (in Moore's allusion to him) cast by the racial contexts of the country's founding that retain force in contemporary culture. For Trethewey, the colonial history of the Americas informing Jefferson's thinking indicates the "dark subtext" of American history, the racial cartography shaping sites, and narratives of the country's founding (Trethewey 2012, p. 68). Subsequently, the tour becomes an important act in discerning this cartography; indeed, the poet as tourist encounters place as a taxonomy to be explored, historicized, and made strange.

1. Early Moore and Taxonomy as Documentary Tourism

Not unlike other modernists, tourism becomes a subject of choice for Moore early on, writing poems in the 1910s and 1920s that respond to places she visits and recording these visits in extensive, precise details based on keen observation, but also freely drawing from multiple, myriad sources. Moore's travel notebooks, which she kept religiously, record many of the observations and details that find their way into poems.[2] Engaging what might be called a technique of "documentary tourism", her poem "An Octopus", like other long (and some short) poems in her 1924 volume *Observations*, displays characteristics of her experimental verse: the poem engages an obsessive cataloguing of precise detail drawn from nature, history, science, art, and all manner of extra-poetic sources; includes a

[2] See the Marianne Moore Digital Archive for information about Moore's notebooks and annotated editions published on line and forthcoming. http://moorearchive.org/.

formal reliance upon other documents, such as the insertion of full and partial quotations within poems; and, provides extensive, but incomplete, notes that end this first book. These often copious "Notes" inconsistently and incompletely cite sources referenced and/or quoted in the poems, contributing to while also complicating a poetic form of documentary tourism. The documentary function of notes, gesturing toward a record of sources however incomplete, joins with other documentary practices that include her use of documents (including documents of tourism), the accumulation of evidentiary detail, and a reliance upon empirical means in proffering a density of fact and observation.

This stress on documentary practice distinguishes Moore's touristic poems from those of fellow modernists for whom the figure of the modern tourist and the advent of mass tourism accompanied a critique of the new century's shallowness. Most strikingly, her fellow poet Ezra Pound disdained a bourgeois sensibility that he saw permeating modern tourism, and he used the tourist as a foil to advancing a new poetics, an avant-garde corrective for a deficient national culture. While both Moore and Pound shared a "preoccupation with nation-building narratives", Moore regards the touristic moment as an opportunity to investigate those narratives, while Pound's poetry suggests that they reveal the populace's shallow sense of national character or tradition (Green 2017, p. 428).

Pound's tourist offers a useful contrast to Moore's sense of the tour as a skeptical engagement with history. In poems, Moore would likely have read while formulating her own first efforts to write as a modern poet, Pound skewers a middle-brow superficiality among tourists he perceives as bereft of history. The first issue of *Poetry* (October 1912) includes Pound's foray with an American audience in proclaiming an avant-garde poetics. His assertion of avant-gardism explicitly takes aim at the "mass of dolts" and the "frolicking tourists" in two poems relating touristic activities—visiting a museum and viewing an ancient tomb. "To Whistler, American", a poem responding to the Whistler exhibit at the Tate, and "Middle-Aged: A Study of Emotion", set among the pyramids, both regale unrefined visitors. The popular masses clustering at sites of cultural significance promote Pound's sense of urgency in calling for the emergence of a superior and oppositional "us", an avant-garde of innovation and poetic vision. This is an old story in modernist avant-garde formations—the artist versus the middlebrow masses—but Pound's particular language about tourism and the oppositional poses that he adopts as speaker warrant attention and throw into relief the different tack taken by Moore in regard to the tourist and the tour.

In "To Whistler, American", the painter enables the oppositional "us" of the poem and the battle to be *in front* (avant-garde) of "our America" through "our art" and its newness. Addressing Whistler, the poem acclaims Whistler's example for "us":

> You, our first great. . .
> . . . for us, I mean.
> Who bear the brunt of our America
> And try to wrench her impulse into art.
> You were not always sure, not always set. . .
> Had not one style from birth, but tried and pried
> And tampered with the media. (Pound 1912b, p. 7)

The poet's visit to the museum stakes a claim to a masculine lineage of artists, encouraging leadership through factional battle or struggle that distinguishes the "avant" from the "dolts":

> You and Abe Lincoln from that mass of dolts
> Show us there's chance at least of winning through. (Pound 1912b, p. 7)

The artist, then, is not the run-of-the-mill tourist, but it is capable of enabling new forms of culture through connecting aesthetically and historically with the museum or other touristic site. In contrast, the "mass of dolts" from which he separates himself in the museum inhabits the second poem "Middle-Aged". Their careless encounters with the great pyramids and buried kings are figured in images of "Tourists frolicking" among the ancient sites, snapping photographs with newly

portable cameras. This technology of representation links to their own modern state of transitory, inconsequential engagement with history, and art. They

> Try photographs, wolf down their ale and cakes
> And start to inspect some further pyramids. . .
> Their transitory step and merriment. . . (Pound 1912a, p. 8)

Pound's antipathy toward the masses infamously led him two years later to assert that the "'man in the street' cannot be expected" to grasp authentic art (in this case, Wyndham's Lewis' "Timon", his Cubo-Futurist illustrations of Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens*): "Damn the man in the street, once and for all, damn the man in the street who is only in the street because he hasn't intelligence enough to be let in to anywhere else" (Pound 1914, p. 233). Pound's disdain echoes in his presentation of the common tourist who enters the museum unaware, trampling over the tombs—and all of history—with "transitory step and merriment" (Pound 1912a, p. 8).

Marianne Moore is not persuaded to join Pound's avant-garde campaign against the "man of the street". Indeed, Moore's poems of the teens and twenties comment repeatedly on this kind of disdain, linking it to material forms of power dramatically expressed in her 1924 long poem "Marriage", which evokes litanies of history and empirical evidence to observe how "experience attests/that men have power/and sometimes one is made to feel it".[3] In many poems, authority and power are shown to be human constructions and systems that too effectively naturalize meaning, concealing their social bias in promoting a natural truth. Early poems perceive that the organization of knowledge, such as constructed taxonomies and classification systems, is never a neutral act. "A Fool, A Foul Thing, a Distressful Lunatic", a poem ostensibly about derided birds, questions how the western preference for classification and cataloguing enables a system that privileges certain versions of knowledge while claiming objectivity. The poem recalls types of birds and their humanly-associated qualities, relating, for example, that the "gander" is "Mocked, and ignorantly designated yet/To play the fool" (Moore 2016, p.12). Similarly, Egyptian vultures are deemed "foul", and the loon is "foremost in the madman's alphabet". Moore expresses skepticism over assuming each bird's nature as such, instead asking whether it is not a "folly's *catalogue*" that "styled" these creatures so, stressing that the cultural structures organizing knowledge are themselves suspect in assessing nature (Moore 2016, p. 12, emphasis added). Intriguingly, this skepticism regarding the catalogue as a structure of knowledge reoccurs in poems that at the same time deeply invest in cataloguing as a method of procedure or a formal poetics for her information-laden poems. The catalogue, as a system of classification, becomes both an architectural feature of Moore's poems and subject to critique for naturalizing definitions and sites of power.

This dual practice of deploying classification and a suspicion of it informs the documentary tourism of "An Octopus", written in 1924 following a trip to Washington state with her mother and her brother Warner. "An Octopus" relates what she sees in their excursions to Mount Rainier National Park where the trio stayed for two days amidst dazzling views of the mountain and alpine meadows, and Moore hiked with her brother in the ice caves (Leavell 2016, p. 200). "An Octopus" presents the glacier as itself a documentary force of "accuracy" and "fact", adopting language that is within the next decade will become synonymous with the new term "documentary": "Relentless accuracy is the nature of this octopus/with its capacity for fact" (Moore 2016, p. 91). Constructed as a catalogue of documents, the poem insistently gathers myriad references and quotes (both exact and off-quotes) from a mixed range of texts. Among the quoted sources in the poem, which include such high-culture luminaries as Newman, Trollope, and Ruskin, Moore draws upon among popular visual media, like the *Illustrated London News* and the *London Graphic*; however, her most insistently inserted sources are from tourist brochures, pamphlets, and books, including W.D. Wilcox's *The Rockies in Canada*, Clifton Johnson's

[3] *Observations*, 80. All quotes from this volume will reference the 2016 edition edited by Linda Leavell. Observations was originally published in 1924 by Dial press, with a second (and slightly revised) edition in 1925.

What to See in America, and what Moore's notes tells us are copious, but uncited uses of "government pamphlets on our national parks" for "descriptions of scenery and of animals" (Moore 2016, p. 109). Johnson's travel guide describes in great detail the natural abundance and visual grandeur of Mt. Rainier, providing the metaphor of the octopus that Moore adopts: "From the snow-covered summit twenty-eight rivers of ice pour slowly down the gashed slopes, reaching into the rich gardens of wild flowers and splendid ever-green forests like the tentacles of a huge octopus" (Johnson 1922, p. 534).

Especially through this intertextuality, the poem installs the tourist in the poem as witness and documentarian, but also as the instrument through whom the apparatus of tourism and tourist guidebooks is filtered. The tourist, the tourism materials, and the poem's overwhelming "capacity for fact" evolve a documentary approach that is characterized by what the poem calls a "relentless accuracy", recalling the cropped, highly focused precision of contemporaneous photographers, like Paul Strand or Ralph Steiner, at the forefront of documentary photography. Note the cropped, up-close focus and precision of detail in the following set of lines:

> Larkspur, blue pincushions, blue peas, and lupin;
> white flowers with white, and red with red;
> the blue ones "growing close together
> so that patches of them look like blue water in the distance";
> this arrangement of colors
> as in Persian designs of hard stones with enamel,
> forms a pleasing equation—
> a diamond outside and inside, a white dot;
> on the outside, a ruby, inside, a red dot;
> black spots balanced with black
> in the woodlands where fires have run over the ground—
> separated by aspens, cat's paws, and woolly sunflowers,
> fireweed, asters, and Goliath thistles
> "flowering at all altitudes as multiplicitous as barley",
> like pink sapphires in the pavement of the glistening plateau.
> Inimical to "bristling, puny, swearing men
> equipped with saws and axes",
> this treacherous glass mountain
> admires gentians, ladyslippers, harebells, mountain dryads,
> and "Calypso, the goat flower—
> that greenish orchid fond of snow"— (Moore 2016, p. 89)

Moore's emphasis on this specifically *American* natural place informs how she formulates the touristic moment. Pound's mockery of the tourist is a broader critique of the thinness of modern culture, and particularly of the lack of substance (for him) of American culture. His portrayals of the middle-brow American tourist show their encounters with the grandness of ancient history as a kind of entertainment or spectacle (being cheaply reproduced through the modern technology of the photograph), emphatically transpiring on non-American ground. In part, this depiction plays into the image of the American and America as culture-less in comparison with Europe and more ancient sites of western culture, an image long plaguing the newer country's sense of identity (as we will see in later discussions of Thomas Jefferson). Moore's poems suggest a different relationship between the tourist, place, and history that are activated by the tourist-poet's engagement in deep empirical observations of both natural and human activity in American places. We see this empirical approach in the precision used to describe Mt. Rainier, rendering a panoply of close-up details that becomes disorienting and suggests a kind of witness enacted through making the American place strange or defamiliarized in the act of witnessing.

The advent of mass tourism, as critiqued by Pound, suggests for Moore a democratization of national identity and an access to the past that nonetheless must be skeptically and responsibly inspected by the touristic citizen. Encouraging a (profitable) relationship between touristic places and a sense of American identity was a central motivation in the expanding tourist industry, which between 1880 and 1940 spurred a "national tourism" that "emerged as a form of geographical consumption that centered on the sights and scenes of the American nation" (Shaffer 2001, p. 3). Responding to a national market and being enabled by "methods of mass production and mass distribution . . . [and] an expanding middle class with time and money to spend on leisure", tourism was "integrally connected to the emergence of the United States as a corporate, urban-industrial nation-state", and "actively promoted" as "a ritual of American citizenship. Commercial clubs, railroad corporations, the National Park Service, good-roads advocates, guidebook publishers, and a wide array of tourist advocates and enthusiasts defined the tourist experience in national terms" (Shaffer 2001, p. 4). For Moore, such experiences held the potential to enable American citizenry, but demanded a particularly informed skepticism toward inherited narratives.

An embrace of American places, alongside a questioning of idealistic histories, marks Moore's poetic encounter with Mt. Rainier, as "An Octopus" heralds the rich beauty of the American landscape, echoing tourist pamphlets and guidebooks of the time that "created and marketed tourist landscapes as quintessentially American places" (Shaffer 2001, p. 4). The poem describes the mountain's fir trees, for example, as the "austere specimens of our American royal families" (Moore 2016, p. 85). Tourist guides from this period aimed to "teach [. . .] tourists what to see and how to see" American places, thus creating "an idealized American history and tradition across the American landscape", as Marguerite Shaffer argues (Shaffer 2001, p. 4). At the same time, Moore's "An Octopus" explicitly decries the human activity threatening this monumental natural environment. The environmental awareness suffusing the poem channels into momentary critiques of the economic forces compelling tourism, as in the inclusion of loggers chopping up the complex natural habitat the poem has assiduously documented. In the long quoted passage above, the activities of men interrupt the cascading catalogue of natural details. Although much of nature is preserved—"glacial ledges" remain "where climbers have not gone or have gone timidly"—the intrusion of men and financial profit threatens the glacier, although its might remains

> Inimical to "bristling, puny, swearing men
> Equipped with saws and axes" (Moore 2016, p. 89)

Conjoining the "climbers" and the loggers, these lines gesture toward the financial project of tourism and its potential to harm the environment.

Interestingly, Moore's eco-critical gloss echoes a tension between idealized representations of place and critical concern with the environment that appears in tourist literature at this time; indeed, her reference to the loggers directly connects the poem to environmental commentary that surfaces in tourism guides. Placed within quotation marks in the poem (although inaccurately quoted), "bristling, puny, swearing men" first appear in Clifton Johnson's *What to See in America*, cited in Moore's notes as her source, although his comments are directed more broadly at the modernizing logging industry invading Washington state's forests: "Steam has made of logging in its forests a business which devastates them with incredible speed and system", and tracts cut through the forest resemble "the trail of a cyclone" (Johnson 1922, p. 537). Linking the forests' old growth to American identity, Johnson attributes to the natural landscape an essential national quality and criticizes environmental abuse as damaging American character: "Many of them [trees] have been growing since the time when Columbus found this continent of ours—and they are doomed to be destroyed by *puny bustling swearing men* with saws and axes" (Johnson 1922, p. 537, emphasis added). Johnson's tour guide provides a detailed and rather lengthy report on the destructive process of logging. Moore's poem, through its documentary strategies and detailed classifications, suggests how the natural environment is narrated for ideological purposes (such as supporting American exceptionalism through reverence for its natural

bounty and space), while alternative narratives (especially commercial ones, like logging) conjure a more complex notion of "history" and "nature" and "nation".

2. Taxonomy, American History, and Tourism

The contradictions surfacing in tourism literature at the time that Moore wrote "An Octopus", between an idealized land and an environmentally compromised American landscape, compel an awareness that the profit-driven tourist industry itself was or would have an environmental impact. In this poem, the documentary habits of observation, cataloguing, and collecting compel the tourist's understanding of her encounter with nature as an encounter with socio-historical and economic constructions. A decade later, in "Virginia Britannia", the empirical documentary tools of catalogue and classification echo and question the taxomomic approach of natural history as a way of organizing knowledge regarding the world. Suggesting a generational link with Moore across some six or more decades, Natasha Trethewey's *Thrall* confronts the continuing social force of taxomomic thinking and practice on racial understanding in America.

In 1935–1936, Moore wrote a four-poem sequence, "Old Dominion", employing a strictly disciplined syllabic verse to consider both the natural world and the sociohistorical dimensions of the state of Virginia, following a visit Moore took with her mother and brother (stationed in Norfolk) that included tours of Jamestown and Williamsburg.[4] The first poem, "Virginia Britannia", conducts a "tour" of these early sites of American history and references the city of Charlottesville, although it is not clear whether she visited there or depended for her brief reference upon her reading through the "prides of Virginia, as found on my bookshelf" during her stay in Virginia in late summer, 1935.[5] She visited Williamsburg initially in 1927, but upon her 1935 visit the National Park Service was restoring the town and its historical buildings and grounds (along with Jamestown), attracting tourists who were eager to see this founding American site.[6] The surge in American tourism, especially after the war, promoted particular ways of viewing historical sites that the reconstruction of Williamsburg enacted. The popular travel guides, *See America First*, for example, had since the teens encouraged travelers to understand a "particular narrative of history":

> … the act of marking these historic sites and literary shrines went beyond the desire to bolster the existence of an American tradition. The guides did not simply celebrate a generic ideal of history, they defined a very particular narrative of American history by deliberately selecting and presenting certain historical facts. In mapping and deciphering the landmarks of history, the series chronicled the process by which the boundaries of the nation were formed. The guides described the march of history as a series of conquests [Spanish, French, English] … Finally, the Americans, united in their quest for freedom and democracy, broke the bonds of empire and expanded across the continent, conquering the Indians and forging a free and democratic nation. Through this narrative the guides presented the stages of American development, inventing an American tradition that reinforced the Progressive era's

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[4] The sequence is first published in *The Pangolin and Other Verse*, 1936. All page references are to this volume, which is included in facsimile form in (White 2008).

[5] Moore (1997, p. 350). In this letter, Moore is writing to Hildegarde Watson, August 8, 1935, during her stay in Portsmouth, Virginia that summer. She and her mother returned to Virginia the following summer.

[6] Green (2017, p. 433). Usefully claiming that Moore's visits to reconstructed Williamsburg and Jamestown "prompted Moore to think about a national narrative as a special kind of construction," Green reads the poem as sympathetic to a romantic "cavalier myth" of "southern historiography" that sees a necessity for slavery "to secure the independence of the cavalier planter, and eventually, that of the nation" (p. 439). See also Miller (1995), on race and Moore; Westover (2004), on Moore's (1967) treatment of American settlement history (Westover treats Moore's final version of the poem as it appears in 1967 in The Complete Poems, while this essay considers its first presentation in 1936). See Stubbs 2016. Stubbs discusses ideas of nationality in this "Virginia Britannia" and other poems and usefully observes that the poem considers historical "ground" as "not only contested territories but also the identifying stamp that inhabitants place upon them" in following the "nature of colonial consumption" (pp. 54–55).

> ideal of progress and obscured the racial and ethnic conflict that marred the nation's past. (Shaffer 2001, pp. 194–95)

Not unlike a travel guide, "Virginia Britannia" selects and marks historic sites to present a "particular narrative" of America, opening the poem by stepping onto the grounds of Jamestown, the first permanent settlement by the English, founded in 1607. However, in both its form and content, Moore's tour challenges the idealization of an American tradition as inherently a movement toward progress enabled by the young nation's commitment to freedom. In part, this challenge takes place through the taxonomic gestures of the poem. In its densely close and precise attention to observing and recording natural detail, its persistent architecture of cataloguing and classification, this poem participates in methods of taxonomy that are associated with natural history since the seventeenth century, applying them to the experience of the historic tour.

Taxonomy is a branch of science that encompasses the description, identification, nomenclature, and classification of organisms. It privileges visual economies of empirical observation first brought into taxonomy in the late-seventeenth century by the botanist John Ray, who influentially asserted the notion of "species" as the ultimate unit of taxonomy (afterward debated by Linnaeus, Darwin, and others). Natural history, as based upon taxonomic observation and categorization of all manifestations of life, emerged coincidently with the transatlantic slave trade, and the exploration and colonization of the new world essential to establishing the American nation. European encounters with non-white populations found a logic in applying taxonomic systems to human groups, evolving an Enlightenment justification for racial hierarchy and oppression endemic to America's nation-building.

An intergenerational pondering of American taxonomies of race can be traced along lines that move from Moore back to Thomas Jefferson and forward to contemporary poet Natasha Trethewey. Collusions of racist thinking and racial mixing, of course, distinguished the colonizing of North, Central, and South America, and the eighteenth-century founding of the United States as a nation. Writing from his home in Charlottesville, and many years before his slave, Sally Hemings (born in 1773) most likely bore his children, Thomas Jefferson struggled with the undeniable presence of miscegenation in the new country. He turned to the logic of taxonomy then defining the field of natural history and embraced by Jefferson in organizing his extensive collections and classifications of American specimens of flora, fauna, and wildlife. His extensive field guide, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, written in 1781, is informed by the new scientific method of taxonomy that was introduced by Carl Linnaeus, a way of cataloguing, dividing, and subdividing all elements of the natural world. Jefferson's project responds, in part, to the French naturalist Goerge Louis Lecler, comte de Buffon, whose popular natural history volumes sought to move taxonomy from endless classifications and subclassifications to broader questions of "why" and "how" species developed and differed. Volume V of Buffon's monumental *Histoire naturelle* applied that question to the American colony's natural world, arguing, in his "Theory of American Degeneracy", that the animals and people of the New World were naturally weaker and smaller than those in the Old World, and that the migration from the Old to the New inevitably jumpstarted a process of degeneracy for any species. *Notes on Virginia* attempts to disprove Buffon through empirical taxonomies that illustrate the vigor of American flora, fauna, and people, linking the American natural world to its capacity and distinctions as a nation.

The diversity of the natural landscape extends into the diversity of its population, and Jefferson strives to provide an ordering vision, analogous to the natural world, of the varied races peopling the country. In pages that are famously painful for their appeal to scientific logic but rife with social prejudice, Jefferson argues that the "races of black and of red men … have never yet been viewed by us as subjects of natural history", a step he then undertakes to correct. While praising the Indian as sublime evidence of American vitality, he advances his "suspicion … that the blacks … whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstances, are inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind". Turning to principles of taxonomy, he argues, "different species of the same genus, or varieties of the same species, may possess different qualifications". Justifying his "suspicion" through classification systems shaping ideas of natural history, Jefferson argues race is

a "difference fixed in nature", and infamously comments that the "improvement of blacks in body and mind, in the first instance of their mixture with whites, has been observed by everyone, and proves that their inferiority is not the effect merely of their condition of life" (Jefferson 1984, p. 264). The assumption that a mixture with whites improves blacks, but that such a mixture degenerates whites and makes them and their descendants forever non-white, forms the basis, of course, of both American custom and slave-holding law, in which the mother's status as a slave determined the status of her child, no matter the father. After slavery ended, the one-drop laws that were adopted throughout America continued this logic of racial distinction and ancestry. Such historical thinking about racial difference, Trethewey's poems insist, continues to persist in the public imagination.

Trethewey's *Thrall* (Trethewey 2012) tracks past and continuing traces of this taxonomic logic, particularly its privileging of visual "evidence" to determine racial identity. Addressing Jefferson's Virginia home Monticello, in "Enlightenment", and the Spanish colonization of the Americas, in a stunning poetic sequence aptly titled "Taxonomy", Trethewey excavates European and early American taxonomies of race to trace how this logic persists into the present day, especially in the intersections of private and public relations. "Taxonomy" dwells upon the casta system defining New Spain's colonizing hierarchies of race, while "Enlightenment" links Jefferson's theories and experiences of racial mixing to similar taxonomies continuing to shape current social discourse and her own mixed-race family history.

The poems that make up "Taxonomy" consider how the taxonomic methods of ordering the natural world are applied to social organization, as displayed by the genre of family portraiture known as casta paintings and the specific artwork in this genre by Juan Rogríguez Juárez. Casta paintings vividly visualize human taxonomies organizing race in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century colony of "New Spain" (now Mexico). Acknowledging that at least five hundred casta paintings were produced in the eighteenth century, Diana DiPaolo Loren notes that these "idealized family portraits" were produced "primarily for elite audiences in Spain", and the "sets of consecutive images . . . were meant to be prescriptive as they followed a specific pattern of illustrating social differences that resulted from the union of people of different races". The social differences followed the "race of offspring", which "defined the family's place in colonial culture" (Loren 2007, pp. 24–25).

Documenting the carefully calibrated systems of racial designation ordering the colony, the series of casta paintings done by Juan Rodríguez Juárez in 1715 stages the classifications of colonial racial mixing emerging from Spanish encounters with Africans and Indians. Insisting upon a visual economy that naturalized social hierarchies, the paintings portray what Trethewey's "Taxonomy" calls a "catalog/of mixed bloods" and a "Guidebook to the colony" that the official "Book of Castas"—government and parish books recording births, deaths, baptism, marriages, etc.—carefully adhered to in classifying racial identities based on lineage (Trethewey 2012, p. 24). Charting the process of miscegenation, casta paintings illuminate the ranking of individuals of mixed-blood ancestry, as "those with more Spanish blood were at the upper end of the scale, while those with more African or Native American blood tended towards the bottom of the scale" (Loren 2007, p. 23). This system of categorization, known as the "sistema de castas", emerged during the seventeenth century to provide a "hierarchical ordering of racial groups according to their proportion of Spanish blood"; while in "theory, one's place in the racial hierarchy was based on lineage", lack of knowledge regarding ancestral lines resulted in a greater stress on "skin color as a guide to racial status among commoners" (Cope 1994, p. 24). As with Jefferson in America, the sistema de castas argued that "moral and intellectual qualities were transmitted through heredity", and "those with less tainted, more Hispanic bloodlines should be superior to other castas" (Cope 1994, pp. 25–26). Although the sistema de castas included upward of forty categories of racial mixing, most typically five to seven rankings were generally pertinent: "de Espanol" (Spaniard white), "da negra" (African black), "de India" (Native Amerian), the mestizo (white and Indian), the mulatto (white and black), the morisco (mulatto and Spanish), and the castizo (the mestizo and white) (Cope 1994, p. 24).

Anxiety regarding racial purity, linked to fears of rebellion and seeking to counter the earlier fluidity of racial mixing, especially among white Spaniards and Indian women, underlies the "catalog/of mixed bloods" and its definitions of progression or regression. Three of the four sections that make up "Taxonomy" employ the titles of casta paintings signifying different mixtures, while using language supplied by the "Book of Castas" that held official listings of the "various mixed unions of colonial Mexico and the children of those unions whose names and taxonomies were recorded", as Trethewey's end-notes describe the system (Trethewey 2012, p. 81). The sequence's final poem is named for this book, while the first three poems take their titles from paintings reiterating the official language used for racial designations in the official record: "De Español y de India Produce Mestiso"; "De Español y Negra Produce Mulato"; and, "De Español y Mestiza Produce Castiza". Ekphrastic responses to each of these paintings by Juan Rodríguez Juárez, the poems continually return to the language of racial taxonomy that fixes the individuals into categories, the words (also painted by the artist into the scene) that shape their social position and are taken to fix their essence as raced beings.

In the second poem, the mixture of the white Spaniard man and black woman is the "mulato", "fixed in his place" by a visually determined lexicon, by "word", "image", and "brush stroke" (21). Unlike the "mulato", fixed in place, the "castiza" of the third poem is more fluid in moving among racial categories, for the "castiza" is considered to be one-quarter "white" as the offspring of a Spaniard and a "mestizo", the term for a mixed Spaniard and Indian. The child depicted "turns toward the father/reaching to him/as if back to Spain", forecasting her own offspring's possible return to whiteness that the poem tracks:

> to the promise of blood
>
> alchemy—three easy steps
> to purity:
>
> from a Spaniard and an Indian,
> a mestizo;
>
> from a mestizo and a Spaniard,
> a castizo;
>
> from a castizo and a Spaniard,
> a Spaniard. (Trethewey 2012, p. 23)

Jefferson postulates that the black is improved by a first mixture with the white, but that pure whiteness cannot tolerate any mixture with the black. In making further distinctions, the sistemas de casta differentiated between the effects of mixing black or Indian "blood" with "white" blood. Most strikingly, the mixture of Indian and white blood allows for a future cleansing of the blood to regain white racial identity. In this taxonomic typology of miscegenation, the return to whiteness remains open for the "castiza" (the light-skinned Indian and white), whose union with de Espanol produces—de Espanol, a procreative blood mending, a progression back toward whiteness.

Trethewey's "Taxonomy" records this "alchemy" for the Indian/white mix, while the "mulato" carries a "typology of taint/of stain: blemish: sullying spot", never leading to "pure" whiteness, even through a continued chain of generational miscegenation, always existing in the not-quite-white state of the "*mulatto-returning-backwards*" in variations of mixtures of African, white, and/or Indian (Trethewey 2012, p. 24). This phrase from the Book of Castas appears as a title for one of the casta paintings by Juárez, "De Mulato y Mestisa, Produce Mulato es Torna Atrás": "In Juárez's painting, the phrase 'mulato es torna atrs' literally means 'mulatto, return backwards', indicating that such a union was actually seen as a step backwards towards a more African heritage" (Loren 2007, p. 23). Trethewey's notes on "Taxonomy" at the end of the volume stress the "return backwards": "the widespread belief in the 'taint' of black blood—that it was irreversible—resulted in taxonomies rooted

in language that implied a 'return backwards'" (Trethewey 2012, p. 81). Her poem supplies an alternative phrase for the "*mulatto-returning-backwards* (or/*hold-yourself-in midair*)" (tente en el aire) (Trethewey 2012, p. 24). These phrases suggest the fear of blackness returning, of parents who look white having a dark child because of the "taint" of blood returning. This fear suggests the English equivalence of "torna altrás" as not only "return backwards", but as "throwback", as in a throwback or return to blackness.

"Taxonomy" records how official and colloquial language enforces racial taxonomies: the "*morisca* [light-skinned offspring of mulato and Spaniard], the *lobo* [African & Indian mix], the *chino* [from "barcino", a zoological term for horses with dark spots]/*sambo* [from the Spanish "zambo", the mixture of African and Native American], *albino* [child morisca and Spaniard, 1/16th black], and//the *no-te-entiendo*—the/*I don't understand you*" (Trethewey 2012, p. 24). This last label speaks to the fear of disorder from white and black mixtures, the failure of visual means to determine race if black blood can lurk in the seemingly white-appearing body and subsequently "torna altrás", or return backwards. Progressions of mixtures involving black lineage end up in uncertainty and unrecognizability within these taxonomies of race.

These centuries-old taxonomies infuse a central moment of tourism in *Thrall*, recorded in "Enlightenment". The use of tourism to reinforce or alter historical narratives of American history, chiming with Marianne Moore's "Virginia Britannia", links a founding father's Enlightenment-era taxonomic theory of race to the present day through a focus on place as historical narrative. Trethewey, the daughter of a white father and a black mother, turns to Jefferson's presence and ideas in "Enlightenment", a poem near the end of *Thrall* that culminates reflections on taxonomy bookending the volume. This moment is staged as a tourist visit she and her father take to Jefferson's eighteenth-century home, Monticello, outside of Charlottesville, Virginia. This moment of tourism, the engagement with and consumption of a historical place, registers within the taxonomic structures linking natural history and social organization.

As though bringing us into Monticello's front door, the poem opens with a "portrait of Jefferson that hangs" in the entrance hall, "his forehead white with illumination—/ a lit bulb—the rest of his face in shadow", suggesting "his bright knowledge, its dark subtext". We are told, as though by a tour guide, that "By 1805, when Jefferson sat for the portrait/he was already linked to an affair/with his slave" (Trethewey 2012, p. 68). Trethewey's Monticello tour records a certain puncturing of an idealized mythos of Jefferson that underwent particular pressure with the revelations of DNA tests in 1998 showing shared heritage of his descendants and those of his slave Sally Hemings, although hypotheses and speculations of this relationship preceded the scientific experiments.

The visit that Trethewey and her father take to Monticello is their second one together, and it follows, chronologically, upon the genetically-enabled picture emerging of Jefferson's relation with his slave Sally Hemings—stories of a liason and offspring long "haunting" Jefferson's Charlottesville (and my home town), debated but just as often popularly debunked as incompatible with the Founding Father. In much the same way, during their previous visit to Monticello and prior to the DNA tests, Trethewey's white father refused to believe the rumors. He had "explained the contradictions", insisting "how Jefferson hated slavery, though—out/*of necessity*, my father said—*had to own slaves*; that his moral philosophy meant//he could not have fathered those children:/*would have been impossible*, my father said" (Trethewey 2012, p. 69). Such a sense of history reveals the tourist moment as one constructed to privilege "certain meanings and myths while ignoring others, deliberately arranging historical events and anecdotes, intentionally framing certain scenes and views into a coherent national whole" (Shaffer 2001, p. 4). The poem suggests the father's change in opinion is coincident with a change in the national narrative, from the time of their first visit to Monticello to this one, in his thinking about "this history/that links us—white father, black daughter" (Trethewey 2012, p. 71). Yet, despite the DNA tests and a softening of her father's convictions, Trethewey still understands that "the past holds us captive" in what she suspects is his lingering, unspoken belief in Jefferson's theory that the black's "mixture with whites" as a taxonomic improvement applies to her—like the taxonomies of

the casta system and paintings—suspecting "my father could believe" that in his contribution of white "blood" to a child borne with a black woman, "he'd made me *better*" (Trethewey 2012, p. 70).

The poem's final stanzas suggest the persisting impact of old taxonomies of race, descending from the colonial Americas, which exhibit themselves not only in her father's unspoken thoughts, but deeply and extensively reside in assumptions of our national narrative. Even as the tourist site strives to change the narrative—as Monticello has committed itself to doing—and to make visible in its twenty-first century excavations, studies, and discussions of racial histories so long elided in narratives of Jefferson, the mechanisms of whiteness persist in this place in both proclaimed and unexamined assumptions of racial superiority. The poem lingers on how even the unveiled evidence of Jefferson's own complexities and contradictions regarding race get filtered through the taxonomies he clung to: even though so much "has changed" on the grounds of Monticello and in the presentation of the tour, "talk of Sally Hemings" inevitably leads to "someone asking" the tour guide: "How white was she?—parsing the fractions as if to name what made her worthy of Jefferson's attentions: a near-white//quadroon mistress, not a plain black slave" (Trethewey 2012, pp. 70–71). As in the casta system, whiteness remains the desired, but unattainable, standard, for if Hemings is *almost white*, the Founding Father's acts might be understood. This justification for Jefferson's attraction to Hemings, for Trethewey, bespeaks continuing and often unconscious assumptions of white superiority infusing American habits of racial distinction.

3. Visiting the "Serpentine Shadows"

Read in conjunction with Trethewey's poems and their direct engagement with taxonomies of race and American history, Moore's own formal reliance upon taxonomy in "Virginia Britannia", which manifests an obsessive cataloguing that gestures toward taxonomic classifications, raises questions about human classifications endemic to America's origins. Moreover, reading the two poets together, as each visits historical sites and especially as each invokes places related to Thomas Jefferson, reveals a concern with how taxonomic processes of classification imbricate tourism's engagement with historical place. How, for each poet, is the structure of the touristic encounter determined by taxonomies linking natural history and social organization?

In its touring observations, Moore's poem adopts a classificatory model of taxonomy to detail natural elements of plants, birds, trees, and wildlife, placing them alongside artificial structures of man-made gardens, cemeteries, and churches. In these juxtapositions, the poem sets up an American taxonomy of natural history that comments upon the construction of an imperial "landscape" to duplicate England's:

> . . . The Old Dominion has
> all-green grass-hoppers
> in all-green, box-sculptured grounds;
> an almost English green surrounds
> them. Care has formed a-
> mong unEnglish insect sounds,
> the white wall-rose. (Moore 1936, p. 4)

The insistently hyphenated words, along with the syllabically broken words ("a-/mong") ending lines, suggest here and throughout the poem how the hybrid domestication of this landscape is also a kind of breaking and making strange, as in the importation of the English rose among "unEnglish" environs to create an "almost English green" among the lands that "Indians knew" differently. Nonetheless, the native environment persists, as in the "terse Virginian" mocking-bird who alights on garden furniture among the artifice of "Narrow herring-bonelaid brikes" and imported pansies (Moore 1936, p. 5). In such lines, Moore's taxonomic approach, like Jefferson's before her, rejects the notions of superior British/European flora, fauna, people, even parodying the attempts to create an English environment in this new world. However, unlike Jefferson, the poem attends to the types of

tyranny imported, alongside the English garden designs, to suggest a "tyrant taste" that underscores European colonization and a national history that includes genocide and slavery.[7]

Identifying an American pattern of oppression in the histories that underpin the sites she tours, this tourist perspective captures distinctively visual enumerations of colonizing force—proceeding through place by citing visual evidence of what the poem calls "taking what they/pleased—colonizing as we say—" (Moore 1936, p. 8). Seeing boxed flower beds and sculpted gardens, for example, the speaker reads into the shaping of nature a colonizing ideology of tyranny that justifies itself as a "kindness". The poem's touristic cataloguing lays bare the oxymoron and contradiction of America's founding moment, its "inconsistent flowerbed" of protest against tyranny and simultaneous adoption of it, particularly pointing to the treatment of Native Americans and black slaves (Moore 1936, p. 6). Her natural history is carefully intertwined with a social history of colonial locations, primarily Jamestown and Williamsburg, and with a location that has taken on new meaning in relation to racial attitudes in twenty-first century America, the city of Charlottesville.[8] The touristic encounter with Jefferson's home, in Trethewey, and the university, in Moore, offer complementary opportunities to consider American racial attitudes borne of applying natural history taxonomies to social organization. Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* haunts both poets, with Trethewey quoting directly from his text, while Moore's poem both echoes and questions the taxonomic approach that, accompanying the history of American colonization and nationhood, essentialized and hierarchized race.

Jefferson's appearance in "Virginia Britannia" is oblique in Moore's poetic text, but explicit in the notes. Moore cites Jefferson through referencing an architectural innovation, the curving serpentine wall, constituting an homage to good design common to Moore's poetics.[9] The fleeting reference morphs in significance, however, from seeming praise to a more complex critique when one considers its placement and relation to the images that precede and follow it in the poem. In one quick moment, Jefferson—Enlightenment practitioner of "new" taxonomic methods—appears (unnamed in the poem) through the image of the serpentine walls distinguishing his architectural design of the University of Virginia, the "one-brick-thick-/wall serpentine shadows" dividing the campus gardens surrounding the main Lawn and the "Range", parallel rows of small student rooms conjoined down the length of the lawn, punctuated by large stately faculty homes, and descending from the classical-inspired dome of the Rotunda (Moore 1936, p. 7). Moore's choice to include Thomas Jefferson and his edifice to education as a part of this sequence is emphasized by her decision to provide the University a rare footnote, in a poem chock-full of perplexing and dense references and allusions but short on notes (unlike "An Octopus", with its pages of notes—although characteristically incomplete). Her note on Jefferson becomes one of a sparse few notes for this long poem, telling us that the "serpentine shadows" are "Of the University of Virginia's one-brick-thick wall designed by Thomas Jefferson", an engineering ingenuity that he adapted from England, but was popularly thought to have invented (Moore 1936, p. 23). Jefferson's own history of owning slaves, of involving them in the labor of building his home and University, and his uneasy rationale in *Notes on Virginia*, where cataloguing flora and fauna leads to justification for classifying humans, compromise the virtues of "intel-/lect and delicacy" advanced by selective and dominant depictions of the nation (Moore 1936, p. 8). These "shadows", like the broken word "intel-/lect", suggest the paradox Trethewey later terms, in speaking of Jefferson, "his bright knowledge, its dark subtext" (Trethewey 2012, p. 68).

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[7] See Tara Stubbs, discussing ideas of nationality in this "Virginia Britannia" and other poems, who usefully observes that the poem considers historical "ground" as "not only contested territories but also the identifying stamp that inhabitants place upon them" in following the "nature of colonial consumption" (Stubbs 2016, pp. 54, 55).

[8] The white supremacist rally, Unite the Right, took place in Charlottesville on August 11 and 12, 2017 and brought far-right and white nationalist groups to the city, where they marched on the campus of the University of Virginia and gathered in a downtown park to protest plans to remove a statue of Confederate general Robert E. Lee. After the rally, a Unite the Right supporter drove a car into a crowd of counter-protesters, resulting in nineteen injuries and the death Heather D. Heyer. See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unite_the_Right_rally.

[9] See Kinnahan (2018) for a further reading focused on economics, labor, and race in Moore's work, including "Virginia Britannia" but also earlier poems.

The image of the serpentine walls suggests the beauty, strength, and engineering ingenuity of the walls (which can "star-/tle strangers"), but also specifies their "shadows", a word that tellingly opens onto a series of references to natural and historical colonizers. This series culminates in a consideration of race:

> . . . one-brick-thick-
> wall serpentine shadows star-
> tle strangers. The strangler fig, the dwarf-
> fancying Egyptian, the American,
> the Dutch, the noble
> Roman, in taking what they
> pleased—colonizing as we say—
> were not all intel-
> lect and delicacy. A
> black savage or such
> as was subject to the
> deer-fur Crown is not all brawn
> and animality. (Moore 1936, pp. 7–8)

This imperial "taking what they/pleased" includes those that are deemed as the "black savage" and the "subject to the/deer-fur Crown", characterizations of Africans and Native Americans importantly relying upon the classification of human types, placing whites at the top of a racial hierarchy, which Jefferson (and others) deploys and that the mythos of Manifest Destiny promoted (Moore 1936, p. 8). The poem emphatically challenges this taxonomic justification for enslavement and/or genocide, insisting that the African and the Native American are "not all brawn/and animality", speaking as much to her own moment of racial strife and political xenophobia in America as to the past (Moore 1936, p. 8).

Moore's tour deviates, in such moments, from the popular approaches to tourism that she herself consulted. The tourist industry at this time directed its selling pitches to white Americans. Travel guides, like the *See American First* series, recounted "a history of American progress that glorified white, Anglo-Saxon America, thus allowing for tourists to retreat into this idealized America, escaping the realities of racial and ethnic conflict and other growing tensions in American society" (Shaffer 2001, p. 199). Moore, whose tourism experiences became—like everything—gist for her poems, conveys an uncanny sense of the early twentieth-century tourist industry as a vehicle for presenting a history of America that suits the racial priorities of the post-war decades of the twenties and thirties. In a nation experiencing intensified race conflict, non-white population migrations, and terroristic violence against blacks, the tourist industry in the teens, twenties, and thirties actively discouraged blacks from visiting historical sites, while tour guides presented a history in which they disappear.[10] Thus, Clifton Johnson's 1922 tour book *What to See in America*, quoted by Moore in the earlier "An Octopus", clearly assumes the (unmarked) whiteness of the American tourist. The chapter on Virginia, for example, which is heavy in describing sites of Civil War history, only indirectly mentions slavery through a lens of natural harmony: in the one sentence noting the "one third of the population" of the state who are "negroes", Johnson assures his tourist that such numbers present no threat, and the "negroes" "are mostly employed in the tobacco factories, where they amuse themselves as they work in singing the quaint old plantation melodies" (Johnson 1922, p. 150). The "old plantations"

[10] As Shaffer relates, "the Park Service consciously discouraged African Americans from visiting the parks. As stated at the 1922 parks conference, 'One of the objections to colored people is that if they come in large groups they will be conspicuous, and will not only be objected to by other visitors, but will cause trouble among the hotel and camp help, and it will be impossible to serve them . . . While we cannot openly discriminate against them, they should be told that the parks have not facilities for taking care of them'" (Shaffer 2001, pp. 124–25). Conditions of segregation throughout the country, but especially in the South, motivated the publication of the annual *Negro Motorist Green-Book* from 1936 until 1964 to provide black travelers with information about businesses and services friendly to African Americans.

pictured in photographs accompanying the chapter are those of American "heroes"—Washington, Lee, and Thomas Jefferson—although the picture captions do not call them "plantations", nor is there any mention of slaves who built and maintained them.

In the midst of her taxonomic and precisely structured syllabic lines, Moore unsettles tourism's white-washed histories, whether they be Johnson's touristic assurance to whites that the "negroes" only raised their voices harmlessly in song, or Jefferson's earlier denial of speech to the "black". Jefferson's human classifications explicitly denied that blacks had a capacity for coherent speech, for he writes, "never yet could I find that a black had uttered a thought above the level of plain narration" (Jefferson 1984, p. 267). Conversely, the poem specifies a more complex understanding of voice, evoking a "Black/idiom" to which Moore attributes the phrase that she uses in describing an alternative perspective on the nation's history, one gained through "advancing back-/ward in a circle" (Moore 1936, p. 6). Fiona Green locates this phrase in Moore's travel notebooks from her Virginia visits, in which she "began recording black speech" (Green 2017, p. 439). In August, 1935, gathering material for the poem that she will soon begin drafting, Moore writes of a witness in court who reports about a "colored man in court" that she "saw him advancing backward in a circle, a piece of scantlin' in his hand" (Moore 1935–55, 4v, quoted in Green 2017, p. 440). Green reads this reference and its incorporation into the poem as suggesting "shady business" or even "making light of the crime at the heart of Virginia history", conveying Moore's "genuinely ambivalent" attitude toward southern economies rather than critiquing them (Green 2017, p. 440).[11] However, the backward circling that Moore records suggests a defensive motion; indeed, the man holding a "scantlin'" or scantling (a piece of lumber) seems to be more protective than "shady", his circling backwards comprising an alternative stepping to outsmart an opponent more so than an aggression.

The movement suggests a different kind of knowledge bridging "black idiom" as coded speech with Tretheway's retrieval of racial labels, chiming with the "mulatto-turning-backwards". This turn backwards signifies the body's language and its disruption of racial categories (the revelation of "blackness" in the seeming white body, or the whiteness turning "backwards" to African origins) as well the racist ideology determining illusory classifications of purity. The mulatto-turning-backwards threatens a throwback to blackness and a refusal of purity mythologized in the Americas' earliest racial categories—the mulatto is both a threat to visual certainty of race and she/he holds the potential to visually disrupt an illusion of whiteness, even while the categorizing rationale of whiteness insists that blackness never retreats and that the descendant of an African can never become "white". The notion of "advancing backward in a circle" similarly registers a movement through concealed knowledge, covered-over and retreating from view but threatening to return and thwart history's racialized categories. Such thwarting challenges the concept of nation idealized as free of "tyranny".

This is the "scantlin'" held in hand, brought to bear in the poem's repeated references to imperialism, colonization, and racial ordering, and activated with particular force in the serial images following the introduction of the "Black/idiom". Moore is "advancing backward" through America's originary claims, bringing a poetic stick to bear. The logic of the lines moves swiftly in the space of nine lines from the "Black/idiom" through a quick reference to colonizing Europeans ("taking the Potomac/cowbirdlike", for the cowbird lays eggs in another bird's nest, colonizing it), to the "Negro, opportunely brought", as the "backward" movement of bringing slaves to the new world translates into the "idiom" (Moore 1936, p. 6). As a trade that strengthens the colonies' financial might and capacity for successful revolt, but betrays the principles asserted for doing so, "the Negro" who is "opportunely brought, to strength–/en protest against/tyranny" speaks to the "inconsistent flowerbed" of the Old Dominion and is, indeed, a "backward" movement justified as forward progress in the colonies and among imperial powers (Moore 1936, p. 6). The breaking of "strength-en" across two

[11] Green reads Moore's ideas about economy, nation-building, and history in relation to the poet's correspondence with and readings of Ezra Pound. Green attributes the idea that the image of "advancing backward in a circle" might reference a cake walk, or a black performance parodying white power, to Stacy Hubbard (Green 2017, p. 447).

lines suggests the inherent flaw or weakness in this revolt against a tyranny that, in dropping that word onto a new line, remains a characteristic that is attributed as much to the new nation as to the old. The "kind tyranny" referenced repeatedly in the poem reads, in this context and others in which it appears, as a sly critique of the oxymoronic justifications offered for any number of oppressions suiting "tyrant taste" in America's history of race, colonization, and capitalistic progress—indeed, the poem seems to ask, how can tyranny ever be "kind" (Moore 1936, p. 8)?

Rather than following the ideology or mythology of American progress as a constant forward motion, this "idiom" adopts alternative strategies and directions, suggesting an idiom of the indirect, the outside, and the marginal that motivates a retelling of colonial might. Rather than exemplifying the forward progress of history, the building of the American nation that is celebrated by these tourist sites suggests instead a series of displacements undertaken in the name of power and re-narrativized in the poem through botanical, biological examples of parasites and colonizers: displacing others "cowbirdlike" or, like the "fig strangler", which establishes itself upon a host tree it destroys, gaining a foothold through conquering others. These "colonizers" in nature are joined by other natural species that are specified in the poem, such as the crape myrtle or the pansy, all imported from Europe and, while dominating Virginia gardens, unable to subdue native flora and fauna, such as the buckeye tree or the Virginia mockingbird or the rattlesnake. Catharine Paul notes that "Moore's choice of species" in this poem is "linked to a larger commentary on how the native and the coloniser might collide" (Paul 2002, p. 190). Such a poetic presentation of history, which Westover usefully terms a "cartography of colonization", also maps the forced import of African people to build the "garden" and the economy of a new land, the use of slavery to create a nation (Westover 2004, p. 40). The oxymoronic tyranny of "establishing the Negro, opportunely brought, to strength-/en protest against/tyranny" joins the taxomomies of Moore's touristic moment.

Moore's double reference to the mule in lines that precede reference to a "black idiom" reinforce a reading of race as a site interrupting a white-washed mythology of American freedom. The mule, a "cross between a horse and a donkey", serves as "a perfect image for the miscegenation that troubled nativists" in Moore's time and vexed Jefferson.[12]

> . . . The slowmoving glossy, tall
> quick calvacade
> of buckeye-brown surprising
> jumpers, the contrasting work-mule and
> show-mule & witch-cross door & 'strong sweet prison' (Moore 1936, p. 8)

All items in this sequence exemplify or have "come about" from "advancing back-/ward in a circle", including the first prison in the British colonies, established at Jamestown to discourage disorder in the new land but, the poem suggests, importing a "tyranny" (Moore 1936, p. 6). "Advancing back-/ward", one discovers traces of other histories disrupting the touristic, patriotic, and historic claims that idealize the country's revolutionary past and ideals of equality. The "Indian-/named Virginian/streams" run through "counties named for English lords" as native lands are overtaken and overwritten by European conquest (Moore 1936, p. 7); the "tobacco-crop/gains have church tablets", as commerce and piety intertwine (Moore 1936, p. 7); the "Devil's woodyard swamps", signaling histories of runaway slaves, conjoin in a parallel syntax with the "one-brick-thick" serpentine walls of Jefferson's university, its "shadows" part of the history of the powerful "taking what they please" (Moore 1936, pp. 7–8).

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[12] Westover (2004, p. 22). See also Kadlec (1994) and Phillips (1982) for discussions of Moore's work in light of contemporaneous discourses on eugenics and racial mixing. The figure of the mule appears also in Moore's earlier "The Labors of Hercules" (written in 1921 and included in Observations, 1924) and has been critically discussed as a criticism of notions of white superiority, especially in light of immigration debates and restrictions following the war.

Throwing light on the "shadows" or "dark subtext" of a celebrated version of American history, both Moore and Trethewey inspect the racial dimensions of nation building. Doing so, they consider inherited Jeffersonian taxonomies of race alongside the mechanisms of taxonomic logic itself. Both of the poets question how taxonomies of race imprinted upon and furthered by the founding contradictions of this country continue in everyday ways that seem common-sense in their familiarity (i.e., she is "near-white"), but are made strange in the step away from taxonomic thinking that each poet encourages. Given the rise of white supremacist activity in America over the past few years, evidencing energy and ideological organization that has remained for a long time submerged and out of sight for the majority public, a renewed urgency compels us to rethink and "make strange" longstanding racial and racist taxonomies and resist the false ideologies of whiteness attending the past and present imagination of "nation".

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Article

Modernist Women Writers and Whimsy: Marianne Moore and Dorothy Parker

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Abstract: This article assesses the work of Dorothy Parker (1893–1967) and Marianne Moore (1887–1972) in relation to the aesthetic category of whimsy. It considers how whimsy has been used as a term of dismissal for American women poets, outlines ways both writers' receptions have been informed by this context, and explores questions of cost, worth, and value raised by their work. It situates whimsy in relation to Sianne Ngai's account of diminutive modes in *Our Aesthetic Categories* (2015) and suggests why American women's modernist poetry can be a useful context for exploring the aesthetic and cultural associations of whimsy.

Keywords: Moore; Parker; whimsy; poetry; poetics; New York; modernism

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Paper: Dorothy Parker's publishing career begins with two women positing whimsy as a literary category:

> "I'm reading that new thing of Locke's
>
> So whimsical isn't he? Yes—"
>
> "My dear, have you seen those new smocks?
>
> They're nightgowns—no more, and no less." (Parker 2010, p. 203)

This is a passing mention, forgotten by the two speakers as quickly as the 1914 novel, which prompted it, the bestselling *Fortunate Youth* by British writer William John Locke. The poem, 'Any Porch', continues with sixteen couplets which yawn their way through an apparently indifferent conversation. Parker thought the poem sufficiently thin to omit from her *Collected Poems*, although its publication in *Vanity Fair* secured her first job as staff writer for *Vogue* (Meade 1988, p. 34). While the poem is a gentle satire on gossip, it blurs the lines between mimicry and echo: Parker's biographer glosses her early poems as 'trivia' (Meade 1988, p. 31), as if the poem were as insubstantial as the smocks. Yet it is striking that Parker's first published poem records a response to a male contemporary by a female reader that is half-engaged, half-dismissive in its gloss of 'whimsical'. It is telling, too, that Parker was keen to remove the poem from her corpus. The women's bored belittling of Locke might tell us they value literature no more than lingerie. However, the humour of the quatrain comes not only from the women's exacting ethical standards ('they're nightgowns') but the combination of precision and euphemism that expresses them ('no more, and no less'). When two people have agreed that a writer's work is characterised by the whimsical, what, exactly, have they agreed on?

Miriam-Webster defines whimsy as 'a fanciful or fantastic device, objective, or creation, especially in writing or art' (Whimsy 2019). Yet if the dictionary suggests a mode or quality particular to imaginative literature, it is hardly well documented. *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetic Terms* contains no entries for the term. Neither monograph index nor journal article bears its mark. Literary critics take us little further than the two women on the porch, having such disdain for the category that even the act of definition would be an engagement too far. Susan Sontag upbraids the 'cold' and 'self-referring' whimsy of Ionesco where 'the terrible is always, somehow circumscribed by the cute' (Sontag 1966, p. 111), but says no more on the topic, in contrast to her infamous inventory of camp. More recently, Geoff Dyer has suggested 'nothing makes any difference with whimsy, whimsy

is for lower stakes [. . .] there are no risks in whimsy. People think of whimsy as doing whatever you feel like, but there's less to whimsy than that' (Dyer 2012, p. 45). In as far as it is part of any critical conversation, it continues to be the word put at the farthest reach from anything worthy of our sustained attention. Dyer's own circulation around the word bears out his diagnosis. However unimportant we might think the category, it beguiles us by being even less significant than it appears. In all these accounts, disavowal sounds out more clearly than definition. Yet if it is always for low stakes, why is it such a crime, and why do poems and poets keep committing it?

As a term, whimsy has many of the 'diminutive' qualities Sianne Ngai explores in *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute Interesting* (Ngai 2012, p. 59). Like her definition of 'cute', it is a word which sounds a strong note of judgement: it encourages us to believe we are in charge of it. It beckons us in, but we are minded to develop a distaste for it. In the women's conversation on the porch, it is less important for them to understand what formal attributes Locke's 'whimsical' work might have than to acknowledge a shared dismissal. It is significant that their use of the term aligns the work with its author: behind every whimsical work is a whimsical writer. The dismissal is studiedly low-key rather than challenging: the whimsical draws attention to itself, but in ways that do not threaten the mainstream. To discern whimsy, as Ngai suggests of minor literary categories, we will need to identify the 'low, often hard-to-register flicker of affect accompanying our recognition of minor differences from a norm' (Ngai 2012, p. 18). The hard-to-register is also hard to disentangle. The whimsical sounds affiliation with other, more aesthetically familiar terms—the camp, the comic, the eccentric, the playful. Yet unlike many of these terms, it has sometimes been an expedient category for critics to use of readers. The word appears, briefly but pointedly, in I.A. Richards' *Practical Criticism*, as he attempts to drum out the 'personal-whimsy' response of untutored eyes and ears (Richards 1930, p. 255). English studies was working hard to consolidate its position as a rigorous academic subject, and anything that was not criticism was merely whimsy. This suggests a potentially dangerous quality of the term: it has the power not only to topple a work of literature but also the critical responses to it. This doubleness seems a threat for an apparently toothless and insignificant word. In this article, I want to challenge the claim that whimsy is for low stakes and that the apparently generic conversation happening in 'Any Porch' is not one we should look at more carefully. I want to simultaneously explore the socially-constructed nature of the term, frequently an insult or act of dismissal which clings particularly to women poets, while considering whether whimsy might have some inherent characteristics that attach themselves to certain kinds of poetic texts. To do this, I want to bring Parker herself into conversation with a female contemporary poet who shares surprising affinities with her: Marianne Moore.

Marianne Moore (1887–1972) and Dorothy Parker (1893–1967) spent most of their lives on two islands separated by a bridge. They were also two of the most identifiable American women writer-celebrities of the twentieth century: Moore, the baseball-watching national poet of America dressed in academic robes, Parker, the epigram-laden wit haunting the cocktail bars of New York. If Parker's satirical and urbane verses seem to have little to do with Moore's gnomic and often involuted poems, their critical receptions, as we shall see, include strategic interventions that bear striking similarities. This article will consider some of the wider historical and cultural contexts for the term whimsy, before considering how these might play out in the poetics, aesthetics, and reception dynamics of both writers. It will then go on to suggest some distinct ways both poets examine the charges and costs both of writing whimsy and being whimsical writers.

1. Whimsy in Context

If whimsy has a literary history beyond being an expedient dismissal, it begins with John Dennis' 1704 treatise, *The Grounds of Criticism in Poetry*. For Dennis, the term offered a key differentiation: 'poetry is either an Art, or Whimsie and Fanaticism' (Dennis 1704, p. 5). In this formulation, whimsy is a work that has gone wrong, and failed to become a poem. It gives us a clue as to why the word might recur so deliberately and variously in literary insults across poetic genres and periods but so infrequently in critical and scholarly literature. It is the creation that has not spent enough time with

the creator, and should not be worth spending our time over. Two historical examples hint at the wide range of uses, or abuses, the term might encompass. For William Hazlitt, whimsy is the maniacal enthusiasm holding back Coleridge from greatness, meaning his work is 'fancy-bred from the maggots of his brain' (Hazlitt 1817, p. 488). It describes the inability of his art to be sure of where it is heading, positing whimsy as a kind of manic humor. For Samuel Johnson, the poet Edward Young is 'whimsical' for his decision to move from rhymed to unrhymed verse (Johnson 1875, p. 433). The adjective is justified for his apparently quixotic shifts in form, for choices too rapid and extreme to suggest due care. In this way, the critical term enacts its own kind of mercurial shiftiness: by never committing itself to a specific authorial sin, it is suitably vague to be endlessly appropriated.

If the term has been apparently banished from serious critical consideration, the risk of poetry being 'trivial' or light verse not being 'good enough' has been a constant in literary conversation. It was felt particularly sharply by modernist American poets: as Bonnie Costello has noted, the dominant mode of twentieth-century American poetry is 'tragi-comic', yet its reception often gives humour short shrift (Costello 2012, p. 340). Susan Howe in *The Birth-mark: Unsettling the Wilderness in American Literary History* notes American culture has a particular fraught relationship with the capricious and the whimsical, and polices its poetry accordingly: to be playful in a poem is also to play truant from 'canonical American literary expression'. Its democratic structure must banish 'false notion, caprice, whim' (Howe 1993, p. 12). Whimsy is the thing we leave behind, the failure which we endeavour to free ourselves from to yoke ourselves to structures and sentences more permanent. This notion might have distinct resonance for a national culture built on a constitution, rather than a series of eccentric legal precedents. Howe also notes 'fancy' is 'an irredeemably feminine word for most Americans', summoning the long Anglo–American tradition of aligning caprice with women poets. As I have noted elsewhere (May 2019, p. 74), notions of triviality and the whimsical have often been used to undermine and contain the role of intellectual women in society, as in Mary Wollstonecraft's observation her educated female contemporaries were said to be 'teeming with capricious fancies' (Wollstonecraft 2008, p. 103), or Margaret Cavendish's conviction that female wit needs the 'discretion' of male prudence in *The Female Academy* (Cavendish 1668, p. 654). Whimsy's status as a negative counter-definition shapes its long association with women poets: Adrienne Rich's 1977 'Women and Honor' notes that women, and by association their writing, have often been characterised as 'generically whimsical, deceitful, subtle' (Rich 1995, p. 186). Rich's collocation of the whimsical with the generic suggests the persistent link between questions of trust, genre, and form: to be whimsical is not only a way of not being taken seriously but also a way not to be trusted.

Given this literary and historical context, we may not be surprised to find the term's pejorative associations haunt the reception of a number of female American poets, as in the baffled account in *Atlantic Monthly* of Emily Dickinson's poetry as 'whimsical memoranda' which 'have a certain something, which, for want of a more precise name, we term *quality*' (Aldrich 1892, p. 133). The critical formulation is striking: 'whimsical' stands in for a term the male reader cannot find for a poetics he cannot decipher. His 'quality' is less a seal of approval than the identification of particularity, an acknowledgment of something distinct rather than something with distinction. It also suggests the double-bind of whimsy for women poets: the power of disavowal can be applied to the experimental and obscure, as with Dickinson, or that which appears generic and ephemeral. Can a vague term with such a history of projection and social construction be a useful aesthetic category or poetic mode? 'There is poetry and there is not' (Parker 1928, p. 77) wrote Parker, in a sharp 1927 review, apparently as clear on the binary distinction as John Dennis had been two hundred years earlier. How might we tell the difference?

2. Bridging the Gap

Both Moore and Parker were subject to whimsical dismissal at various points in their literary career and posthumous receptions: their own writing and critical accounts of it often challenge, circumvent, or play with these characterisations. What is the nature of these dismissals, in what ways have both

writers and readers sought to address them, and what might this tell us about the category itself? In a 2004 review, William Logan identified whimsy as the 'besetting weakness' in Moore's work, her status as a public figure making 'poets, and poetry, seem slightly ridiculous' (Logan 2004). The charge linked her poetics with her persona, repeating a familiar trope of her critical reception: Cliff Mak notes how often her fastidious precision is equated with an 'ingrown cuteness' (Mak 2016, p. 873), echoing Ngai's categorisations. The poem which begins Moore's first collection is a dedication to an inter-mural rat, yet it is Moore's extra-mural activities which have given critics as much cause for concern: extolling the virtues of baseball or, in 1955, agreeing to devote serious time to naming the Ford Motor Company's newest car. Whimsy seems a challenging term precisely because its adhesive force is felt equally by the poet and the poem. Logan's attack suggests whimsy has the power to infect all poets and poetry with the 'ridiculous': it is a potent insult-by-association.

Moore criticism often characterises her poetry as a series of eccentric forms. Writing in 1982, David Bromwich compared her use of poetic innovation to 'a friend's matinal fondness for mango juice' (Bromwich 1982, p. 340); John Ashbery was keen to differentiate her Mary Poppins, presumably one administering medicine to help us stomach the sugar rather than the other way round (O'Connor 1988, p. 30). Here is, in part, an urge to out-quip a famously self-effacing and original poet, who tended to describe herself in terms still more bizarre than these: in a 1959 letter to Elizabeth Bishop, Moore cast herself halfway between 'Jack Abbot and Peter Rabbit' (Costello 1984, p. 130). The idea of the poet shifting between two competing identifies or locations is echoed in critical accounts, too. Robert Crawford notes the unsettling pull between 'whimsy and correctness' (Crawford 2004, p. 251) in her work: here, the playful and fastidious are in committed dialogue. Meanwhile, Cliff Mak has recently located within Moore's poetry an 'authoritative kind of surplus style', or a 'series of instabilities virtuosically integrated into a greater stylistic whole' (Mak 2016, p. 875). The tension between 'surplus' and 'authoritative' echoes the 'whimsical' and 'correct' in Crawford's reading, opening the door to the very aspects of Moore's work earlier critics have sought to downplay. For both Mak and Crawford, whimsy is part of a dynamic binary rather than, as for Logan, something immutable or all-pervasive. As T.S. Eliot remarks of Moore's work, 'if you aim at only the poetry in poetry, there is no poetry either' (Eliot 1935, p. 11). If poets and their readers could agree what whimsy was, would they also be able to agree how much a poem could take?

The same question haunts another famous defense of Moore, and one that feels keenly what damage a word like 'whimsy' might do. It appears in Elizabeth Bishop's memoir:

> Lately I have seen several references critical of [Moore's] poetry by feminist writers, one of whom described her as 'a poet who controlled panic by presenting it as whimsy'. Whimsy is sometimes there, of course, and so is humour (a gift these critics sadly seem to lack). Surely there is an element of mortal panic and fear underlying all works of art? Even so, one wonders how much of Marianne's poetry the feminist critics have read. (Bishop 1994, pp. 143–44)

This passage has most often been marshalled to explore the underlying panic of Moore's or Bishop's work, while the other element is neutralised or ignored: Lionel Kelly suggests Bishop 'has no animus against whimsy for itself' (Kelly 2000, p. 1). Certainly, it seems to be the spirit of whimsy Bishop calls on in her poetic epistle to Moore, when she asks her to 'please come flying' with angels riding 'on the broad black brim of your hat' (Bishop 1994, p. 83). It is significant, too that whereas Bishop makes panic universal, underlying all works of art, whimsy, much more pertinent to Moore, is brushed aside with 'of course', normalizing as consensus something which, as have seen, is a vexed term with a long history of containment and dismissal. 'Of course' so often masks the things we have only recently come to know, or are trying not to highlight. Bishop resituates whimsy as a 'gift' the critic is lacking, rather than a poetic error to be corrected. Her critics are charged not only with misreading, but not reading widely enough. Over the last decade, we have sought new terms for the established languages of mastery and critique. What would our responses look like if we attended to

the whimsical, rather than sought to deny its existence? Bishop suggests that as well as defending poets from the charge, we might explore ways to make ourselves more alert to its power.

It is helpful here to turn to Dorothy Parker, a writer apparently hostile to whimsy, but aware of its pervasive role in literary culture. If 'whimsical' is a term of dismissal in her first published poem, she returns to the word with an unusually repetitious irritation in her own reviewing. Examples from her Broadway reviews give a hint of the circular quality of these uses and suggest its heightened currency in early twentieth-century America. Her account of Roi Cooper Megrue's 1924 play *Honors Are Even* casts a wry glance at a heroine's 'whimsical wondering', and frequently 'whimsical' rejoinders, casting her as 'the most determinedly whimsical heroine you ever saw in your life' (Parker 2014, p. 240). Arthur Richman's comedy *Not So Long Ago* has a 'whimsical tenderness', later qualified as 'overmuch whimsical tenderness', before she notes 'it is surprising what a long, long way even a little whimsical tenderness will go [...] give me but one or two acts of it, and I'll manage to scrape along for a whole year' (Parker 2014, p. 145). Here, she suggests the question may be one of degree rather than kind. Meanwhile, J.M. Barrie's *Dear Brutus* (1917), a play of middle-aged wish-fulfilment, prompts the frustrated cry that 'it is practically impossible to talk about the play without bringing in "whimsical charm", and that spoils everything [...] the play is simply packed with whimsical charm, and what can you do about it?' (Parker 2014, p. 58). It is notable how frequently in these cases, Parker draws our attention to a male writer's representation of a female character. The whimsical is the way to police the female and the sexual, to keep it securely in the category of entertainment. The empty return of these phrases in Parker's criticism also suggests the cloying quality of whimsy, its need to draw us in, making us unable to shape our response into critical distance. Its frequent arrival in her often satirical reviews suggests an aesthetic, as well as a cultural unease, at the term. It allows us to experience nothing, and to say nothing about what we have experienced: as Parker complains, 'what can you do about it?'.

Her ire is apparent in the 'whimsical' writer who suffered most under Parker's critical eye. Her notorious A.A. Milne review for the *New Yorker* under her popular pseudonym of the 'Constant Reader' confesses that by the first mention of 'Hunny [...] this Tonstant Weader Fwowed up' (Parker 1970, p. 101). She quotes Piglet's lyric 'The more it/SNOWS-tiddely-pom', before noting his 'frequent droppings into more cadenced whimsy'. The metaphor is somewhere between cute and scatological. Her review did serious damage: a 1956 profile in *Time* magazine carried Milne's complaint that 'if I write anything less realistic, less straightforward than "the cat sat on the mat", I am [called] whimsical", that "most loathsome adjective"' (Unsigned Review 1956). It was an expedient attack to guard her own reputation, too: once Parker's first poetry collection *Enough Rope* (1927) passed into its third edition, her publisher made plans to sell her as 'another A.A. Milne'. This prompted an unloved temporary nick-name of 'Dotty-the-Pooh' (Adams 1935, p. 706), an advertising strategy she was keen to abandon. By pinning her word on Milne, she avoids it being applied to her own work. Yet her apparently physical disgust at whimsy belies her interest in having more purchase on the term: her reviews highlight the difficulty of defining its characteristics. How might her own poetry explore what 'cadenced whimsy' could do? If its presence in a work of art is usually overdone, might it still provide us with something worth keeping? In the remainder of the essay, I will identify ways the poetry of Moore and Parker complicate and thicken our understanding of whimsy's contradictions and possibilities.

3. Gifts of Whimsy

Bishop's notion of whimsy as a 'gift' is suggestive, allowing readers to get something they were not expecting, but to receive it in gratitude. This suggests less that whimsy is of no worth, and more that poets or their readers cannot be sure of its value. Parker and Moore's poetry explores this idea through sustained attention to how we value the things we make, give, and receive. An implicit conversation between Parker's poem 'Bric-á-Brac' (Parker 1928) and Moore's 'Walking-Sticks and Paperweights and Watermarks' (1936) suggests the complex relationship between all three. Parker's 'Bric-á-Brac' details the 'Little things that no one needs-/Little things to joke about'—(Parker 2010,

p. 102). The two stanzas recount the domestic miniatures of 'little landscapes' and 'little morals, woven out', and the 'little brigs of whittled oak/Bottled painfully in glass'. In the final stanza, we learn the combination of littleness and profusion is not accidental:

> Lonely folk have lines of days
> Long and faltering and thin;
> Therefore—little wax bouquets,
> Prayers cut upon a pin,
> Little maps of pinkish lands,
> Little charts of curly seas,
> Little plats of linen strands,
> Little verses, such as these. (Parker 2010, p. 102)

The repetition of little, like the obsessive return to the word 'whimsical' in Parker's reviews, suggests a quality that is difficult to quantify, so easier to repeat. The final line brings us up short, but enacts a Janus-turn too. The poem moves from a sniggering, if melancholy, inventory of domestic craft to elegiac self-diagnosis. The final deictic 'such as these' does painful work: by making an example of itself, the poem is both allowed to be entirely generic, and—exceptionally—to sigh for being so. It is built from layers of the time-killing littleness it observes. If Parker's reviews ensured she was never accused of whimsy by accusing others first, this poem refuses the insult by being the first to make it.

We seem to be in the world of what Derrida has called the 'frivolous', where the 'utility' of what is being described bears only on 'objects of little consideration or worth' (Derrida 1987, p. 118). Yet the poem is too knowing to cast itself as unnecessary, and its claim to be no more substantial than what it describes is disingenuous. By the poem's conclusion, it is no longer funny enough for a reader to 'joke about', but more complex than the earlier pathos for the 'lonely folk'. The poem reveals the rich and complex literary affects prompted by its 'bric-á-brac', and uncovers, underneath the unwanted objects, the profound feelings of the makers. While an art work might be dismissed as whimsical, its process of 'painful' bottling may be less so. If Parker's criticism glossed whimsy as an immovable obstacle—'what can you do about it?'—her poetry shows the affective power of what it can do. The poem's self-professed littleness matched Parker's own diminutive comments on her poetry. In a 1956 *Paris Review* interview, Parker declared, 'my verse is terribly dated [. . .] I gave it up, knowing it wasn't getting any better, but nobody seemed to notice my magnificent gesture' (Capron 1956). Yet her remark is more than wry shoulder-shrugging: like the poem, it suggests a mode which downplays its significance only to draw attention to itself.

Moore's notoriously opaque poem 'Walking-Sticks and Paperweights and Watermarks' (1936), which Luke Carson and Heather Cass White have noted remains 'mostly invisible to Moore scholarship' (Carson and White 2010, p. 341), also shows the complex burden of apparently insubstantial and whimsical gifts. If Parker's poem offers itself as a thing which no-one needs, Moore's poem was similarly discarded. Moore herself partially revised it before omitting it entirely from subsequent *Complete Poems* (1967). It sums up its own value with ambivalence: in the course of the poem, Moore's speaker describes a copy of her recent poetry collection *The Pangolin and Other Verse* (1936) as merely' an alphabet/of words and animals', and doubts the 'high-/way's wide giant trivia' (Moore 2017, p. 126). Like Parker's 'magnificent gesture' of renunciation, the scale of dismissal ('giant trivia') upsets its intent. The poem is built around a series of objects which make hovering analogies with the work itself, mostly private gifts which circulated among Moore and her close friends. The references for many of its quotations often rely on an intimate knowledge of a particular context, the tenor of its words on understanding what Empson called a 'compacted doctrine' (Empson 1948, p. 230). While Parker's 'Bric-á-Brac' was full of objects so everyday they resisted further comment, Moore's poem is built with objects so particular in meaning their worth cannot be understood.

The objects in the poem are often made frail by questions about their durability, purpose and utility, building a 'fabric of inconsistency' which is 'moth eaten by self-substractives' (p. 124). The ornate, private, and gnomic qualities of the poem re-animate the 'thin' lines of Parker's domestic crafts. Its world is whimsical because while the eye can admire the beauty of the objects, it cannot explain the purpose of their arrangement, or their significance to the figures bestowing them. The poem is peppered with incentives to peel back its obscure layers, quoting the Dominican friar Giordano Bruno who held that 'difficulty is ordained to check/poltroons', (p. 124), but the reader is found wanting courage. Like the 'linen strands' knitted together in Parker's poem, the gift of the poem itself is one readers often do not know where to put or what to say on receiving. The presents given by whimsy are often handed out shyly, obscurely, and may not reach the reader at all. In this context, the poem's final stanza is telling, rewriting the festive carol of cumulative gift-giving:

> "On the first day of Christmas
> My true love he sent unto me, part of a
> Bough of a juniper-tree",
> Javelin-ed consecutively. (Moore 2017, p. 128)

As Carson and Cass White suggest, this allusion combines the Christian story of redemption with the wish-fulfilment of a fairy tale, hoping to 'find a third term' that moves between doctrine and fancy (p. 359). In the final difficulty of the poem, we find a need for a word that can move between the miraculous and imaginary. The consecutive 'javelining' of the allusion animates a peculiarity of the carol, too: each day brings gifts surplus to requirements. If the carol's gifts of turtle doves and French hens are always symbolic, their cumulative effect can be preposterous. As we move closer to epiphany, the number of gifts multiplies, but the arrangement between them becomes ever-more perplexing. The two poems help map the journey between a work which declares that no-one needs it, and a work which needs to be known, but which no-one knows they need. Both might be taken for a kind of whimsy, and were partially dismissed by the writers themselves. Yet both poems also help us understand the surprisingly rich qualities of whimsy, drawing attention to its power, puzzle and pathos. They also show its breadth: we are led from the whimsy of the insubstantial in Parker to the whimsy of the inscrutable in Moore. If its gifts come unbidden, or are given ambivalently, can they still be cherished?

4. The Whimsical Poet

Moore and Parker suggest further ways to appreciate these gifts by attending to the uneven reception of whimsical writers. We are often encouraged to rethink the worth of minor poets in Moore's and Parker's work, to see the gaps and contingencies between their writing and their reputation. A series of Parker's epigraphs for writers mock-memorialises the unlettered and ungarlanded:

> His little trills and chirpings were his best
> No music like the nightingale's was born
> Within his throat; but he, too, laid his breast
> Upon a thorn.
> ('The Minor Poet, from Tombstones in Starlight', Parker 2010, p. 163)

The quatrain hovers between wry rib-tickling and gentle deflation. The accusation of being 'minor' or 'little' is qualified by being a subject worthy of elegy, though the poem's preference for his 'little trills' might suggest, similarly, that Parker's poem is a minor one. Its final line cuts itself off in mid-song, flattened into a stubby elegy: this act of affinity—a minor epitaph for a minor poet—complicates his status as a subject of ridicule. The task of authorship is no easier for the writer of 'trills' and 'chirpings'. These poems are often in dialogue with her own reputation: in 1927, Parker's fellow *Vanity Fair*

columnist E.E. Cummings satirized her literary pretensions with a wry tribute to the fictional 'poetess' named Helen Whiffletree, murdered in Paris. He gathers together enough topical allusions to make Parker a possible object of his satire. The mock-tribute celebrates a poetry where 'naivetë is carried to a pitch of unheard-of poignancy', and summons a comic portrait of the Algonquin set, as Helen arrives 'penniless but exultant, in Greenwich Village' to find a '*coterie* of struggling artists and models, many of whom lent her money in small quantities as a tribute to the surge of odes, triolets, roundels, roundeaux, chants royals [. . .] which poured from her teeming brain almost ceaselessly at this fecund time' (Cummings 2017, p. 123). As the 'teeming' suggests, this is also the familiar model of the women poet as whimsical. The verse forms he lists are often seen as light, trivial, or absurdly over-complicated.

Parker responds with a series of parodies of modernist literary culture, which always work to lower the stakes. In her essays and opinion pieces, she summons a literary culture where 'to have written anything, whether it be a *Ulysses* or whether it be a report of who sat next to whom at the P.E.N. Club dinner, is to be a writer' (p. 64). In a work subtitled 'Showing that Anyone Can Write Modernist Verse', Parker offers a wry sequence of four poetic pastiches: Eliot's 'newspaper from vacant lots' from 'Preludes' (Eliot 1999, p. 9) become a 'litter of newspapers/Piled in smothering profusion' (Parker 2010, p. 227). Yet the newspapers are more beguiling than they should be, and the modernist manqué cannot quite leave them alone. Their 'supplements' are 'sprawling shamelessly open' presenting their 'lurid contents' to editorials 'crumpled in a frenzy of ennui'. The 'endless' and 'beginningless' heaps of newspapers pile ever higher, suggesting the gap between 'news' and 'news that stays news' is not so wide. If anyone can write modernist verse, anyone, too, might find themselves writing whimsy.

While Moore's own poetic portraits are necessarily more abstruse, there is a telling evocation of whimsical authorship in her 1916 poem '"He Wrote the History Book", It Said'. The poem, first published in the *Egoist* in 1916, recounts a conversation Moore had with a young boy named John, son of the historian Dr. C.M. Andrews, and takes his words as its title. Ostensibly, the poem mocks authority and individual claims to being definitive:

> THERE! You shed a ray
>
> Of whimsicality on a mask of profundity so
>
> Terrific that I have been dumbfounded by
>
> It oftener than I care to say. *The* book? Titles are chaff. (Moore 2017, p. 30)

Its central metaphorical tenet is to make whimsy a 'ray' and profundity 'a mask'. Whimsy is that unexpected beam of light which illuminates and explains, and profundity the forbidding disguise that hides a subject from us. The dismissive 'titles are chaff' might also implicate the title of this poem as mere dictation, or whimsy. Yet the poem's final sentence—'Thank you for showing me/Your father's autograph'—attempts another kind of playful inversion, laying doubt on the whole literary discourse of the poem by signing off with a low-key envoi. Moore makes still greater claims for what a whim might be, something not with hidden depths but hidden *under* depths. Both Parker and Moore, by considering in their own work how writers are categorised, and the role of literary and social contexts in defining it, show that mood and mode cannot be separated from social categories. The minor poet might still have a life worth recording, and the authoritative male historian might skate closer to frivolity than we expect. In both cases, Moore and Parker respond to potential attacks on their work by finding whimsy in unusual places, then detailing the ways we might value it.

As Moore's poem 'Novices' notes, the artist is 'the only seller who buys, and holds on to the money' (Moore 2017, 'Novices', p. 61). Moore's reductio-ad-absurdum of her collected works, vanishing stanzas when republishing her work or omitting poems altogether, offered a poetic economy that made new economic product from absence and destruction. In accepting the 1955 commission from the Ford Motor Company, and republishing their correspondence first in *The New Yorker* and then *The Marianne Moore Reader*, Moore aligned modern American poetry squarely with capitalism. As Irene

Ramalho Santos notes, the decision was 'not in opposition to but taking into account the rhythms and achievements of material culture' (Santos 2003, p. 265). Perhaps, in an age which suggested that the poem should 'work', like a machine or a pudding, this was no great mismatch (Wimsatt 1954, p. 4). Yet the project, like the car itself, could hardly be considered a success, even if the resulting correspondence makes wonderful reading: Moore begins by refusing to take a fee for her pains as she wishes to carry out the commission with 'unencumbered fancy' (Moore 1958, unpaginated). Moore's increasingly absurd suggested names for the Ford—Mongoose Civique, Utopian Turtletop, Dearborn Diamonte—were all politely rejected for the name of Ford's son, Edsel. Yet the final tagline for the car that, after all, Marianne Moore did not name is revealing: 'The EDSEL acts the way it looks, but it doesn't cost that much' (Neil 2016). By this point, the advertising campaign had nothing whatsoever to do with Moore, who had magisterially withdrawn from proceedings, but the tagline invites application to her own work and the mood that propels so much of it forwards. Whimsy neither acts the way it looks, not costs as little as it seems. Like the animals celebrated in Moore's poem 'Diligence is to Magic as Progress is to Flight', that have 'outstripped man's whim to suppose/them ephemera' (Moore 2017, p. 18), the work of Parker and Moore shows us how a diminutive mode can be capable of more than we can understand or express.

5. Conclusions

Whimsy is a literary-critical term that is most often an insult, negation, or act of dismissal, and an aesthetic category which has received little sustained attention. It has been applied particularly to poetry, and often to female authors. Its tendency to invoke a range of moods and modes makes it a challenge to understand its characteristics or affects. It has been the contention of this article that the work of women poets most often accused of being whimsical gives us a helpful starting point for considering the cultural, aesthetic, and political meanings of the term. By attending to the poetry of Marianne Moore and Dorothy Parker, I have suggested that whimsy is a mode which can often challenge its readers to question the value and process of meaning-making. Although it is a socially-constructed category, close attention to the work of 'whimsical' poets nevertheless opens the way to significant aesthetic questions of scale, affect, and value. Moore's cat poem 'Peter' (1920) encourages us to 'fly over the fence' and 'go in the wrong way' (Moore 2017); whimsy might be the way poets makes right from our wrongs, and attending carefully to its pawprint might show us how many trails it leaves in modernist women's poetry and its reception. The history of poetry counts whimsy as a poetic dismissal, but Moore and Parker's work uses it to identify limitations in our own readings, rather than the poems we read. As Moore put it in her commission from the Lead Pencil Manufactures Association: 'Velvet mat/is my cat [. . .] Our best pencils/write like that' (Moore 2017, p. 420). Careful attention to the cultural politics and aesthetic possibilities of diminutive modes not only allows us to understand why and how poets are said to 'write like that', but rethink how dangerous 'that' might be. Judging by Moore and Parker, those most at risk of whimsical accusations proved the most dexterous in reframing them as possibilities.

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Article

'I've Put a Yule Log on Your Grate': Lynette Roberts's 'Naïve' Modernism

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Abstract: In this article, I suggest that Lynette Roberts develops a 'naïve' modernism that emphasizes tropes of folk art, home-made craft, and creative labour as a therapeutic response to war and a means of carving out a public role for the woman writer in the post-war world. Bringing high modernist strategies down to earth through an engagement with localized rural cultures, she strives to bridge the divide between the public and the private in order to open up a space for the woman writer within public life. As part of my discussion, I draw on Rebecca L. Walkowitz's contention that literary style—conceived broadly as 'attitude, stance, posture, and consciousness'—is crucial to modernist writers' attempts to think in—and beyond—the nation. Embracing a liberating openness to experience and 'amateurish' passion, Roberts's 'home-made' style challenges imperial constructions of nationhood centred in authority and control with a more collective, constructivist, improvisatory concept of belonging (Roberts 2005, p. xxxvi). Probing the intersections between folk art, national commitments, and global feminist projects in British modernism, I investigate how a radically transformed 'naïve' subtends the emergence of a new kind of feminist modernism, rooted in concepts of collective making and creative labour.

Keywords: folk art; Welsh Modernism; Feminism; nationalism; ethnography

> Powder shivers down the walls, grey as the cold grate. This is my own cold surroundings where green men call and death walks up the stairs. I go out stumbling to face reality. The kale roads are full of careless droppings, but this I think is a good omen. A land of plenty … dig for Victory, back again to the soil.[1]

At the time of writing this passage, Argentine–Welsh poet Lynette Roberts had been living in rural Carmarthenshire in Wales for scarcely two months. Despite the bone-aching cold and lack of material comforts in her small cottage—neither she nor her husband had money, and their village was not yet networked to mains water or electricity—she was full of energy and a sense of possibility. The strange 'reality' of her new location seems to have unlocked her poetic creativity and given vent to her intellectual inquisitiveness: her diary from that time records her plans for a poem for the South Wales miners, and describes, in painstaking detail, elements of local life, from the brightly coloured window-dressings of her neighbours to the 'top-hat hag wringing out the tripes and swilling them at the running pool up by the Blacksmith's shed' (DLR, 4). Her ambivalent affiliation with Welsh culture as a liminal 'contact zone' not only helped Roberts to define her gendered identity as a poet, but also activated her sense of the possibility of radically transforming poetic form—and revitalizing national culture—from within and without, at the same time.

[1] Lynette Roberts, 'A Carmarthenshire Diary', 10 December 1939, in *Diaries, Letters and Recollections*, ed. Patrick McGuinness (Roberts 2008a), 4. All further references are to this edition and will be given parenthetically in the text.

In this article, I suggest that Roberts develops a 'naïve' modernism that emphasizes tropes of folk art, home-made craft, and creative labour as a therapeutic response to war and a means of carving out a public role for the woman writer in the post-war world. [2] As several critics have noticed, that Roberts was a practicing artist as well as a poet is important to an understanding of her writing.[3] However, the confluences between her poetics and the Primitivist scenes of domestic and village life that she painted throughout her career remain underexplored. Roberts trained at the Central School of Arts and Crafts in the 1930s, illustrated articles for the Argentine paper *La Nacion*, and, in 1955–1956, set up the Chislehurst Caves art project featuring Guyanese artist Denis Williams. During the war she contributed poems to the *Caseg Broadsheets*, a collaboration between poet Brenda Chamberlain, her artist husband John Petts, and soldier–poet Alun Lewis, on sheets of poetry and woodcuts intended for popular distribution.

The marrying of visual art and poetry was a particular feature of Anglophone Welsh women's cultural production at this time. Together with Welsh-identified 'border' writer Margiad Evans, Roberts and Chamberlain are figured by Tony Conran as members of the 'heroic generation' of Welsh women poets.[4] All three were visual artists as well as writers, and their work, in Conran's view, exhibits the 'primitive' style traditionally associated with poets without a formal training in literature. These writers' idiosyncratic visuality and flouting of literary convention is symptomatic, for Conran, of the expression and negotiation of their charged relation—as women and partial outsiders—to Wales *and* to the English literary tradition.[5]

Roberts adopts a 'naïve' style—informed both by her own art, and by her interest in 'indigenous' folklore and ethnography—in order to assert a specifically gendered point of view within the framework of modernist traditions, and to lend form and significance to shared, communal experience. Bringing high modernist strategies down to earth through an engagement with localized rural cultures, she strives to bridge the divide between the public and the private in order to open up a space for the woman writer within public life. Although an understanding of the contexts for Roberts's practice as a visual artist informs this article throughout, my discussion focuses on her transformation of the 'naïve' into a distinctive literary poetics and mode of social and political engagement. In this, I draw on Rebecca L. Walkowitz's contention that literary style—conceived broadly as 'attitude, stance, posture, and consciousness'—is crucial to modernist writers' attempts to think in—and beyond—the nation.[6] Embracing a liberating openness to experience and 'amateurish' passion, Roberts's 'home-made' style challenges imperial constructions of nationhood centred in authority and control with a more collective, constructivist, improvisatory concept of belonging.[7]

1. Lynette Roberts and the Modernist 'Return to the Folk'

The recent rediscovery of Roberts's poetry, as Leo Mellor observed, 'has decisively changed several literary-critical narratives' surrounding both gender and poetic subjectivity, and British literary

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2 This article thus sounds the implications of Patrick McGuinness's suggestion that 'Her extraordinary freedoms of scale, subject and imaginative conception … are unique to Roberts, and to what we could call her "home-made" world.'

3 William May analyses Roberts's gendered engagement with the ekphrastic tradition in his essay 'Verbal and Visual Art in Twentieth-Century British Women's Poetry', situating it in the context of 'the female writer's re-examination of painting's assumptions and expectations' during and after the modernist period. Tony Conran, John Pikoulis and Patrick McGuinness have similarly emphasised the visuality of Roberts's imaginary and the forms of hermeneutic invited by her poetry. See (May 2011, pp. 42–61; Conran 1997; Pikoulis 1983, pp. 9–29; Roberts 2005, pp. xi–xxxix).

4 (Conran 1997, p. 165).

5 Ibid. May has similarly pointed out the connections between the 'verbal-visual' interplay in women modernists' poetry and their gendered renegotiation of literary tradition, suggesting that Stevie Smith, Liz Lochhead and Roberts 'seemed particularly conscious of the visual as a category where they might both draw attention to and escape the label of "women" writers.' (pp. 45–46).

6 (Walkowitz 2006, p. 2).

7 (Roberts 2005, p. xxxvi). This article sounds the implications of McGuinness's suggestion that 'Her extraordinary freedoms of scale, subject and imaginative conception … are unique to Roberts, and to what we could call her "home-made" world'.

experiment of the 1940s.[8] Read in the context of her personal writings and prose, it also illuminates forgotten patterns of cultural transit connecting Britain, Wales and the Americas during the 1940s and 1950s. Born in Buenos Aires in 1909 to parents of Welsh heritage, Roberts was brought up in Mechita, a small railway township to the west of the capital, where her engineer father was stationed. Her family were part of affluent British 'colonial' circles in Argentina; she recalls their yachts and racehorses, and an *estancia* with white peacocks. Educated in a French and Spanish Convent in Buenos Aires and later in a boarding school in Bournemouth, as a young woman she acted as her father's official companion and held soirées, with her friend Mariusa Fernandez Beyro, for members of the Hispanic intelligentsia. She returned to London in the mid-1930s, eventually gravitating toward the outer rings of Fitzrovia's bohemian literati.[9] It was in 1939 at a Poetry London event that she met Keidrych Rhys, poet and 'flamboyant impresario'[10] of Welsh letters; he 'was charming and spoke like a prince'.[11] They married in October 1939 in the village of Llansteffan (with Dylan Thomas as best man), and moved to Llanybri, a tiny village near the south coast of Carmarthenshire, perched just across the Taf estuary from Thomas's Laugharne. Roberts lived there for the duration of the war, and much of her poetry is anchored within the life of the locality.

Because her writing is 'grounded in a variety of places: West Wales, South America, London', locating Roberts within the late modernist literary scene can be a difficult task.[12] She collaborated with Robert Graves on his poetic myth odyssey, *The White Goddess* (1948), and was close friends with Edith Sitwell. Her poetry, which includes her first collection, *Poems* (1944) and a long 'heroic' poem of the Second World War, *Gods with Stainless Ears* (written 1941–1943, published 1951), is at turns riskily experimental and stylishly artless. Though her poetry found considerable acclaim among British and North American readerships, it gradually fell out of favour in the 1950s, and became subject to critical neglect for much of the twentieth century. Patrick McGuinness's republication of Roberts's *Collected Poems* in 2005 has re-ignited interest in her work, but she has yet to enjoy the belated canonization conferred on fellow 'colonial' women writers, such as Katherine Mansfield or Jean Rhys.

Critics have long noticed the challenges posed by Roberts's poetics to norms identified with Britain's literary centre. Maroula Joannou has observed that her poetry is remarkable for its 'commitment to Modernism within an anti-metropolitan modernist framework', while John Wilkinson sees it as a 'highly localised modernism, intent on reanimating bodies of tradition to resist a planned and administered world.'[13] One way of understanding Roberts's poetry is in relation to the Welsh modernist formation that took shape around her husband Keidrych Rhys's experimental journal *Wales* during the late 1930s and 1940s.[14] Identified with such figures as Dylan Thomas, Idris Davies, David Jones, and Margiad Evans, Welsh modernism, as John Goodby and Chris Wigginton have suggested, was a distinctive and relatively 'belated' phenomenon, which subverted and pastiched high modernist claims in the creation of an 'internalised, imploded, even mimic modernism'.[15]

In particular, Roberts's poetry speaks to a strain of Welsh modernist practice identified by Daniel G. Williams as the 'return to the folk'. Similar to the 'proletarian' modernism of other Welsh writers,

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8 (Mellor 2019, p. 156).

9 For instance, Sonia Brownell, the future wife of George Orwell, was a close friend, and she met Wyndham Lewis and Augustus John at their studios. Patrick McGuinness's Introduction to *Collected Poems* offers a comprehensive, reliable account of Roberts's biography. Roberts's own 'Notes for an Autobiography', collected in *Diaries, Letters and* Recollections, also offers instructive insights (it was originally published as 'Parts of an Autobiography' in the *Poetry Wales* special issue on Lynette Roberts, 19/2 (1983): 30–50). However, McGuinness has advised that readers take into account the circumstances under which these notes were written, pointing out that Roberts had experienced significant difficulties in her mental health during this period. See *Diaries, Letters and Recollections*, 228.

10 (Thomas 1999, p. 84).

11 (Roberts 2008b, p. 205). All further references are to this edition and will be given parenthetically in the text.

12 (Roberts 2005, p. xx).

13 (Joannou 2012, p. 116; Wilkinson 2007, p. 190)

14 Keidrych Rhys edited and published three series of this magazine, which became the primary channel for new English-language writing in Wales, between 1937–1939, 1943–1949, and 1958–1960.

15 (Goodby and Wigginton 2000, pp. 95, 106).

this sought to counter high modernist elitism through the use of 'low' vernacular forms, but it directed its attentions not toward fragmenting industrial heartlands, but to those rural cultures threatened by modernity's orthodoxy of progress.[16] Of course, as Raymond Williams has pointed out, the valorization of the 'vitality of the naive' had always been a mainstay of the international avant-garde, and some readers have been critical of what they see as Roberts's tendency to '[co-opt] or [appropriate] the local indigenous [Welsh] culture into her modernist vision'.[17] This essay, however, takes as its point of departure Daniel G. Williams's suggestion that the 'return to the folk' coexists in women writers such as Margiad Evans and Zora Neale Hurston 'with a self-conscious literary attempt at giving voice to repressed and marginalized female consciousness.'[18] As I show, through its rupturing of linguistic conventions and multiplications of perspective, Roberts's presentation of rural Welsh life calls colonial and patriarchal dynamics of viewing and interpretation into question. Harnessing ethnographic discourses of conservation and protection, her writing suggests that the project of voicing gendered consciousness in art is coextensive with the project of lending visibility to repressed cultural minorities. But while Roberts's poetry has been seen as attempting to disclose a putatively 'real' Wales, I suggest that she employs 'naïve' tropes of craft and folk art, linked to images of costuming and disguise, to call that 'reality' (and the 'reality' of the gendered self, with which Wales is rhetorically connected) into question.[19] To address these questions, I explore in turn what I consider to be three major locations for Roberts's deterritorialized, reinvigorated 'naïve': the cottage; the rural village; and sewing.

2. Home Making: Rootedness and Re-Enactment in the Shadow of War

Roberts's writing is in many ways motivated by her search for a 'place'. Although most of her life was unsettled and nomadic, as her daughter, Angharad Rhys, recalls, she 'always longed for a simple home, with a fire and a table — a place to look after friends in need'.[20] Accordingly, domestic space, especially that of her two-roomed cottage, 'Tygwyn', has a central presence in Roberts's poetry, radiating out to touch all other aspects of life. The home appears in her poetry as a site of performance offering an 'inner spiritual continuity' with a Welsh past, and the habitualized return to the rural hearth becomes a way of composing the self—literally and figuratively—among the 'ruins' and havoc of war.[21] The spectacle of violence erupting within the confines of the 'home front' during the 1940s forced a new attention to everyday life during this time, lending ordinary, daily rhythms a new importance and significance. Accordingly, rural household tasks—drawing 'water from the well',[22] 'bak[ing] bread' (CP, 4), or 'hang[ing]/Dishcloth over the weeping hedge' (CP, 7)—often take centre stage in Roberts's poetry; presented in a heightened, ritualized form, they are imbued with pointed emotional significance. Take, for example, her poem 'The Shadow Remains':

> To speak of everyday things with ease
> And arrest the mind to a simpler world
> Where living tables are stripped of a cloth;
> Of wood on which I washed, sat at peace:
> Cooked duck, shot on an evening in peacock cold:
> Studied awhile: wrote: baked bread for us both.
> But here by the hearth with leisured grace
> I prefer to speak of the vulgar clock that drips

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16 (Williams 2010, p. 811).
17 (Williams, p. 58; Evans 2010, p. 40).
18 (Williams 2012, p. 121).
19 In this, I draw on readings of Frida Kahlo's self-construction offered by Alice Gambrell in (Gambrell 1997, p. 67).
20 Angharad Rhys, Preface to *Collected Poems*, ix.
21 (Robichaud 2007, p. 108).
22 (Roberts 2005, p. 3). All references to Roberts's poetry are to this edition and henceforth will be given parenthetically in the text.

With the falling of rain: woodbine tips, and yarrow. (CP, 4)

Roberts saw in Llanybri's rural traditions an opportunity to clarify her life and language—'To speak of everyday things with ease'—by anchoring it in something that *mattered*. In this sense, her poetry subscribes to the 'back to the source' discourse that saw resurgence in the troubled 1930s and 1940s: she told soldier–poet Alun Lewis in the early years of the war that she was 'at a time in my life when I want to get down to those emotions thoughts and ideas which are to be found only close to the earth.'[23] Placing itself in dialogue with the spiritualized rhetoric of purification and renewal found in contemporary texts such as *Four Quartets*, 'The Shadow Remains' appears to essentialize what Roberts elsewhere called the 'earth rhythms' of rural Welsh life, in order to enlist them as part of a modernist 'recreation refolding of the world' in language.[24]

The 'grace[ful]' performance of country life found in poems such as 'The Shadow Remains' speaks in part of what scholars such as John Pikoulis have recognized as Roberts's Yeatsian valorization of the 'integrity, dignity, and unfeathered ways' of the rural 'peasantry': in her diary, she notes admiringly that 'The people I have met here in Llanybri seem to me to retain all the natural and true qualities of an aristocrat' (DLR, 17).[25] But, significantly, Roberts rejected what she saw as the sentimental vagaries of the Celtic Revival: after a visit by Yeats's close friend Ernest Rhys, she noted that '[h]e was still caught up in [the] aura' of 'rather a mock Celtic Twilight' when she met him, 'and, frankly, this nauseated me.' (DLR, 13) She preferred to direct her poetry outwards, towards external social worlds, staking her desire 'to be just a normal person who can take my full share of responsibility.' (DLR, 3)

Roberts's conception of the 'peasant' thus perhaps bears closer relation to the modern, sociological definition of the term, as a subordinated class of subsistence rural worker—a group with whom she identified Llanybri villagers and Argentine rural 'peons' alike.[26] Poems such as 'The New World', for instance, vividly dramatize the Argentine peasants' dispossession by global capital:

Death ate their hearts like locusts over a croaking plain,
Fell tears red as fireflies on the rising dust;
Barbed wire fenced them in or fenced them out,
these outcasts of the land.
[. . .]
Lost now. No sound or care can revive their ways:
La Plata gambles on their courage, spends too flippantly,
Mocks beauty from the shading tree, mounts a corrugated roof
over their cultured hut. (CP, 28–9)

As Roberts put it in her diary, 'That is why I have such an interest in the village of Llanybri. I see that in the future it will be forced to change for the worse' (DLR, 17). The veneration of vernacular simplicity (as embodied in the 'cultured hut') in 'The New World' and 'The Shadow Remains' is also redolent, as Daniel G. Williams has shown, of strategies adopted by Welsh modernists such as Idris Davies and African American writers such as Langston Hughes. For proletarian Davies, simplicity was a way of articulating commitment to his industrial Valleys communities, while in Hughes's case it served his aim of expressing the particularity of African American culture; as he suggested, 'I try to grasp and hold some of the meanings and rhythms of jazz. I am as sincere as I know how to be'.[27] As I show, 'The Shadow Remains' bespeaks Roberts's search to materialize, in writing, the invisible—to 'grasp and hold some of the meanings and rhythms' of domestic Welsh life—in order to investigate and lend expression to the gendered experience of cultural difference.

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[23] (Roberts n.d., p. 2).
[24] See (Roberts 2008f, p. 150).
[25] (Pikoulis 1983, p. 17). The quotation is from the same unpublished letter to Alun Lewis as above, 4.
[26] (Thomas 2019, p. 32).
[27] (Hughes 1926, p. 694).

Speech, thought, and organic matter: all are held in harmonious, if perhaps precarious, balance in 'The Shadow Remains'. Patrick McGuinness has observed that, unlike high modernists such as Pound and Eliot, Roberts demonstrates 'an enabling—and in the best sense unsophisticated—belief in language's sufficiency', and the poem speaks of her continued faith in the possibility of bringing language, self, and word/world into harmony.[28] Central to the poem's thematic structure is an attempt to integrate the spiritual and the material everyday. Robert used her diary to record moments when 'even the most dreary tasks take on an ethereal quality' (DLR, 26), and an analogous transformation of daily life can be seen in this poem. Ordinary actions such as washing and baking bread are imbued with the solemnity of the Eucharist, while the bare, altar-like 'wood' and consumption of flesh are suggestive of pagan ritual. Alliteration ('everyday … ease', 'wood … washed', 'here … hearth') and loosely-applied tetrameter smooth the surfaces of the poem with a sense of (informal) convention, while the pointed use of the colon and semi-colon further elongates the lines' 'leisured' rhythms, shaping moments of silence (or pauses in the speaking voice) that suggest that these traditional activities of Welsh domestic life allow considerable time for thought. The 'vulgar clock' offers material and imaginative connection to the generations of women who may have sat and listened to the rain, and is portrayed as implicitly healing: the same rain nourished the 'yarrow' on the shelf, a plant revered since ancient times for its healing properties (its Latin name, *Achillea millefolium*, signals that it was named after the god Achilles, said to have employed the plant to staunch wounds on the battlefield).

Integrating the 'spiritual' world of literature and the everyday world of the body was an important task for modernist women writers. In her essay 'Professions for Women', Virginia Woolf owned that, as a writer, she continued to stumble upon a central feminist conumdrum: 'telling the truth about my own experiences as a body'.[29] In Roberts's poem, domestic labour, placed in a relation of flow and equivalence with acts of thinking and writing ('Studied awhile: wrote: baked bread for us both') opens up the private lyric to collectivity and embodiment. It also foregrounds the body as a mode of intertextual engagement with an unofficial, gendered tradition, rooted in the domestic, the material and the particular—what Welsh modernist Margiad Evans called 'a corner cupboard history, a deliberate evocation, a summary of man's odd needs.'[30]

For Roberts, the devil (divinity?) was in the detail. Similar to David Jones, her poetry seeks to 'make sacral, or give otherness to', the particular, as a means of articulating the experience of cultural difference. In his preface to *Epoch and Artist* (Jones 1959), Jones argued that, while modern Western culture may have repressed the 'primitive' tendency to confuse the universal with the relative and particular, this tendency persists in all of us. Moreover, the confusion of the human and the divine, the real and the ideal, is the foundation stone of poetry:

> *poiesis* should and sometimes does make radiant 'particular facts' so that they become intimations of immortality or, if the reader won't stand for that, then intimations of *some otherness of some sort* [my emphasis].[31]

Roberts's concentration on local or domestic minutiae in her poems thus alludes to an 'otherness' hidden within the fabric of the familiar.

Luminously illuminated but also somehow always in shadow, Roberts's domestic interiors display a broader 'ethnographic impulse to document ways of living and thinking' in British literary culture of the 1930s and 1940s.[32] 'The Shadow Remains' references a specifically Welsh anthopology that, associated with H.J. Fleure and folklorist Iorwerth Peate, intersected in significant ways with the development of both Welsh nationalism and Welsh literary modernism (Fleure's article on 'The Welsh

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[28] (Roberts 2005, p. xxxvi).
[29] (Woolf 2008, p. 144)
[30] (Evans 1939, p. 286). Evans similarly posits a subterranean link between the spiritual past and domestic everyday by speculating on the connection between domestic culture in rural areas and 'the dispersal of the monasteries'.
[31] (Jones 1959, p. 16).
[32] (Williams 2012, p. 127).

People', for example, was published in the tenth (1939) edition of *Wales*, alongside writing by vanguards like Dylan Thomas, Margiad Evans, George Barker and John Cowper Powys).[33] As Gareth Evans has noted, 'Roberts was familiar with Peate's involvement in the reconstruction of representative, traditional Welsh household rooms at the National Museum in Cardiff and an advocate of his ideas for an Open Air folk Museum that would serve to recover traditional Welsh culture for the nation.'[34] Yet, while Peate saw his project in terms of the conservation of an 'authentic' Welsh past, poems such as 'The Shadow Remains' recast his ideas from the perspective of gender to subtly destabilize the idea of a coherent, unified national culture.[35]

Katie Gramich has observed that 'Roberts's cottage in Wales is simultaneously an embodiment of Wales's history and of her own autobiography as a cosmopolitan, much-travelled, avant-garde writer.'[36] Roberts described 'The Shadows Remains as 'a good poem of my v. simple life' (DLR, 47), explaining that it depicted her bathing practices at a time when water, like many other commodities, was scarce in the village:

> Keidrych (that is my husband) and I wash once a week: we boil a bucket of water, strip-tease exposing a small bare patch of flesh, we scrub the exposed part violently, then cover the part with wool, and immediately attack another part. Soon, our whole body is cleansed from our head to toes. We work thoroughly and methodically, each bending over his or her basin sharing the soap which rests between us on the kitchen table. (DLR, 9)

Like Frida Kahlo, another Hispanic modernist who took inspiration from 'indigenous' folkloric culture, Roberts's 'creative impulse'—and her modernist mythography—always emerged 'from her own concrete reality'.[37] In fact, her poetry resonates with the 'autoethnography' identified by Alice Gambrell in the work of figures such as Kahlo, Ella Deloria, and Zora Neale Hurston, all of whom set about doing 'fieldwork' within their 'home' communities.[38] Gambrell uses the term 'insider-outsider activity' to describe their bifurcated, self-reflexive practice, which sought at once to revision both 'metropolitan' and 'home' cultures.[39]

'Insider-outsider' would seem an apposite way of describing Roberts's hyphenated identity as what Nigel Wheale terms 'the one and only Latino-Welsh [sic] modernist'.[40] Affiliated to Wales in a legal sense via her marriage to Rhys, her writing often manifests her commitment to Wales and the Welsh nationalist project that gathered momentum after the founding of Plaid Cymru in 1925; *Gods with Stainless Ears*, for instance, makes an invocation to 'my people' to 'Upshine, outshine the day's sun' (CP, 53). In seeking, like David Jones, to re-route the universal through the local and particular, her writing speaks of her conviction in the poet's role in 'the development of a politically charged national tradition' whose rhetoric mirrored that of similar national movements elsewhere in the world; in 1937, artist Salvador Azuela announced that 'our vote is for the work of the Republic's artists to be more Mexican, to the extent of being more universal and human.'[41] But Roberts also always saw herself as something of a 'stranger' within Wales and her chosen community, maintaining a posture summarized by the speaker of her poem 'Lamentation' as 'always observant and slightly obscure' (CP, 8). In 'The Shadow Remains', the national dream of full belonging and presence attached to the idealised rural 'folk' (or, in Wales, the 'Gwerin') is revealed to be more a dream than a readily

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33 (Fleure, pp. 265–69).
34 (Evans 2010, p. 40).
35 Evans maintains that as 'A fervent cultural nationalist, Peate sought to define both the history and the future of the Welsh nation by reuniting the 'folk' with its tradition—expressed through building, crafts, costume and folklore—and also with its identity in a revitalized Wales.' (Evans 2010, p. 55).
36 (Gramich 2019, p. 56).
37 (Mundye 2013, pp. 23–28; quotation from Lowe 1995, p. 27).
38 (Gambrell 1997, p. 1).
39 (Ibid., p. 3, p. 32).
40 (Wheale 1994, pp. 4–19).
41 (Gambrell 1997, p. 58, Azuela, quoted in Tibol 1993, p. 102).

achievable reality. Moreover, it becomes increasingly untenable as the pressures of history, in the form of the war, begin to cast their 'shadow[s]' within the cottage:

> And below, brazier fire that burns our sorrow,
> Dries weeping socks above on the rack: that knew
> Two angels pinned to the wall—again two. (CP, 4)

Unity and fragmentation, 'pair[ing]/And peel[ing]' (CP, 45) apart, are strong themes in Roberts's poetry, reflecting, perhaps, not only the 'doubleness' of her situation, but also the reality of separation and dislocation that marked many people's experience of World War II. She herself was separated from Keidrych Rhys when he was called up to serve as a gunner on the South coast in 1940, an experience that was a source of great suffering and loneliness for her. In 'The Shadow Remains' national dynamics of unity, community and disunity are explored through the physical objects that bear witness to a private history. The hanging socks by the fire signal the speaker's 'paired' domestic life; figures for the ordinary, bodily existence of herself and her partner, they are mirrored by a pair of decorative angels on the wall. These can be seen as images of the couple's poetic, transcendent selves: Roberts acknowledges the connection in her 'Notes for an Autobiography' when she remarks that '[t]he two angels were given me by Sonia Brownell symbolising Keidrych and myself who have not been acknowledged in the literary world for over 30 years' (DLR, 212–3). Angels and images of flight recur in Roberts's work; her painting of 'Llanybri Old Chapel', for example, includes an image of her neighbour Rosie Davies as a flying angel wearing 'her best harvest apron' (CP, 35). The painting of the old village chapel depicts both a space that she considered sacred and fields spread with manure, and her homely angels offer a similar synthesis of the material and the spiritual.

The socks depicted in 'The Shadow Remains' are not only terrestrial doubles for the angels; they are also 'weeping' for them as figures they once 'knew'. This suggests that while the domestic realm can sometimes act as a peaceful haven for the poetic self, it can also 'murder' it; indeed Robert often owns in her diary to feeling 'cramped and barred from life, imprisoned' by domestic labour and the 'ties of marriage life' (DLR, 9). '[P]inned to the wall', the angels could also be seen to foreshadow the persecution of 'outsiders' under fascism, a group with whom Roberts identified as a poet; the final part of *Gods with Stainless Ears* sees its central characters, the 'gunner and his girl', return from futuristic 'cloud in fourth dimensional state' to a dystopian landscape dominated by the sign '*Mental Home For Poets*' (CP, 64, 69). Like the 'society of outsiders' imagined by Virginia Woolf in *Three Guineas*, the homespun angels become suggestive of cross-gender solidarity and a shared struggle against totalitarian forces within the space of the home. Luce Irigaray defines angels as '[t]hese messengers who never remain enclosed in a place, who are also never immobile'. Neither male nor female, angels, for Irigaray, are 'endlessly reopening the enclosure of the universe, of universes, identities, the unfolding of actions, of history'.[42] Roberts's angels, then, might also be understood as subversive images for that part of the self that can never be contained by gender or national/domestic ideology, indicating a desire to break out of the mental enclosures imposed and reinforced by war. We leave the interior of 'The Shadow Remains' as a kind of dramatic set-piece, peopled by ghosts—actors who remain somewhere just off-stage. Welsh culture and the domestic space that encloses it is thus revealed not as a 'natural or coherent [object]', in Rebecca L. Walkowitz's words, but as a 'construct', an 'achieved fiction'—though the narrative of this poem is, significantly, left open-ended.[43]

3. 'You should want to know even if you/Don't want to know about my village': The Welsh Village as Centre for the Avant-Garde

Roberts's writing is concerned with survival—with what goes on after change and disaster. In her depictions of Welsh village life, she draws upon Fleure's idea of survivals—the concept that the rural

[42] (Irigaray 1993, p. 15).
[43] (Walkowitz 2006, p. 9; Clifford 1998, p. 95).

west was a treasure-trove for lost 'thoughts and visions' that remained yet discoverable in material form. But while she sometimes identifies Llanybri with the timelessness attributed to the colonial periphery, telling Robert Graves that 'rural villages in Wales are still so medieval in craft & manner',[44] she also sees it as embodiment of a vibrant, living history, in which changes wrought by modernity (war, the aeroplane, 'galvanised sheds', the chemical factories at Llandarcy) constantly 'break before us' to '[change] its contour'(CP, 44).[45] The Welsh village thus emerges as a 'centre for the avant-garde' in her poetry—a space of experiment in which art and life coalesce.[46]

But Roberts's relationship to her village community was often vexed and always complicated. Gill Plain asserts that 'wartime women [during the Second World War] were assumed to be performing rather than inhabiting the identity of public citizen';[47] this paranoia—which laid bare the instability of women's relation to nationhood—made itself felt in Roberts's relations with Llanybri; she was, for a while, suspected by her neighbours of being a German spy, an experience that she encodes in her poem 'Raw Salt on Eye'. Her poetry thus explores the difficulties, as well as the regenerative potential, of the woman poet's attempt to assume a place in society during wartime. Like fellow Anglophone Welsh modernists Brenda Chamberlain and Margiad Evans, Roberts found herself situated on the borders between different cultures, and all three occupied the overlap between disciplines, as practicing artists as well as writers. As I have already noted, Tony Conran has suggested that Roberts, Chamberlain and Evans should all be seen as '"primitives" in the sense that we use the word of painters—poets without a training in literature, whose work therefore involves problems in appreciation.'[48] Citing the facts that Roberts was extremely well-read and artistically trained, McGuinness prefers to use the term 'naïve' to describe her work, 'in the specific sense of the naïve painters' such as Henri 'Douanier' Rousseau, but he concurs with Conran's statement that, in Roberts's poetry, 'the clear boundaries most poets with literary training make between private and public worlds are frequently transgressed.'[49]

Village craft becomes a touchstone for Roberts's interest in the relation between art and artlessness. Furthermore, she shows how 'home-made' art can serve to bridge divisions between the private and public, thus allowing the outsider woman writer to participate within communal life. In 'Earthbound', the making of a wreath is transformed into a public ritual that serves to integrate the solitary artist within the circle of her village community. A diary entry from 1941 explains that the poem was inspired by the poet's act of making a wreath with a female evacuee friend for 'a village death' (DLR, 32):

> We made the wreath standing on the white floor;
> Bent each to our purpose wire to rose-wire;
> Pinning each leaf smooth,
> Polishing the outer edge with the warmth of our hands.
> The circle finished and note thought out,
> We carried the ring through the attentive eyes of the street:
> Then slowly drove by Butcher's van to the 'Union Hall'.
> We walked the greaving room alone,
> Saw him lying in his upholstered box,
> Violet ribbon carefully crossed,
> And about his sides bunches of wild thyme.
> No one stirred as we offered the gift. No one drank there again. (CP, 10)

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44 (Roberts 2008d, p. 170).
45 (Roberts 2008c, pp. 133–38). All references are to this edition and henceforth will be given parenthetically in the text.
46 (Harris 2010, p. 169). Harris notes that 'It seems counter-intuitive to describe English villages as centres for the avant garde', but, in the context of the late 1930s, 'it certainly cannot be left out of the account.'
47 (Plain 2009, p. 168).
48 (Conran 1997, p. 165).
49 (Roberts 2005, p. xxxiv; Conran 1997, p. 165).

Roberts was an expert in flower arrangement, for she had trained as a florist with Constance Spry, and once set up a flower-arranging business named Bruska in her private rooms in London. This wreath, therefore, represents a home-made art (or decorative craft) that is at once local and traditional—constructed, we could presume, from wild flowers—and avant-garde: Spry was well-known for her edgy designs that pioneered mixed materials and the unusual decorative use of vegetables, such as kale or rhubarb leaves.

Over the course of the poem, the wreath becomes, in Conran's assessment, 'a symbol of participation; almost a symbol of the poem that has been made of it.'[50] The text foregrounds how the artists' bodies, infused into their craft through the 'warmth of our hands' become integrated, through their sacrificial gift, into the body of the community. The concept of the poem as gift or offering suffuses Roberts's work, gesturing to bardic Welsh conventions such as the *cywydd gofyn*, where the poet traditionally petitions a friend for a gift, and the *llatai*, the poem as love-messenger (the word comes from the word '*llad*' meaning gift), it emphasises what David Jones called the 'gratuitous' in literary production.[51] The 'gratuitous' for Jones is that making which is not 'merely utilitarian' or 'simply functional'; it is defined by absence, as the 'extrautile', and is connected by the poet to humanity's religious impulses as 'the preserve of saints—lovers, and all kinds of unifying makers'.[52] Kicking against the unequal exchanges of capitalism and imperialism, the poem-as-gift thus suggests a different way of structuring the relations between the poet and her readers (or audience); home becomes the sacred site for the creation of a gendered communal art that serves to mediate between public and private experience. During her time at the Central School of Arts and Crafts, Roberts designed and made printed textiles, carved wooden panels, 'made a traditional table of my own design', and learnt gesso work and gold leaf application (DLR, 197). This experience seems to have influenced her lifelong interest in material and decorative surfaces—both of language, and of a culture. It is relevant to note here that the ideas of William Morris, proponent of the Arts and Crafts movement, would have been in the air at the time Roberts was studying; for socialist Morris, as for Roberts, traditional crafts—invented as much as reclaimed—became an avenue for reclaiming art and beauty for the community.

Similar to Dorothy Wordsworth, Roberts used her diary to note down detailed observations on the flora, fauna, birdlife, geology, customs, and speech of Llanybri, raw data that she drew on and transformed in the making of her poems. We can see this most clearly in her 'Poem from Llanybri', a text that, in Gareth Evans's view, presents itself as a kind of storehouse or 'synecdoche of traditional local culture'[53]:

> If you come my way that is. . .
> Between now and then, I will offer you
> A fist full of rock cress fresh from the bank
> The valley tips of garlic red with dew
> Cooler than shallots, a breath you can swank
> In the village when you come. At noon-day
> I will offer you a choice bowl of cawl
> Served with a 'lover's' spoon and a chopped spray
> Of leeks or savori fach, not used now,
> In the old way you'll understand. (CP, 3)

Roberts was an avid student of cultural traditions, but here the speaker portrays herself as something of a teacher, too.[54] The poem was initially written as an invitation to Alun Lewis, whom Roberts met

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50 (Conran 1983, p. 130).
51 (Jones 2001, p. 126).
52 (Jones 1959, pp. 176, 181; Hague 1980, p. 93).
53 (Evans 2010, p. 59).
54 (Gambrell 1997, p. 65).

in Longmoor in the spring of 1941, and the speaker here takes the role of a guide or ethnographic 'informant', welcoming her reader into the village and offering a bridge to its cultural otherness.[55] As Alice Gambrell explains, women artists and writers were often subject to 'the expectation that they would serve as containers, transmitters, or translators of the very forms of experiential immediacy' whose loss in war is lamented by Walter Benjamin in his essay 'The Storyteller'.[56] This intimacy of experience is indicated by the speaker's breezy use of vernacular names and 'private allusion[s]', a technique which some readers have perceived as deliberately 'riddling':[57]

> . . . The din
> Of children singing through the eyelet sheds
> Ringing smith hoops, chasing the butt of hens;
> Or I can offer you Cwmcelyn spread
> With quartz stones from the wild scratchings of men:
> You will have to go carefully with clogs
> Or thick shoes for it's treacherous the fen,
> The East and West Marshes also have bogs.

The 'valley tips' of wild garlic are so described because, according to John Pikoulis, they reminded Roberts of lilies of the valley; 'wild scratchings of men' is possibly an allusion to traces of bronze age settlement in Cwmcelyn, a bay on the western marshes overlooking Laugharne (Roberts was a member of the Carmarthenshire Antiquarian Society).[58] Again, we find Roberts inscribing a sense of place that is rooted in her personal experience, and elucidating a national culture that finds expression in particular details whose opacity except to the most local of readers subtly resists the politics of coherent representation they seem initially to support.

Echoing Katherine Mansfield's contention 'I want for one moment to make our undiscovered country leap into the eyes of the Old World', 'Poem from Llanybri' seeks to imbue this 'undiscovered country' with 'a sense of mystery, a radiance, an afterglow'.[59] Llanybri's utopian, dream-like dimension is mirrored by the temporal structure of the poem. Placing itself in a conditional time 'between now and then', it is orientated both to an imagined past and an imagined future, and the speaker's gendered role as hostess and conserver seemingly enables her to participate in a (still conditional) project of national reconstruction:

> You must come—start this pilgrimage
> Can you come?—send an ode or elegy
> In the old way and raise our heritage. (CP, 3)

'Poem from Llanybri' also poses as a homespun 'offering' designed to alleviate the stress and anomie of the homesick soldier, and in a sense this is what it is: Bill Ashcroft et al., have shown how, in postcolonial literatures, the imagination, like the magical worldview of folk culture, can offer an enabling escape from the violent dialectics of dominance and subservience that is exposed by *Gods with Stainless Ears* as a primary feature of the war machine's encroachment on west Wales.[60]

The portrayal of the village here also speaks to traditional textiles in the 'naïve' style, such as the *arpilleras* that emerged from Peru in the 1980s. Made by proletarian women in mothers' clubs in towns and cities, the *arpillera* drew on ancient traditions of Andean dollmaking and textile art to depict scenes from rural life.[61] As Mary Louise Pratt notes, these representations set out a kind of

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55 (Pikoulis 1983, p. 13).
56 (Gambrell 1997, p. 5).
57 (Conran 1983, p. 125; Pikoulis 1995, p. 205).
58 (Pikoulis 1983, p. 15).
59 (Mansfield 1954, p. 94).
60 (Ashcroft et al. 2002, pp. 33–34).
61 (Pratt 1992, p. 141).

'atemporal mapping' of place that 'celebrate[s] plenitude, variety, and detail', while also depicting 'a social space teeming with people and domestic animals whose activities contribute as much to the variety as the plant world does.'[62] Like these fabric pictures, 'Poem from Llanybri' fills its entire canvas with detail and plays with perspective so as to represent a 'whole way of life'. Pratt holds that the *arpillera*, while aimed in part at an Anglo-European consumer, is also 'an autoethnographic gesture, transculturating elements of metropolitan discourses to create self-affirmations designed for reception in the metropolis'. In these kinds of representations, 'subjugated subjects engage, and seek to engage, the metropolis's constructions of those it subjugates', and 'Poem from Llanybri' can be seen to perform a similarly transcultural 'mirror dance'.[63]

Roberts's depiction of Llanybri walks, as it does in many of her poems, a gossamer line between clarity and opacity, 'cultural "revelation" and cultural "silence"', an effect seen by Pikoulis as willfully teasing.[64] Indeed, tropes of evasiveness are not uncommon in 'insider-outsider' modernist women writers and artists; Gambrell notes that the 'textual elusiveness' of figures such as Hurston, Leonora Carrington and Kahlo signals their resistance to being construed as transparent containers or transmitters of exotic otherness.[65] In Roberts's poetry, an 'incomplete intimacy' signals a gendered appreciation of cultural (and linguistic) difference that cannot be grasped within the knowledge structures of metropolitan scrutiny.[66] This we see in her poem 'Plasnewydd'. As in 'Poem from Llanybri', the speaker playfully adopts the role of Clifford's ethnological 'informant':

> You want to know about my village.
> You should want to know even if you
> Don't want to know about my village. (CP, 4)

The village is initially presented as a small, static location to pass through: 'You could/Pass it with a winning gait. Smile.' (CP, 4) Moving from the general (the whole village) to the particular, the speaker effects an abrupt shift of perspective, focusing in on a village cow:

> WAR. 'There's no sense in it.
> Just look at her two lovely eyes
> Look at those green big big eyes
> And the way she hangs her tail.
> Like a weasel. Ferret. Snowball
> Running away on the breast of a hill.
> WAR. There's no sense in it. (CP, 5)

While the passage perhaps invokes Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, a more important source is surely the 'Hanes Taliesin', as collected in Lady Charlotte Guest's translation of the *Mabinogion* (1838–45), in which Gwion Bach, sought after by a shape-shifting witch Ceridwen, is chased for his poetic powers, with both characters becoming subject to a dizzying array of metamorphoses into different animal forms. The legendary narrative of Gwion's transformation is used by Roberts in order to provide the effect of viewing the village through a kaleidoscopic range of changing perspectives: the cow's anthropomorphic presentation serves to blur the division between human and animal, while the gaze of her 'big big eyes' on the viewing subject (the reader) blurs divisions between the viewing subject and her ethnographic 'object'. The cow's sudden movement away over 'the breast of a hill' suggests the impossibility of fully 'knowing' the 'other' that is Llanybri. In this respect, the position of Llanybri

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62 (Ibid., p. 142).
63 (Ibid., p. 143; Taussig 1987, p. 305).
64 (Ashcroft et al. 2002, p. 58; Pikoulis 1983, p. 15).
65 (Gambrell 1997, p. 32).
66 (Ibid., p. 56). Daniel G. Williams explores similar dynamics of linguistic difference in relation to Margiad Evans's writing in his chapter on (Williams 2010, pp. 810–13).

and the Welsh culture it represents is shown to mirror Luce Irigaray's conception of the 'feminine' as 'already elsewhere than in the discursive machinery where you claim to take [it] by surprise'.[67]

Patrick McGuinness has suggested Roberts's literary style emulates the 'naïve' painting in its intricate harmoniousness, its eclectic combination of images (*Gods with Stainless Ears*, for example, gives us 'euclidian […] air', 'sprockets of kale', 'Women titans [as] weathervanes' in the space of a few stanzas (CP, 47)), and in its tendency to '[play] fast and loose with [scale and] proportion'.[68] Her naïve style is also evident on the level of tone, contributing to the 'problems of appreciation' noted by Conran: in a review of *Gods with Stainless Ears* in 1951, a *Times Literary Supplement* critic dismissed 'the contrast between the high tragic tones of the poet and the naivety of her incidents' as 'irresistibly ludicrous'.[69] Indeed, in 'Plasnewydd', the seriousness of the subject matter—'WAR'—is belied by the speaker's comic levity. This is not down to Roberts's lack of understanding of literary conventions, however: rather, as Walkowitz has shown, a tone marked by naturalness and triviality can be seen to challenge the principles of proportion and literary 'decorum' that writers like Joyce and Woolf portray as supporting the imperial project.[70]

Although Roberts was a skilful formalist, critics have observed that there is a 'calculated awkwardness' to her poetry—a contention borne out by the image, in 'Poem from Llanybri', of walking 'carefully with clogs'.[71] Patrick McGuinness has insisted that 'Some of her alleged obscurity, and much of her oblique or inverted syntax' can be attributed to her 'tendency to transcribe, unaltered, the idioms and phrases she hears all around her.'[72] She shared George Orwell's association of the metropolitan political establishment with a corrupt language that, detached from any shared referential value, served as an instrument of power and oppression. Like Orwell, she thought clarity and democratic representation might be achieved only through public recourse to the 'vivid, homemade turn of speech' that she recognized in the inhabitants of Llanybri:[73] she opined in her diary that 'the officials speak at their own low level, and do not understand the wise and simple minds of the agricultural community', adding, 'And if we do not listen to the rural wisdom of the common man we shall be a lost Nation.' (DLR 17) Many of the villagers were Welsh speakers who used an accented, idiomatic English, and, as Laura Wainwright observes, 'Roberts seems to revel in the linguistic oddness and expressive potency of this vernacular mode'.[74] But rather than constructing a 'synthetic vernacular', as does Hugh MacDiarmud, poems such as 'Plasnewydd' use the oral vernacular 'to signify the insertion of the outsider into the discourse.'[75] Nineteen of 'Plasnewydd''s thirty-nine lines are taken up by direct speech quoted more or less verbatim from Roberts's friend Rosie Davies, a local farm worker then in her forties. The conversation is described in Roberts's diary (note the class distance inherent in the use of her married name):

> 'Well you see, it's like this, Mrs Rhys' … and Rosie stands on one foot with her hand on her hip, she licks around her mouth, then begins talking again, and it is always the same, 'Well you see, it's like this, Mrs Rhys. I can't imagine the war or fighting at all, I've never travelled at all, only to go to Cardiff, so I can't imagine this war at all. She's very wrong mind you (meaning the WAR), and what I feel is they're all flesh and blood like you or I Mrs Rhys, aren't they? If you were to be stabbed you would feel it just as much as they, wouldn't you? WAR there's no sense in it. We're simple people we all get on. War there's no sense in it'. (DLR, 16)

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67 (Irigaray 1988, p. 103).
68 (Roberts 2005, pp. xxxiv–xxxv).
69 Review of *Gods with Stainless Ears*, *Times Literary Supplement*, 16 November 1951, quoted in (Roberts 2005, p. xxxiv).
70 See (Walkowitz 2006, p. 56).
71 (Goodby and Wigginton 2013, p. 175).
72 (Roberts 2005, p. xxi).
73 (Orwell 1946, p. 252).
74 (Wainwright 2018, p. 62).
75 (Ashcroft et al. 2002, p. 55).

One of the things that lends Roberts's 'naïve' style its uncanniness—its sense of the familiar in the strange, and vice versa—is its tendency to place objects or literary styles within unusual contexts; *Gods* sees a tiger-like 'striped rhizome cat' escaping over the waters of the estuary (CP 57), while modern-day town mayors wear the 'torques' of princes as they wade out to sea after a plane crash (CP, 50). By re-placing the language of war within the realm of the female and oral with the refrain 'WAR. "There's no sense in it . . . .", 'Plasnewydd' estranges and deheroizes the rhetoric of conflict, robbing it of its engrained meaning and power. While the technique has something in common with Surrealism's 'simulations' of voices of madwomen, in Roberts's work, the ventriloquized voices of Welshwomen are eminently sane.

The 'calculated awkwardness' of Roberts's style calls attention to the fact that 'Hers is an impressive impersonation—for such it surely is—of cultural authority'.[76] As in 'Poem from Llanybri' where the reader must 'go carefully with clogs', or 'The Circle of C', whose vatic investigations culminate in the prosaic lines: 'Heard Rosie say lace curtained in clogs/I've put a Yule log on your grate' (CP, 7), the sense is projected of the speaker walking and *talking* in Rosie's shoes (stuffing bits of lace in them to make them fit?) to achieve a practical understanding of her point of view. Following the ideas of Sianne Ngai, it can be suggested that Roberts's poetry thus shows how thinking through and about powerlessness can generate new modes of thought.[77] Indeed, her work often emphasizes the centrality of copying and mimicry within a culture's formation, but this inherent performativity does not, for her, seem to be antagonistic to authenticity. Her sensuous recollections of Argentina in 'Royal Mail' include 'peacock struts and nets mimicrying butterflies' (CP, 27), while the notes to *Gods with Stainless Ears* include a reference to Romantic 'poet Iolo Morganwg in particular, who forged numerous parchment poems' claiming to be ancient texts of the Welsh tradition (CP, 72). Understood in its composite dimensions, as mimic/cry, the word informs the 'naïve', tragi-comic tone of Roberts's poetry.

4. Make do and Mend: Fabricating Self and Society

Early on during her time in Llanybri on 20 March 1940, Roberts was already mimicking the Llanybri villagers: 'I drew my scarlet cape around me and walked leisurely, as village people do.' (DLR, 9) Although the vibrant apparel signalled Roberts's love of colour, a statement of her proud individuality within the 'damp and stony stare of a village' (CP, 27), it was made, as her daughter, Angharad Rhys recalls, of Welsh wool (she later gave it to her friend, the writer Celia Buckmaster, as a gift) and was well designed for keeping the cold winds at bay. A practical item that served both as a disguise, a means of adaption and a revelation of Roberts's personal self-identity, it often appears, in a mythic guise, within her poetry.

Although the extent and complexity of Roberts's engagement with tropes of costuming and textile in her poetry are beyond the scope of this essay, similar to Kahlo, she uses clothing and disguise to present a self perpetually in motion, as in 'The Circle of C' where 'I walk and cinder bats riddle my cloak' (CP, 7).[78] Playing on the desire on the part of her readers that she disclose her 'real' self, she instead calls that 'self' into question. This we see in her poem 'Low Tide', which depicts Roberts's experience of miscarriage, also in March 1940:

> Every waiting moment is a fold of sorrow
> Pierced within the heart.
> Pieces of mind get torn off emotionally,
> In large wisps. (CP, 5)

The text seems to establish itself in the confessional mode, but all we really see are layers of a fabricated ('sewn-together') self and its fraying edges, only hinting at the pain that is felt within. This

[76] (Thomas 2019, p. 26).
[77] (Ngai 2005, p. 14).
[78] (Gambrell 1997, p. 54).

questioning of the 'true' subject of disclosure through images of veiling and costuming extends to her representation of Welsh culture: take, for example, her use of Rosie's patterned apron as a border for her painting of 'Llanybri Old Chapel', or her description of a neighbour's cottage:

> Here an old widow of eighty-four lives. She always seems to have a pink geranium flowering at her window throughout the year. I cannot tell you more about her as I pass, as today she has fussily put up a lace curtain right across the lower window frame, drawn two citrine curtains towards the middle of her window, which she told me she had dyed with her own water. She has at the side of these two dark blue hangings of baize. Then there is as well the navy-blue blind just inside the small frame of the non-opening window. Such are the window dressings of many in the village. (DLR, 5)

Here we have an image of the 'periphery' as excess and 'gratuity'; an idea of Welsh culture, glimpsed from a female perspective not in synecdoche or totality, but in a series of ever-proliferating decorative details. The window coverings signal Roberts's exclusion as outsider, while alluding to a collective reticence that she ascribed to the 'continual subjugation of the Welsh by conquerors' (DLR, 68) which meant that they 'never failed to exercise the flexibility of their wit to conceal their thoughts'.[79] The impression is given, though, that cultural identity is revealed in the layered materiality of the window displays, not behind or before it, even as the elderly woman's difference is hinted at, yet left in shadow.

As Gambrell, following Jean Franco, has shown, Kahlo's self-portraits trouble masculinist-imperial fantasies about female interiority by portraying her interior as broken and pierced, thereby collapsing the boundaries between inside and outside.[80] In a similar manner, Roberts harnesses the naïve mode to present the Welsh 'heart' as an item of home-made craft; pierced; on display; but always, rather like the English language in which it is written, obscuring as much as it reveals. This we can see in her description of a typical coracleman's house: 'a great pride, just now I am thinking of one home in particular, a pincushion in the shape of a heart, studded in design with glass coloured beads, and set in a glass box.' (DLR, 138) Again, 'pointedly incomplete intimacy' inscribes a difference that yet exceeds the capacities of the English language to contain it.[81]

Through her development of a unique late modernist 'naïve' style, Roberts seeks to create visibility for Welsh culture *and* gendered experience by transforming the consciousness of her readers. Using the idea of the 'naïve', the 'amateur' and the 'home-made', she reformulates our conceptions about literary art in order to give women writers a stake in national culture. The folk practices she portrays, while seeming to comply with the centre's constructions of a 'primitive' periphery, are somehow always in excess of metropolitan norms, and are used to assert the importance of cultural difference in the face of Fascism and totalitarianism. Although Roberts's work is concerned with continuity, she is no nostalgist; rather, in her adoption of a naïve style, she shows a desire to move away from patriarchal ideas of tradition and heritage in order to explore multiple forms of affiliation. The oral vernacular becomes embedded in Roberts's exploration of language as a malleable, heterogeneous entity, without unified origin. Using sewing and craft as model and metaphor for the lines of entanglement linking people across disjuncture and difference,[82] she weaves her own story as female outsider into new patterns of Welsh culture.

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79 (Roberts 2008e, p. 128). All references are to this edition and henceforth will be given parenthetically in the text.
80 (Gambrell 1997, p. 72).
81 (Ibid., p. 56).
82 (Anderson, p. 227).

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Article

"From Scotland to the World": The Poetry of Hope Mirrlees, Helen Adam, Muriel Spark, and Veronica Forrest-Thomson

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Abstract: The four poets that provide the material for this chapter did not know each other and they probably did not know each other's work. However, they had important formative experiences in common: They were all educated in Scotland and they all left Scotland after that early education. Yet, they all retained special, although different, ties to that country, to its history, and its writing. They were all "modern" in their poetry, sometimes bizarrely so: Of each of them it could be said, "There was no one like her." This strangeness they also share, as they share a willingness, even desire, to shock, a muddling of contemporary and archaic, of real and legendary. Veronica Forrest-Thomson's "Hold on to your seat-belt Persephone" is an indicative phrase. I aim to show that these serially inimitable modern writers have complicated and intertwined Scottish and international connections.

Keywords: Scotland; ballads; kaleidoscope; Charles Bernstein; Edwin Morgan

> English critics in particular, seemingly mesmerised by Irish writers, have only gingerly grappled with what has been happening north of Carlisle. We like spacemen as well as bog men. We like, and write about, both kinds of chip. We are carnivalesque, and will never give up the comedic mode. We have long feelers that extend into America and Europe rather than into England.

Edwin Morgan wrote this in *The Sunday Times*, 19 July 1992. He was reviewing Douglas Dunn's *Faber Book of Twentieth Century Scottish Poetry* (Dunn 2006). Perhaps the fact of an English publisher of an anthology of Scottish poetry provoked what seems like a warning to readers south of the border that Scots are international even if it is an internationalism that seems rather pointedly to exclude England. Morgan is glad, however, that Dunn includes Veronica Forrest-Thomson who might have been thought an English poet since her post-school life had been spent south of the border:

> I was glad to see a poem by Veronica Forrest-Thomson, the Glasgow poet who died tragically in her 20s, in 1975. Her work is nothing if not avant-garde, a remarkable mixture of raw emotion, language-games, collage, and academic questioning and Dunn [. . .] has chosen one of Forrest-Thomson's most accessible pieces, but might, to be fair to her, have complemented that with one of her more Wittgensteinian corkers.

Veronica Forrest-Thomson, in Morgan's version, is a Glasgow poet whose work is only fairly represented when it is recognized at once as Scottish and European, when the ballad rhythms that Morgan detected in her verse are supplemented by "Wittgensteinian corkers". This combination of Scottishness and internationalism links Mirrlees, Adam, Spark, and Forrest-Thomson. Hope Mirrlees is the first born of the four and the longest lived. She was born in Chislehurst in Kent on 8 April 1887 and died 1 August 1978 in a nursing home in Goring-on-Thames. She had lived in South Africa,

Scotland, England, Paris, Spain, through two world wars, the social and political transformations of the 1960s, and more critical and philosophical trends and modes than it is possible to enumerate; she had published poetry, novels, essays, and biographies. Her friendship with the classicist, Jane Harrison, her tutor at Newnham College, Cambridge, has intrigued her critics. Their stay in Paris provided some of the material for Mirrlees' 1919 poem, *Paris*, and has provoked speculation about the degree of Sapphism in the relationship of the two women. The relationship is discussed by Harrison's biographer, Mary Beard (Beard 2000, chp. 9). However, it is Mirrlees' relationship with Virginia Woolf that better reveals her connection with the other three poets.

Hope Mirrlees probably met Virginia Woolf through Karin Costelloe, a fellow student at Newnham with whom she visited Paris in 1913. Costelloe married Woolf's brother, Adrian Stephen, in 1914 and subsequently had an extraordinary and intermittently unhappy life, culminating in suicide in 1953, five years after the death of her husband. However, in 1913, she was 24 with a first-class degree in moral sciences and she and Mirrlees visited Paris, taking in, Sandeep Parmar explains, the salons of Anna de Noailles and Mary Robinson (Madame Duclaux) and meeting Edith Wharton only to be dismissively treated by her (Parmar 2011, p. xviii). Mirrlees spent much more time in Paris with Jane Harrison in 1914, 1915, and throughout 1918, and the relationship with Harrison was the central relationship of her life, but that first trip to Paris with another young woman explains some of the verve of *Paris*, the poem that Julia Briggs has celebrated as "modernism's lost masterpiece" (Briggs 2007). *Paris* was first published by the Hogarth Press, and without the Woolfs' patient reproduction of the typographical idiosyncrasies of the poem, its distinction might never have been recognized. Woolf's early estimate of Mirrlees, 17 August 1919, is caustic yet grudgingly admiring:

> Last weekend, however, we had a young lady who changed her dress every night for dinner—which Leonard and I cooked; the servants being on holiday. Her stockings matched a wreath in her hair; every night they were differently coloured; powder fell about in flakes; and the scent was such we had to sit in the garden. Moreover, she knows Greek and Russian better than I do French; is Jane Harrison's favorite pupil, and has written a very obscure, indecent, and brilliant poem, which we are going to print. (Woolf 1976, p. 385)

Many years later, in 1976, J. H. Prynne was just as sensitive to the perfume worn by the young woman who had been one of his research students and who had been struck by his poetry:

> Veronica would prowl round to see me, in a manner one might once have termed *outré*; she wore outfits of bright green or uncompromising purple, and hurled arguments about like brickbats. Her reasoning habits were very intense and she locked herself into questions like the conditions for intelligibility of poetic convention as if getting a right answer, or even a workable one, were a condition for all the details of ordinary life. She would come up against contradictions with a vivid local clarity of insight, quite without that pragmatic relativism of 'keeping things in perspective' which allows ordinary life to be merely ordinary. She wore perfume which would give the most hardened logician the staggers. She was theatrically short-sighted in ways of which she seemed entirely unaware. Her commitment to the writing of poetry was absolute and intrepid, and this commitment was in a vehemently dialectical and changing relation to her writing of poems. (Prynne 1976)

It was the overpowering scents favored by Hope Mirrlees and Veronica Forrest-Thomson that first brought them together in my mind, but other connections quickly presented themselves. Mirrlees' grandfather, James Buchanan Mirrlees (1822–1903), an engineer who designed sugar-refining machinery and diesel engines, built a mansion off Great Western Road in Glasgow. The house, Redlands, became a maternity hospital between 1902 and 1978. It has now been converted into flats. Mirrlees' father, William Julius, also an engineer and brought up partly in Glasgow, part-founded a sugar company, which after mergers, is still thriving as the Tongaat–Hulett Company. Therefore, although born in Chislehurst, Mirrlees was brought up between South Africa and Scotland. Hope had a Zulu

nurse who taught her that language, and when she became a boarder at St Leonard's School in St Andrews, she learned Latin, Greek, and French. Hope Mirrlees' mother was a Moncrieff, rooted in the Scottish aristocracy.

Veronica Thomson had a less wealthy but equally here and there background. Her father was a rubber planter in Brunei and later Malaya. He was working in Padang Serai, Kedah, at the outbreak of WWII when he joined the volunteer Malayan forces (KDF). Veronica's brother Miles was born in Penang in 1939 and he and his mother subsequently escaped on a ship some time in 1941. The family returned to Malaya after the war and Veronica Elizabeth Marian Forrest Thomson was born in Penang on 28 November 1947. The family were fortunately on home leave when the Malayan Communist Insurgency broke out 1948 and although her father returned abroad until he finally retired from planting in 1951 or 1952, Jean Forrest Thomson remained with her children in Glasgow, which was her parents' home (Malayan Volunteers Group 2006). Mirrlees' upbringing was divided between countries and this marked her affections—and her linguistic abilities. Like Mirrlees, Forrest-Thomson was schooled in Scotland, at Jordanhill College School and, as a boarder, at St Bride's School in Helensburgh. The periods that both Mirrlees and Forrest-Thomson spent in Scotland encompassed some of their primary and most of their adolescent schooling. These are formative years and the phrase 'Scottish by formation' came to mind. The expression was used of herself by Muriel Spark in "What Images Return", an essay that she wrote in 1962 after returning to Edinburgh when her father was dying.

> Edinburgh is the place that I, a constitutional exile, am essentially exiled from. I spent the first 18 years of my life, during the 'twenties and 'thirties, there. It was Edinburgh that bred within me the conditions of exiledom; and what have I been doing since then but moving from exile into exile? It has ceased to be a fate, it has become a calling. (Spark 2014)

Some of the cultural traditions of Spark's first place remain significant throughout her work. Spark remembers, for example, how the Border Ballads had captivated her from the age of 11 when she was reading them:

> so repetitively and attentively that I memorized many of them without my noticing it. The steel and bite of the ballads, so remorseless and yet so lyrical, entered my literary bloodstream, never to depart. (Spark [1992] 1993, p. 98)

The notion of the ballad where so little is said and so much (and that often so dark) is implied, is a controlling force in Spark's fiction, providing the memorable title of *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* and title and form of the *Ballad of the Fanfarlo*, the poem that Spark said contained the declaration of her aesthetic. Spark's commitment to the ballad recalls another writer in exile, also Scottish by formation, who never left the ballads, although she never, after going to America in 1939, returned to the country of their origin. Helen Adam, born in Glasgow, educated mostly in Dundee, died in a nursing home in Brooklyn. Her obituary in the *New York Times,* 12 October 1993, described her as a "poet and composer of Scottish ballads closely associated with the Beat authors and the San Francisco school of poets."

Recordings of Adam's performances of her ballads show that, like Spark, she never lost her middle-class Scottish accent. No one recalls Hope Mirrlees as having a Scottish accent, but her mother seems to have kept hers. T. S. Eliot knew the family well and, during the blitz, regularly spent long weekends with Hope and her mother, "Mappie," at their home, Shamley Wood, nr Guilford. Writing to Eliot 30 May 1948, shortly after Mappie's death, a mutual friend, Margaret Behrens, describes her as "an extraordinary compound of fantasy, Scotchness, cleverness" (Eliot 2017, p. 637, note 1). Gareth Farmer, in his recent critical assessment of Veronica Forrest-Thomson, speaks of her light Glaswegian vowels at her 27 April 1967 Essex Arts Festival reading (Farmer 2017, p. 25).

All four were privately educated in girls' schools in Scotland: Mirrlees at St Leonard's in St Andrews, Helen Adam in Seymour Lodge, Dundee, Muriel Spark in James Gillespie's, Edinburgh, and Veronica Forrest-Thomson in St Bride's in Helensburgh, all schools that offered more intellectual opportunities and less social variety than co-educational state schools. The privilege of a good education

has to be balanced against the desire that such schools might provoke to escape the limitations and constrictions of privilege and protection.

The four poets are linked by literary as well as biographical connections. Mirrlees in *Paris* draws on the Baudlairean *flâneur* tradition; Spark takes her characters in her short story "The Seraph of the Zambesi" and her long poem *The Ballad of the Fanfarlo* from Baudelaire's short story *La Fanfarlo* (Baudelaire 1847); both Mirrlees and Forrest-Thomson in different ways draw on French modernism, particularly on Apollinaire; through Robert Duncan and Charles Bernstein Helen Adam is connected to L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry and thus to Veronica Forrest-Thomson. There is always something in one of the poets that sends me to another. But there is, I would suggest, a more radical connection. My contention is that these four poets, born between 1887 and 1947, dying between 1975 and 2006, share a Scottish formation, which, no matter what their later experience may have been, ensured that for all of them, as for Muriel Spark, Scotland remained the country that they were exiled from. The result is, in each case, poetry that might be called kaleidoscopic in that it admits disparate, even clashing elements and allows pattern to be formed from these without imposing a single view. Mirrlees, in an essay "Listening in to the Past", which she originally published in *The Nation and Athenaeum*, 11 September 1926, invokes the kaleidoscope "the prettiest toy ever invented, and the most entertaining of all the thieves of time". She concludes her essay by remembering:

> a particularly glorious kind of kaleidoscope for which you yourself provide the materials for the patterns. Under the lens there is a little tray, and on this you place any thin brightly coloured scraps you can lay hands on . . . the silver paper off chocolates, for instance, the petals of flowers, and so on. And, as you gradually add to this collection of scraps, you sometimes find—from the addition, say of a purplish-brown element given by a wallflower's petal or from the brilliant blue of a butterfly's wing, rifled from your childhood's collection that both the colours and design of the patterns become much more beautiful. (Mirrlees 2011, pp. 88–89)

Since the essay is concerned with the recovery of the past, she also invokes the notion of an aural kaleidoscope and tries to listen to the mixture of horror and cruelty and domesticity that is to be found in the witch trials in Pitcairn's "Criminal Trials of Scotland". The trial that fascinates most is that of the "royal witch" Mary Stuart of whom Pitcairn writes that she exercised "some enchantment, whereby men are bewitched". We owe the bewitchment of the kaleidoscope itself to the Scot Sir David Brewster who invented it in 1816.

In spite of her fascination with Scottish history, Hope Mirrlees might seem the least convincingly Scottish by formation, not because she did not spend formative time in Scotland but because so much about her life was unsettled from an early stage: England, South Africa, Scotland, and by the time she was 16, England again. St Leonard's School was and is the most anglified of the girls' schools attended by the four. It has tended to prepare its students for English Examinations and to send them, when they do go to University, to Oxford or Cambridge. Mirrlees went to RADA and then Newnham, Cambridge, where she was taught by Jane Harrison, the shaper of much of Mirrlees' later life.

Yet Mirrlees' years at St Leonard's left their mark on her. After mostly home schooling she entered St Katharine's, the junior school of St Leonards, in 1899, moving on to the senior school St Leonards itself in September 1901 and leaving in April 1903. She was in the boarding house, Bishopshall West, the Housemistress of which was Miss Abernethy, who latterly kept as pets two terriers and a parrot[1]. The Headmistress from 1896 was Miss Julia May Grant. She was the daughter of Sir Alexander Grant, Principal of Edinburgh University, classicist, editor of Aristotle's *Ethics*. Grant's wife, Susan Ferrier, was second daughter of James Frederick Ferrier, the distinguished and controversial philosopher,

[1] I am grateful for this information from the Librarian of St Leonard's, Angela Tawse, 17 January 2019.

nephew of Susan Ferrier, the novelist. Therefore, the school was guided by a woman with a distinctive academic heritage, firmly Scottish and firmly intellectual.

Hope Mirrlees left no exceptional record at school, yet four years of an impressionable period of her life under devoted teachers committed to the study of classical and modern languages did much to prepare the ground for her attachment to Jane Harrison. After Cambridge and a broken engagement, Mirrlees lived off and on in Paris, spending almost all of 1918 there, studying Russian at the *École des langues orientales* and reading "avant-garde poetry, including that of Apollinaire, Pierre Reverdy's journal *Nord–sud*, and Jean Cocteau's sequence *Le Cap de Bonne-Espérance*, which she claimed 'liberated' her into writing her own experimental poem" (Julia Briggs, *ODNB*). Apollinaire's *Calligrammes*, 1918, exerted some pressure on Mirrlees' *Paris* (Mirrlees [1919] 1920). The poem is dated Spring 1919, although it was not published until 1920. *Paris* begins "I want a holophrase", a phrase, that is, that will express and unify everything, but the poem is, like Apollinaire's calligrams, pictorial and aural as much as it is linguistic. It invites us to look, to listen, and try to bring together. For the first 300 odd lines, the poem follows a female protagonist (she is asked "*Vous descendez Madame*" by the underground attendant) on a journey in the Paris Métro under the Seine, to Concorde, then through the Tuileries Gardens, past the Louvre, along the Rue Saint-Honoré. She retraces in her mind and as a physical *flâneur*, the Louvre, the Ritz, the Palais-Royale, the Hôtel de Ville. Readers are dependent on the observations of this woman but are not bound by them, since what she sees in Paris is fixed but what it makes her think about is not, and it may not be quite what the reader thinks about. Therefore, the poem pulls in its readers while still allowing freedom for memory and imagination.

About three-quarters through the poem, the linear perspective shifts to a panoramic view from an "old Hôtel" in the Rue de Beaune, which was Mirrlees' address[2]. The walker has come home and that point of rest allows at last a kaleidoscopic view. The disparate elements of the poem can be brought together in a gaze, but more than one gaze is possible and so the poem can be repeatedly refocussed and reviewed. Mirrlees' description of the kaleidoscope in "Listening to the Past" explains how *Paris* can be made to work. The poem makes available a tray upon which the poet can place a collection of people and things that represent Paris in the past and the present and in the imagination. A single gaze will bring these things together in a meaningful way, but a turn of the platform will provide a different, but equally extraordinary pattern. This is enabled by the refusal of a conventional poetic structure and is made possible by the kind of visual fragmentation that Mirrlees effects. Mirrlees' *Paris* is a kind of poetic roundabout as she seems to warn us at the beginning with her picture of little boys on wooden horses[3].

What makes the poem courageously modern are the pieces that Mirrlees places on her viewing platform. Hope Mirrlees was 32 when *Paris* was finished; her life had been thus far protected by money and confined by a polite girls' school and a female university college. *Paris* allows the muck, the filth, as well as the beauty to produce visions that encompass the misery and waste of war in the present and the past. Paris, as all commentators on the poem note, was the site of the Peace Conference, which culminated in the Treaty of Versailles, signed on 28 June 1919. The Treaty was disapproved of by a number of observers, including the economist Maynard Keynes, friend of Virgina Woolf, who walked out of the Conference in protest at the treatment of Germany, although Mirrlees may well have reached the poem's unsympathetic view of President Woodrow Wilson on her own:

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2 Hotel de l'Elysée, 3 Rue de Beaune. The Rue de Beaune is on the Left Bank, but close to the river and thus is well placed for a view of both banks of the Seine and of the Île de la Cité.

3 The little boys on their horses may also be intended to invoke Mark Gertler's *Merry-go-round*, 1916.

> President Wilson grins like a dog and runs about the
> city, sniffing with innocent enjoyment the diluvial
> urine of Gargantua.[4]

Wilson typifies the failures that the poem tries to combat. Paris's present cannot be comprehended without awareness not only of its own past but of all the pasts that have gone to make that past. That awareness is achieved by acknowledging what is both squalid and glorious in the modern city by dredging below the surface, while also looking to the sky:

> But behind the ramparts of the Louvre
> Freud has dredged the river and, grinning horribly,
> waves his garbage in a glare of electricity.
> . . .
> Soon les Halles will open,
> The sky is saffron behind the two towers of Nôtre-
> Dame.

The poem begins in the morning and ends with a new dawn. Its last words are 'JE VOUS SALUE PARIS PLEIN DE GRACE'. It then concludes with the astronomical symbol for the Great Bear, which had become the chosen symbol of the relationship between Mirrlees and Harrison and so the conclusion is both public and private, personal and political (Parmar 2011, pp. 3–17).

The plenitude of *Paris* is inexhaustible—the dawn at the end of the poem is a beginning and the next Parisian day could be as full as the one before and all the elements on the kaleidoscope tray could be different, yet just as meaningful. However, *Paris* is (like *The Waste Land*) a rather *de haut en bas* poem—it is written for a reader unusually well-educated or at least well-supplied with notes. The reader must have had or must seek to acquire the advantages of privilege. In Mirrlees' case, that privilege was, in part, a consequence of her father's money and her mother's ancestry. In her later work, Mirrlees explicitly investigated that ancestry, her own formation. The Scottish parts are explored in *The Counterplot*, (Mirrlees 1924), Mirrlees' third and last novel. The novel is advertised as "a study of the literary temperament". Its central figure, Theresa Lane, tries to understand her place within her own family and in the wider world and decides that the best way to do this is through art itself. She writes a play, which is performed within the novel. The play, *The Key*, purports to explain Theresa's place and to offer a way of expressing her deepest needs and desires. It is in the mode of a Spanish Auto Sacramental, set within a medieval convent. The author figure plays Sister Pilar who reveals that her virtuous appearance is just that, an appearance; in truth, she is "Christ's adulteress" (*The Counterplot*, p. 312). Theresa's family are mystified by her play and so were contemporary critics: Sandeep Parmar quotes an anonymous contemporary reviewer of Mirrlees' last novel, the fairy story, *Lud-in-the-Mist* (Mirrlees 1926), whose praise of that work is tempered by condemnation of the "all-embracing pedantry" of *The Counterplot* (Parmar 2011, p. xxiv). Yet, the detail is intriguing. Theresa, in the course of the novel, falls in love with Munroe, an associate of her father. He is from Inverness-shire where "they've got a special accent . . . not Scotch, but a sort of genteel English" (p. 44). Munroe, in the end, does not choose Theresa but becomes a Roman Catholic priest, a life towards which he has been moving:

> "Hush, you wee thing, hush! You're havering, you know, just havering. *You*—Sister Pilar—you're not going to try and wreck a vocation." (p. 321)

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[4] When Rabelais' giant Gargantua first goes to Paris, the ignorant crowds of people so annoy him that he urinates over them, drowning thousands. The survivors laugh, saying that they have been washed as a joke, "par ris", and the city is renamed Paris (Gargantua, c. 1534, chp. xvii).

There is no marriage of the would-be artist and the soft-spoken Scotsman. It is not clear how much this is to be regretted, but like her character Munroe, Mirrlees herself converted to Catholicism in 1929 after Jane Harrison's death. It is of interest that Mirrlees should focus on the "literary temperament" and that it proved impossible to ignore the Scottish pressures on that temperament. *The Counterplot* has never established itself in any canon, modernist or feminist. It is remarkably difficult to get hold of a copy even to read. It had an odd devotee in Christopher Isherwood in his diary on 24 March 1955:

> Am reading—after about thirty years—Hope Mirrlees's novel *The Counterplot*, which I got here, after long advertisement. I find I know whole passages of it nearly by heart. It must have been one of the truly "formative" books in my life. And yet it represents so much that I used to imagine I hated and was fighting to the death—Cambridge cleverness and the whole *Waste Land* technique of describing moods by quotations from the classics—in fact, indulging in moods that were nothing else but the quotations themselves. It's a second-rate book, but I still feel some of the charm it used to have for me. And just because its "sophistication" is transparently naïve, I find it warmer and more sympathetic than that of the early Aldous Huxley. (Isherwood 1997, vol. I, p. 483)

Isherwood's comparison to *The Waste Land* recognizes *The Counterplot* as a modernist text despite its mannered prose. Here, too, is Guy Cust, a friend of Theresa's brother Arnold, who after the war gives up his intention to be an academic and instead settles in London where he tries to express in poetry what he calls:

> "the modern mysticism"—that sense, made possible by wireless and cables, of all the different doings of the world happening *simultaneously*: London, music-halls, Broad Street, Proust writing, people picking oranges in California, mysterious processes of growth or decay taking place in the million trees of the myriad forests of the world, a Javanese wife creeping in and stabbing her Dutch rival. One gets the sense a little when at the end of *The Garden of Cyrus* Sir Thomas Browne says: "The huntsmen are up in America and they are already past their first sleep in Persia." Its finest expression, he said, was to be found in the *Daily Mirror*. (p. 32)

Cust's poetic quest seems fulfilled in the fragmented plenitude of *Paris*.

Sandeep Parmar includes in her excellent edition of Mirrlees' poems, "My Mother's Pedigree" the first section of "what appears to be draft in progress" from Mirrlees' notebooks. Her interest in her ancestry is confirmed by her compiling "a history of her maternal ancestors, the Moncrieff family in the 1950s" (Parmar 2011, p. 134). The poem represents her mother's pedigree as including blood and beauty, the violent struggles for power that oppresses women from "the little princess Matilda" to Mary Stuart, whose murdered "lover", Rizzio, rubs shoulders in the poem with "Earl Beardie" who played cards with the devil and the "fierce Ogilvies", the family that fought on both sides in the wars of independence. The poem looks at the muddles of the past and concludes:

> And yet all of it by the tectonics of
> A thousand genes builds—me who am at
> Least articulate. (p. 64)

That notion of tectonic plates that construct the poet also harks back to the structures of *Paris*—a carefully built poem, kaleidoscopic in its formation of pattern out of disparate elements, but which is also describable as formed out of layers of tectonic plates of past and present.

In *Angry Rain*, a memoir of his days among the poets, Maurice Kenny writes: "Helen Adam's tiny apartment on East Eighty-Second Street, which she shared with her sister Patricia, had . . . a huge and diverse collection [of books] assembled in such unusual places . . . in the oven, as legs for the dining table, and so on" (Kenny 2018, pp. 134–35). That sense of much variety compressed into a small space, in the center of a great world, also typifies the dark supernatural ballads that form Adam's poetic

corpus. It is a corpus that she began building very early, composing poetry apparently from the age of two and being published by adoring elders before she was 14. Adam and her younger sister Pat attended Seymour Lodge Girls School in Dundee. The school, which moved its site during the war from Dundee to Crieff, no longer exists, but it is possible to get some sense of it from bits and pieces in the local newspapers of the time. The sympathetic biography of Helen Douglas Adam on the Scottish Poetry Library website (Scottish Poetry Library Website) remarks that in later life Helen Adam rejected these early works, that she was embarrassed by the childlike charm of *The Elfin Pedlar and Tales Told by the Pixie Poole* (Adam 1923). Yet they are connected to her later "supernatural ballads which tell of fatal romances, darkly sadistic sexual affairs, jealous lovers, and vengeful demons" ("Helen Adam's Sweet Company", Prevallet). If you love the mysteriousness of the occult yet wish to obliterate your sugary childhood encounters with it, then you might well turn to the dark side.

I imagine Helen Adam was glad to get away from her early Scottish places. She attended Edinburgh University, after which she and Pat moved to London and made some kind of living from journalism but when, after their father's death, they went with their mother to a family wedding in the United States and were trapped there by the war, there is no evidence to suggest that the trap was for them other than a release. The women settled initially in New York and in 1949, moved to San Francisco where Helen Adam became involved with the Beat poets and their circle, particularly with Robert Duncan and his partner the artist/collagist Jess Collins, known always as Jess. Helen, assisted by her sister, Pat, published a good deal, although they were always struggling to make ends meet. Another Scottish exile, Muriel Spark, found in her experience as a girl of slender means the material on which she founded her literary fortunes. Adam, although remarkable, did not have Spark's genius, nor her ruthlessness. Indeed, it is in part Adam's vulnerability, the trailing odor of Scottish middle-class respectability, that simultaneously hinders Adam's advance, and characterizes her specialness.

> Prepare to be astonished. How on earth, you wonder, can a Scot, woman poet and collagist possessed of an overcomingly remarkable imagination, combined with an intense involvement in Scottish history, Dante, the Victorian Romance novel and art, and in really weird animals in various beings and doings, fit so perfectly, no matter how oddly, into the San Francisco Renaissance? Prepare to meet Helen Adam. (Caws 2018)

There is an evident connection between Adam's collagism in *Ghosts and Grinning Shadows* (Adam 1979) and the kaleidoscopic method of Mirrlees. Adam, like Mirrlees, mixes dirt and darkness with mysterious light. Mirrlees' last novel, her fairy fantasy, *Lud-in-the-Mist*, exploits the mixture of horror and gentility that characterizes some of Adam's work, but Mirrlees did not also use her physical self and appearance, did not perform in Adam's manner. Adam was not unaware of her oddness; she may indeed have felt that her best advertisement was the uncomfortable combination of the dark horrors of her verses and the afternoon-tea appearance of their creator, reader, and chanter.

Helen Adam's talk with the Beat poet, Anne Waldman, is available on YouTube. Adam is wearing a flowery dress and a turban with beaded decoration at the front. She speaks with friendly and captivating charm:

> Almost all my ballads have destructive women in them. I really don't know particularly why. I guess something in my remote childhood must have made me feel that women were something uh savage and strange and completely without remorse. But, of course, I was more or less brought up on Scotch ballads and there's no such thing in the Scottish ballads as forgiveness of sins—it's all an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, you know. They're all absolutely ruthless and the fairies in them are powerful creatures, not pretty little, dainty little English fairies at all. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EwYjODoZG7I)

Had Adam read Hope Mirrlees' *Lud-in-the-Mist*, she might have come to see English fairies as only deceptively pretty, but that is another story. Adam's dark poems tend to be repetitive. Partly this is a question of ballad technique, but it is also her inflexible design on the listeners' nerves. She is at

her most dynamically original when she uproots the Scottish ballads and locates them firmly in her adopted country. Thus, the "Cheerless Junkie's Song" works better than the more Scottish ballads in the *Selected Poems and Ballads*, the volume that has had most circulation outside the United States. The internet has, however, made Helen Adam available to all and Adam can be heard celebrating the Cheerless Junkie on YouTube. Her triumphant punning conclusion "Brother he died high" works partly as the defiance of an ageing Scottish lady who refuses to be subdued by polite protocols. The best site for Helen Adam material is PennSound, the University of Pennsylvania's website for contemporary writing. It offers the whole performance of *San Francisco's Burning* (Adam 1977), a lyric play that Adam wrote with her sister Pat. The online version is performed by the Audio-Experimental Theatre on WBAI, 17 July 1977, produced by Charles Ruas. In this version, Helen Adam herself reads Miss Mackie Rhodus and Anubis. It is perhaps enough to simply give this information to demonstrate that Adam's work catches its listeners between hysterical laughter and terror. X. J. Kennedy comments on Adam's *Selected Poems* that her ballads and songs "will stay green when most poetry now in fashion is nothing but dried-up leaves" (Adam 1974, blurb).

It is now almost a cliché to point out that Muriel Spark, world famous as a novelist, always thought of herself as a poet. The inscription on her tombstone reads 'MURIEL SPARK/POETA/1918-2006. Like Helen Adam, Muriel Spark was a poetic prodigy. *James Gillespie's School* gave Spark the opportunity to shine as a poetess as well as giving her Miss Jean Brodie in the person of Miss Christina Kay, the teacher who took her to hear John Masefield reading, giving Spark a poet who continued to be a poetic hero for her, if not strictly a modern one. Throughout Spark's famously uncomfortable time with the Poetry Society, as feisty editor of *The Poetry Review*, 1947–1948, where in spite of the antagonistic attitude of a number of the Society's stalwarts, which resulted in Spark's dismissal[5], she wrote sharp editorials, beginning with "Cannot we cease railing against the moderns?", and managed to introduce payment for the contributors, she continued to think of herself as a poet trying to make enough money to support her vocation. In 1951, she wrote a poem, which uses the traditional form of the ballad to construct a startlingly modern and startlingly difficult personal manifesto. Spark told her then lover, Howard Sergeant, that "The Ballad of the Fanfarlo" was her "central statement in verse so far" (Stannard 2004, p. 91). Even to think of a poem in these terms is to conceive of oneself as seriously committed to the vocation of the poet. The poem features a cast of characters drawn not from Baudelaire's poetry, but from his short story, "La Fanfarlo", from which the poem's epigraph and some of its details are also taken. Samuel Cramer, the child of a pale German and a brown Chilean woman, seeks his ideal self, Manuela de Verde, has encounters with the dancing girl, la Fanfarlo, with a steel chair, which calls him No Man, with a red light, other objects, and with the courteous figure of Death. The compelling effects do not quite compensate for the reader's bewilderment.

The Ballad is a paradox. It is faithful to the simplicity of utterance that characterizes the ballad; but it is also confusingly obscure. Traditional ballads are not without difficulty for the listener, but their difficulty is usually a consequence of mystery, of not quite knowing the details of the story. In Spark's poem, it is not simply a question of not knowing the whole story as of not knowing whether there is a whole story to know. It comes as a relief when Cramer is addressed by Death, for Death is a much more familiar and comfortable character than a steel chair. The reader's puzzlement is a consequence of Spark writing for herself, producing a manifesto that will underpin her subsequent work, rather than an artefact that has its own existence.

If we situate the *Ballad* beside the visual art of the time, of the Dadaists and the Surrealists, we might be more attuned to encounters between the human and inhuman objects, to the transformation of the human into the inhuman and vice versa, yet somehow Spark's sense of humor abandons her in *The Ballad of the Fanfarlo*. It comes back when Samuel Cramer and the Fanfarlo turn up again in "The Seraph of the Zambesi", which won the *Observer* short story competition and confirmed that

[5] Spark insisted upon being dismissed so that she was financially compensated.

Spark's talent was better adapted to fiction than poetry. Nevertheless, she remained a poet and a challenging one to the end and the publication of *All the Poems* (Spark 2004), edited by Barbara Epler in 2004 and reissued by Michael Schmidt as *Complete Poems* in 2015, confirm the claim that she made for herself: "Although most of my life has been devoted to fiction, I have always thought of myself as a poet. I do not write 'poetic' prose, but feel that my outlook on life and my perceptions of events are those of a poet" ("Foreword to 2004 edition" in Spark 2015, p. xiii). Schmidt is probably right to maintain Epler's non-chronological arrangement of the poems, since they do not seem to show any development through time. The earliest poem in the collection is "The Fall", which Spark dates 1943, when she was 25 and still in Africa. The poem speaks of extinct or nearly extinct beasts and asks how these seemingly innocent creatures have sinned to fail "the finals in history" (p. 34). "Report on an Interrogation" (p. 86) is dated 2006 and is still preoccupied with notions of guilt and innocence and the impossibility of determining the difference between them. By then Spark was 84, yet the first poem is as "modern" as the second and the questions it asks as unanswerable, and unanswered in spite of Spark's long literary life and her celebrated conversion to Catholicism. There is an appropriateness in placing "Report on an Interrogation", with its insecurities about being sure of anything in the human sphere, immediately after "Sisera" (p. 85) written 53 years earlier where the poet takes issue against the triumphalism of Deborah, who is so sure that God is on her side: "I am for Sisera". In "Report on an Interrogation", Spark retains her ability to leave her readers with the uncomfortable feeling that most of their daily assumptions are just that—assumptions, unproven.

On the face of it, Helen Adam and Veronica Forrest-Thomson seem more than continents apart. The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poet, Charles Bernstein, offers a link between them. It is a tribute to Bernstein's flexibility that he is able to applaud both Adam's apparently archaic methods and the sophisticated critical aesthetic of Forrest-Thomson. He generously praises Kristin Prevallet's *A Helen Adam Reader*: "Adam is the most exuberantly anachronistic of second wave modernist poets. Her magical, macabre, magnificently chilling ballads open a secret door into the Dark with rimes both gruesome and sublime" (Prevallet 2007. Advance praise). Bernstein's approval of Forrest-Thomson is more predictable, given her 1971 collection, *Language-Games,* but he was early in his admiration of both her poetry and the critical work, *Poetic Artifice*, 1978, which although published after Forrest-Thomson's death, implicitly offers a defense of her own poetic aims. Bernstein's "Artifice of Absorption: An Essay" spends a good deal of its argument in debate, agreement, and modification of Forrest-Thomson's positions in *Poetic Artifice*: "Veronica Forrest-Thomson . . . notes that artifice in a poem is primarily marked by the quality of the poem's language that makes it both continuous and discontinuous with the world of experience". Both Bernstein and Forrest-Thomson insist that "content never equals meaning" and deprecate attempts to reject or explain away "difficulty" in poetry (Bernstein 1987).

The Scottish poet, Edwin Morgan, provides another link between the two. Edwin Morgan was the first to bring Helen Adam back across the Atlantic and he finds that her achievement is enabled at once by her Scottishness and by her distance from Scotland:

> Helen Adam is possibly unique in the sense that she would never have made anything of her poetry, even though she wrote a lot of it, if she remained in her native place. She was a latent poet who needed the jolt of an entirely different environment to bring to the surface what was subterrraneanly there. Later in life she took out American citizenship, and in American bibliographies she is called an American poet. But that won't do. She was unmistakably a Scottish poet who learned a new boldness and vivacity in California, but who never lost touch with the Scottish oral tradition she grew up with. . . . we can say that she moved from Scotland to the world, and made something of it. (Morgan 1999)

It was Edwin Morgan, too, who was the first to recognize Veronica Forrest-Thomson as a Scottish poet. Like Adam and Spark, Veronica Forrest-Thomson tried her hand at poetry from an early age. As Veronica Thomson, she published a few poems in her school magazine, *The Bridesian*, between the ages of 11 and 14, and "Miserere Nobis", a little hopeful prose piece about love between a Protestant

boy and a Roman Catholic girl during the religious persecutions of 1587, the year Mary Stuart was executed (Thomson, Veronica 1960–1961, pp. 49–52)[6]. However, it was a harder-edged girl who wrote to Edwin Morgan in February 1965 when she was 17 and preparing to go to Liverpool University. She tells Morgan that she has heard his Third Program talk on Concrete Poetry. She says she believes it to be the first healthy development in poetry since the war:

> Though didn't Apollinaire try something similar? It was a pleasant surprise to hear some intelligent poetry which showed responsibility towards the exploration of language instead of the usual egotistical watered down angst-dichten which seems to monopolise the Third Programme poetry readings. (MS Morgan DT/7. 16/2/65)[7]

It is wonderful to hear this intellectually confident young voice of Veronica Forrest, the name she adopted before Forrest-Thomson as her writing name. It may seem illogical to want to know more about Veronica Forrest-Thomson's life when she dismissed the practice, typified for her by the treatment of Sylvia Plath, of reading biography out of or into poetry, as the bad Naturalisation of the artifice of poetry (Forrest-Thomson 2016, p. 225).

Jonathan Culler, her husband from 1971–1974, explains the objections to biographical criticism:

> The work is a product not of a biographically defined individual about whom information could be accumulated, but of writing itself. To write a poem the author had to take on the character of poet, and it is that semiotic function of poet or writer rather than the biographical function of author which is relevant to discussion of the text. (Culler 1981, p. 38)

However, the desire of the writer to take on the "character of poet" is itself an emotion experienced by the biographical subject. Even those whose interest is focused on intertextuality, or the Artifice of the individual poem, may well wish to know something about the life of the writer. Forrest-Thomson has been insufficiently located in her places and times by her critics. No one seems to be interested in where she grew up, in where she went to school. The most recent work on Forrest-Thomson by Gareth Farmer does not mention Edwin Morgan. Forrest-Thomson's recent admirers have all very much been that—admirers. It may be that their admiration makes them tentative about asking questions about her life. *Nevertheless*, to adopt one of Muriel Spark's favorite qualifiers, although it is language, Poetic Artifice, that makes good poetry, we might still be allowed to feel that it is the poet that finds the language and that it is life experience that at least in part creates the poet. Veronica Thomson's life experience certainly included Scotland.

Between February 1965 and May 1973, Forrest-Thomson kept in touch with Edwin Morgan by letter and they met in Glasgow on a number of occasions. Until February 1970, she signed off as Veronica Forrest, then as Veronica Forrest-Thomson, then Veronica. Only one of her letters, in August 1971, uses the salutation Edwin and she reverts to Mr. Morgan in her last letter, but presumably because she was asking for his help with the publication of her collection On the Periphery. In his attentive and informative replies, Edwin Morgan addresses her at first as Miss Forrest, then by 1968, as Veronica. They discussed her own work, which Morgan read. They discussed, or at least mentioned in passing, Concrete Poetry and Ian Hamilton-Finlay, Cavan McCarthy, Glynn Purslove, various little magazines, Fenellosa, Empson, Richards, Hugh MacDairmid, Wittgenstein, J. H Prynne, Philip Hobsbaum, Gabriel Harvey, Spenser, Barthes, *TelQuel*, Graham Hough, L. C. Knights, Morris Cox, Ashberry, Dadism, Surrealism, Structuralism. They discussed the possibility of Forrest-Thomson doing graduate research in Glasgow, her decision to work on literature and science in Cambridge after she got a first at Liverpool.

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[6] I am grateful to Alister Minnis, Depute Head of Lomond School which incorporates the old St Bride's, for information about the school and access to *The Bridesian*.

[7] I am grateful to Jonathan Culler for his kind permission to quote this passage and the poem "What are we". I thank the Estate of Edwin Morgan for allowing me to read Veronica Forrest-Thomson letters.

The joys and lively irritations of the early letters give way to the depression of struggles for work and publication, but even that depression is presented without self-pity: "I've just finished a book on poetic theory too which I can't find a publisher for; everything is cracking up" is immediately followed by "However I should be glad of any advice you could give me" (MS Morgan DT/7)[8]. Forrest-Thomson may have been on the periphery, but she never presents herself as being on the edge.

Edwin Morgan was deeply affected by Forrest-Thomson's premature death. He wrote a sequence of 10 *Unfinished Poems* for her, published in *The New Divan*, 1977. His later appraisal of Forrest-Thomson is both personal and professional:

> She was probably better known in England than in Scotland, but she can be seen as belonging—in her own strange and oblique way—to the revival of poetry that has gone on in Glasgow during the last decade or so. She was a spiky, difficult character of great intelligence and wit, engaging, vulnerable and lonely. I liked and admired her very much. She wrote both poetry and criticism, and the influences on her work were variable and formidable: the French structuralists, Wittgenstein, John Ashbery, J. H. Prynne . . . but shot through with a raw, moving, almost ballad strain from time to time, and especially in her love poetry. (Morgan 1990, p. 373)

Morgan's poems for her are an impressive homage, not least in their title *Unfinished Poems*, a title that refers to the artifice rather than the status of the poems. Their last lines all refuse the completion of a full stop, as though Morgan were refusing the event that had so cruelly brought Forrest-Thomson's life to a stop. The poems cannot reach a formal close because Forrest-Thomson, by reaching her end prematurely, has left herself and her work tragically unfinished. It is all the more important, therefore, not to neglect any of the elements that made Veronica Forrest-Thomson the writer that she was to the last becoming. The "almost ballad-like strain" of Forrest-Thomson's poetry may seem less evident than in Adam or Spark but, and this is possibly what Morgan discerns, nursery rhymes, children's game verses, incantations from fairy story and legend hover in and above the poems from early to late. In "Through the Looking-glass", 1967:

> Mirror, mirror on the wall
> show me in succession all
> my faces
> . . .
> But if, in some unlucky glance,
> I should glimpse naked circumstance
> in all its nowhere-going-to
> may you crack before I do. (Forrest-Thomson 2008, p. 29)

What concerns Forrest-Thomson here is that we have used the language of these familiar verses since childhood without ever enquiring about the words. The words themselves have enchanted us, until the poet makes us *think* about them as well as *use* them. That 'crack' invokes a fragile life as well as the physicality of the mirror; and that fragile life is still being invoked at its end, albeit an end that should have been a beginning. In *I have a little nut-tree*, c.1974, the language of childhood is trying to cope with the miseries of maturity:

> I have a little nut-tree
> Nothing will it bear
> But a silver anguish
> And a golden tear. (Forrest-Thomson 2008, p. 148)

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[8] MS Morgan. DT/7. University of Glasgow Library, Special Collections. Morgan's letters have been published (Morgan 2015). Forrest-Thomson's remain in manuscript.

My list of topics from the letters of Forrest-Thomson and Edwin Morgan is not exhaustive but it is already kaleidoscopic and Forrest-Thomson herself introduces the notion of the kaleidoscope in "Provence" from her earliest published collection *Identi-kit*, 1967:

> Mosaics of flesh
> and kaleidoscope streets
> seem brilliant in perpetual noon
> till dark drains warm bronze
> grey as the faces
> on sarcophagi.
> . . .
> Light dissolves future
> like outlines of forms
> and shifts focus to
> a camp of survivors who linger
> sipping the south
> in a graveyard café. (Forrest-Thomson 2008, p. 24)

This four-verse poem shares some of the methods of Mirrlees' *Paris* without the visual complications of that poem. The poem may be read according to the placement of the reader in the present or the past, in light or shade, looking at the beautiful or the disintegrating, or encompassing all of these things and times at once. Even some of the radically subject-matter-refusing poems of *Language-Games* connect oddly with *Paris*. "Antiquities" is focused at first on the city of Paris and initially proceeds in a similar way to Mirrlees' poem, depending as it does on the vision of one pair of eyes bringing the poem's pieces together. This singular mode of perception makes the work of these writers teeter on the autobiographical and confessional in spite of Forrest-Thomson's warning note that the underlying theme of the poems in the collection is: "the impossibility of expressing some non-linguistic reality, or even of experiencing such a reality". "Antiquities" is a poem that could not have been written by someone who had not been to Paris—biographical fact is a necessary precondition of the poem.

Her later poetry is increasingly packed with quotation and allusion and pun, which betrays the personal even as it seems to be concealing it. "Address to the Reader from Pevensey Sluice" pulls in a real warning board at the sluice:

> DANGER SUBMERGED STRUCTURES
> and all at once Transformational Grammar
> "peoples" the "emotional landscape"
> with refutation. (Forrest-Thomson 2008, p. 116)

The board has that effect especially if you have just become divorced from a specialist in structuralist poetics[9]. Forrest-Thomson's allusiveness has some of the characteristics that Isherwood stigmatized as Cambridge and Modernist cliché in Mirrlees' *The Counterplot*. However, Forrest-Thomson is so daring in her use of quotation to signal emotional states that her readers are willingly ravaged: "So here we go for another trip and hold on to your seat-belt, Persephone" ("The Garden of Proserpine", in Forrest-Thomson 2008, p. 139). "Cordelia: or 'a poem should not mean but be'" is so packed with allusion and quotation that it would take as many notes as *Paris* requires to exhaust its possibilities and then the kaleidoscope platform might turn to produce a different view of the same elements.

> Spring surprised us, running through the market square

[9] An excellent treatment of this poem and Forrest-Thomson generally is in Ian Gregson, *Contemporary Poetry and Postmodernism* (Gregson 1996, pp. 192–204).

And we stopped in Prynne's room in a shower of pain
And went on in sunlight into the University Library
And ate yogurt and talked for an hour.
You, You, grab the reins.
Drink as much as you can and love as much as you can
And work as much as you can
For you can't do anything when you are dead. (Forrest-Thomson 2008, p. 157)

"Lemon and Rosemary", the last poem in *Collected Poems*, refuses the kaleidoscope, refuses to make patterns out of the mess of a disorganized life: "Though my deserted frying pans lie around me/ I do not want to make it cohere" (Forrest-Thomson 2008, p. 162) but the poem then rejects its own desires and commands, taking, through its simultaneously violent and nostalgic artifice, a shape and meaning that is not reducible to any conclusive comments about Forrest-Thomson's art but which, nevertheless, achieves its memorialization. "Is this a chisel that I see before me. If so I want to hack my name on the bedroom door." Forrest-Thompson does not close the personal gaps through which a self seeps, a self that at what turns about to be its near end still looks uneasily to possible futures and selves. "Nobody. I, myself" the poem begins, providing an answer to a question that it has not asked, and it ends with a kind of hope that her subsequent real death does not cancel: "On the best battle fields/No dead bodies"[10].

Here is the poet, only 13 years old writing as Veronica Thomson in her school magazine:

What are we and what do we here?
And are we what we think we are?
Are you, you, and am I me?
The sky the sky, the sea, the sea?
And are those birds, flying in the air?
And is everything, really there?

The questions of this poem are in their own way as sophisticated, as complex as any questions that are ever asked. They may be confined and limited by attention to conventions with which the teaching at St Bride's would have made Veronica Thomson familiar. Yet, already the 13-year-old poet is refusing any punctuation that might separate the two halves of the first line and in the fourth the "the sky" from "the sky". In this way, the poet makes "the sky the sky" express a kind of wonder and possibility as well as asking existential questions about it. Veronica Forrest-Thomson struggles to escape the limiting conventions taught in her Scottish boarding school but without them she could not have formulated the problematic anti-questions and open answers of her late intellectually inflected international verse.

So, where are we with these four women? How helpful has it been to think of their Scottish formations and connections? Helen Adam and Muriel Spark are most fruitfully explored in terms of the sometimes-warring tugs of their Scottish and world experiences. The balladeer with the perjink accent, chanting about the glorious darkness of the junkie, and the internationalist whose Morningside accent clings with lingering tenacity to the darkness with which it flirts: As Spark puts it in her *Ballad of the Fanfarlo*, "For there's no scope for a talented type/In the loss of memory." The first and last of these poets have trickier elements in their partly Scottish formation. Mirrlees was physically even more restless than Spark but without Spark's ability to appropriate all the places she inhabited. Yet, like Spark, she refused a loss of memory, writing late in her life about her mother's pedigree and in "Listening to the Past" concluding with that kaleidoscopic image of harmony achieved by the collation of disparate elements. Veronica Forrest-Thomson might have been happier had she clung to the Scottish ties she explored with Edwin Morgan, but then neither the thrills nor the miseries gifted to her

[10] These last two lines are taken by Peter Porter, who admired Forrest-Thomson's work, for the title of one of his poems (Porter 2015).

and imposed upon her in Cambridge, Leicester, Liverpool, the United States, and Birmingham would have been available for her. Scotland gave Forrest-Thomson the nursery rhyme, the ballad: It was all that other experience that made her poems kaleidoscopic. She was, as it were, poised, as were all four poets that I have discussed, between Scotland and Modernism, except that the kaleidoscope, that "toy" that lends itself so easily to Modernist aesthetics, was itself, as I have pointed out, a Scottish invention.

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Article

"It's Just a Matter of Form": Edna St. Vincent Millay's Experiments with Masculinity

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Abstract: Edna St. Vincent Millay occupies an uncomfortable position in relation to modernism. In the majority of criticism, her work is considered the antithesis to modernist experimentation: as representative of the 'rearguard' that rejected vers libre in favour of fixed poetic forms. Indeed, most critics concur that whilst Millay's subject matter may have been modern and daring—voicing women's sexual independence, for instance—her form was decidedly traditional. Millay also troubles notions of modernist impersonality by writing seemingly autobiographical lyrics that showcase feminine emotions. In this paper, I aim to challenge this view of Millay by focussing on the two avant-garde works that mark the outset and the zenith of her career: *Aria da Capo* (1921) and *Conversation at Midnight* (1937). These works are both formally innovative, blurring the boundaries between poetry and drama, causing Edmund Wilson to complain that Millay had "gone to pieces". Moreover, both works engage in performances of masculinity, with women all but absent. *Aria da Capo*, first performed by the Provincetown Players in 1919, dramatizes the conflict between two shepherds as an allegory for the First World War. *Conversation* ventriloquises an all-male dinner party, ranging through the political issues of the Depression era and foreshadowing the war to come. I use both works to argue that Millay has a more interesting relationship to masculinity and modernism than has been hitherto captured by critics. Millay voices men in innovative ways, radically challenging constructions of both gender and poetic form in the process.

Keywords: Edna St. Vincent Millay; modernism; masculinity; lyric; drama; verse drama; gender; genre

1. Introduction: The Poet as Woman?

Edna St. Vincent Millay is insistently associated with femininity. In a 1937 review John Crow Ransom described her as paradigmatic of "the Poet as Woman" (Ransom 1937), an emphasis that endures in the scholarship on Millay produced during the last decades of the twentieth century. In a pioneering article that catalysed the revival of interest in Millay's work in the 1980s, Patricia A. Klemans credited Millay with boldly articulating female experience: "Her poetry presents this new viewpoint to literature—the liberated woman's view" (Klemans 1979, p. 8). More recently, critics observe Millay's indebtedness to a longer tradition of women's writing. Elissa Zellinger, for example, argues that Millay drew on the nineteenth-century tradition of the poetess, finding inspiration in the likes of Felicia Hemans and Frances Sargent Osgood, poets who projected idealised femininity and appeared to provide their readers with intimate access to the inner selves (Zellinger 2012). Millay's connection to feminine poetic traditions led to her rejection by proponents of high-brow literary modernism. In contrast to T. S. Eliot's demand to separate "the man who suffers and the mind which creates" (Eliot 1999, p. 2398), Millay's poetry seems to play on the exposure of the poet's inner self. According to Suzanne Clark, Millay's brand of "sentimental modernism" aims to establish emotional intimacy with readers and public audiences. The cultivation of a relatable persona played a crucial role in forging

this connection, but also damagingly linked Millay's work to popular culture and poetic traditions that were disparaged as out-dated and irredeemably feminine in an era dominated by "dry and hard" masculinised modernism (Hulme 1994, p. 66).

Intensifying these issues, Millay's use of traditional forms sets her apart from her modernist peers who were experimenting with free verse. Her aptitude for fixed forms—especially the sonnet—combined with her recurrent themes of love and death led her to be compared to her "sister bards, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Christina Rossetti and Alice Meynell" (, p. 97). Relishing rather than railing against the "corset of form" (Gilbert and Gubar 1994, p. 113), Millay took a decidedly different path to female modernists such as H.D., Marianne Moore and Mina Loy. This combination of gender and genre means that Millay occupies an uncomfortable position in relation to modernism, which is still regarded as the dominant poetic mode of the early twentieth century (despite being only one among a plethora of poetic trends in that era). In the majority of criticism, Millay's work is considered the antithesis to modernist experimentation. Indeed, most critics concur that whilst Millay's subject matter may have been modern and daring—voicing women's sexual independence for instance—her form was paradoxically traditional.

But Millay's champions have urged that rather than judging her on modernism's terms, we re-interrogate modernism in light of her work. If Millay represents the suppressed other of modernism, what does this suggest about modernism's limitations? How might reading Millay's work on its own terms open up her poetry to different evaluations and perspectives? Celeste M. Schenck, for example, proposes that we question our assumptions regarding form, particularly the equation between "radical form and radical politics" (Schenck 1989, p. 231); an equation that continues to endure in recent scholarship on twentieth-century women's poetry.[1] She suggests that conventional forms do not always represent conservative politics, constriction and restraint, and can be used be ironically by women poets to knowingly critique such ideas. Gilbert and Gubar concur that Millay's use of the sonnet form is often tongue-in-cheek: "a kind of archaic costume in which the rebellious poet sometimes seriously, sometimes parodically attired herself to call attention to the antique garb of femininity" (Gilbert and Gubar 1994, p. 113). They view Millay's ironic use of form in line with her hyper-feminine self-fashioning or "female-female impersonation."

The present article seeks to build on this work, but also to add another angle to these debates regarding gender and genre—one that more fully reflects Millay's published output in its complexity. I want to trouble the notion that Millay's work is consistently concerned with femininity and is formally un-experimental, by showing how she engages in interrogating masculinity in works that are also stylistically innovative. In the process, Millay defies gender and genre boundaries in ways that trouble our received critical perception of her oeuvre, with wider implications for twentieth-century poetics. For, as Susan Rosenbaum has recently argued: "The opposition between experimental and conventional forms does not adequately account for the history of twentieth-century women's experimental poetry" (Rosenbaum 2016, p. 332). Whilst male modernists are largely associated with free verse, Rosenbaum points out that "experimental women poets have often made use of conventional forms such as lyric and epic", in the process creating "generic hybrids" such as "poetic novels, verse novels, prose poems, poetic theatre" (p. 332). Such experiments, moreover, often provide "commentary on patriarchal traditions and history" (p. 332). All of these statements are certainly true of Millay, although she is not mentioned in Rosenbaum's essay.[2]

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[1] For example, Cristanne Miller's "(Women Writing) The Modernist Line" discusses how H.D., Marianne Moore and Mina Loy's "deployment of a new poetic line was compatible with larger (often feminist) goals of their poetics" (Miller 2016, paragraph 4).

[2] Millay is mentioned in Melissa Girard's excellent essay from the same volume "Forgiving the Sonnet: Modernist Women's Love Poetry and the Problem of Sentimentality" (Girard 2016) but this once again has the effect of foregrounding her shorter, fixed-form poems over her longer, generically hybrid works.

In this article, I will challenge the received view of Millay as female-focussed, feminine and formally unexperimental by focussing on the two avant-garde works that mark the outset and the zenith of her career: *Aria da Capo* (Millay 1921) and *Conversation at Midnight* (Millay 1937). These works are both formally inventive, blurring the boundaries between poetry and drama, causing Edmund Wilson to complain (in the case of the latter) that Millay had "gone to pieces" (Wilson 1993, p. 81). Moreover, both works engage in performances of masculinity, with women all but absent from the cast. *Aria da Capo*, first performed by the Provincetown Players in 1919, dramatizes the conflict between two shepherds as an allegory for the First World War. *Conversation* ventriloquises an all-male dinner party, ranging through the political issues of the Depression era and foreshadowing the war to come. I use both works to argue that Millay has a more complicated relationship to masculinity and modernism than has been hitherto captured by critics. Millay voices men in innovative ways, radically challenging constructions of both gender and poetic form in the process.

2. A Man Speaks: Millay's Early Experiments in Masculinity

Although raised in a family of women, Millay's masculine identity was subtly embedded in her very name—St. Vincent—in honour of the hospital where her uncle Charlie was nursed from a life-threatening fever in 1892, the year of her birth (Milford 2001, p. 17). Millay's grandmother noted of the new baby that "Nell [the nickname of Millay's mother, Cora] would have called it Vincent if it had been a boy" (quoted in Milford 2001, p. 18). As matters turned out, Millay was the closest thing her family had to a male heir. Her father abandoned the family at a young age, and, the eldest of three daughters, Millay grew up to be her mother's favourite, signing her letters "your devoted son" (quoted in Milford 2001, p. 255). Despite her reputation for hyper-femininity, Millay did not restrict her experiments with masculine identities to her private correspondence. She played on the ambiguity of her name from the earliest stages of her career. "E. St. Vincent Millay" shot to fame with the publication of "Renascence" in *The Lyric Year* in 1912. Many assumed that this celebrated debut was by a male author. Impressed, the poet Arthur Ficke engaged in a correspondence with the young poet. On hearing of her true identity, he replied that "No sweet young thing of twenty ever ended a poem precisely where this one ends: it takes a brawny male of forty-five to do that" (quoted in Milford 2001, p. 79). Millay replied flirtatiously: "I simply will not be a 'brawny male'. Not that I have an aversion to brawny males: au contraire, au contraire. But I cling to my femininity!" ([5 December 1912] Millay 1952, p. 20).

Despite her protests, Klemans observes that "the most frequent comments made about Renascence was that it was unbelievable that it was written by a young woman" (Klemans 1979, p. 10). It was not just Millay's name that contributed to this impression, but the poem's sense of literary inheritance. Clark highlights how Millay draws on masculine American transcendentalism: "Readers of Millay in 1912 could still hear masculine resonance to the Emersonian or Whitmanian 'I' constructs by certain key phrases and moments of 'Renascence.' The daughter puts on the father's garb, their vocabulary, their form" (Clark 1991, p. 87). As her career developed, Millay's "cross-dressing" was not limited to poetic emulation. Earning a place at Vassar as a direct result of her celebrated debut, she relished playing male roles in college plays, using these costumes to intensify the romantic attention she received from fellow students. A 1915 letter to her family following her role as the poet Marchbanks in George Bernard Shaw's *Candida* is imbued with a sense of cross-gendered identification: "I felt perfectly at home in the clothes. People told me I reminded them of their brothers the way I walked around and slung my legs over the arms of chairs, etc. [. . .] Somebody thought I was really a boy" (quoted in Epstein 2001, p. 92). Millay continued to enjoy donning masculine garb throughout her career (see Parker 2016). In this sense, Millay can be read alongside other twentieth-century writers who expressed a sense of sexual inversion through their diverse experiments in self-fashioning and aesthetic innovations, such as Radclyffe Hall, Gluck, and Bryher (see Doan 2001 and Funke 2018).

This sense of sexual inversion is further inflected by Millay's use of a cross-gendered poetic voice, a technique also employed in other modernist works by women which exhibit cross-gendered

ventriloquism.[3] Millay developed this voice through her early reading practices. In their focus on Millay's femininity and female speakers, critics such as Zellinger neglect to mention that Millay's avowed poetic influences were male. In a conversation with Walter Adophe Roberts (editor of *Ainslee's* magazine) Millay explained her belief that "it was impossible for a poet not to be influenced by the work of those he venerated as artistic ancestors—that it was in fact desirable, for it assured a continuity and development of the general stream of poetry" (quoted in Milford 2001, p. 174). Asked about her own influences, she acknowledged A. E. Housman and Alfred, Lord Tennyson as her primary inspirations. Millay had been familiar with these poets from an early age; the collected works of Tennyson sat proudly on the bookshelf in her childhood home and she studied Victorian poetry whilst at Vassar. In a letter of October 1922, she excitedly recounts spotting Housman in Cambridge and following him down the street (Millay 1952, p. 161). These influences permeate an early poem, "Interim," in which a bereaved speaker addresses a dead beloved, beginning:

> The room is full of you!—As I came in
> And closed the door behind me, all at once
> A something in the air, intangible,
> Yet stiff with meaning, struck my senses sick! (Millay 2011, p. 14)

These opening lines echo Tennyson's *In Memoriam*: "But thou, that fillest all the room/Of all my love" ("CXII" (Tennyson 2009, p. 277)). Other Tennysonian echoes resonate through the poem; for example Millay's vision of an empty embrace: "That day you filled this circle of my arms/That now is empty. (O my empty life!)" (p. 17) recalls Tennyson's famous lines:

> Tears of the widower, when he sees
> A late-lost form that sleep reveals,
> And moves his doubtful arms, and feels
> Her place is empty, fall like these ("XIII", p. 211)

While Millay's speaker declares: "You were my flower!" (p. 21) Tennyson's laments: "I lost the flower of men" ("XCIX", p. 267) and both poems use imagery of the seasons to contrast the thriving natural world with the stalled heart where "Dark, is all I find for metaphor" (p. 21) and "all is dark where thou art not" ("VIII", p. 208).

Millay's poem has long puzzled critics due to the ambiguous identity of the speaker. "Interim" was originally published in the *Vassar Miscellany* in July 1914 accompanied by the epigraph "A Man Speaks." An early draft was preceded by "The Widower Speaks" (echoing *In Memoriam*). However, in the 1917 version (in *Renascence and Other Poems*) it was published without these epigraphs, lending a greater sense of gender ambiguity. Should this poem be read as a dramatic monologue, a lyric elegy or something between the two? Daniel Mark Epstein claims that Millay was persuaded by her writing tutor at Vassar to add the "Browningesque stage direction 'A Man Speaks'" (Epstein 2001, p. 47). With reference to Millay's early draft of the poem written in September 1911, he argues that the poem is a more personal outpouring than this epigraph would suggest, asserting that the mourned subject of "Interim" is "the poet herself [. . .] the poem is Vincent's formal farewell to and expression of grief for the girl (herself)" (p. 48). He notes details in the poem that resemble Millay's own life: "We know the book, the table, and the room very well. This is a picture of Vincent's own bedroom and secret diary" (pp. 47–48). Mary K. Stevens, in her 1947 thesis, anticipates this biographical interpretation, linking it to the poem's meandering, diary-esque form: "It is probably a faithful recording of a young girl's

[3] Diana Collecott discusses Amy Lowell's "masculine impersonation" in her love lyrics (Collecott 1992, p. 101) whilst Margaret Homans has explored her cross-gendered ventriloquism of Keats (Homans 2001). H.D.'s use of Swinburne and other Pre-Raphaelite and decadent poets to forge a gender-fluid homoerotic voice has been discussed at length by Cassandra Laity (Laity 1996). Beyond poetry, Sarah Hayden has discussed Djuna Barnes's use of a cross-gendered voice in *Nightwood* (Hayden 2012).

reactions to death, but it gives rather the impression of unselective notation than of the composition which is characteristic of the poetic imagination" (Stevens 1947, p. 78). Though there may be elements of psychological insight to such readings, these autobiographical interpretations rather problematically imply that Millay is incapable of writing a poem that is outside of or beyond the self, and thus play into the stereotype of the self-effusive 'poetess' unfolding her heart to readers. Could we instead consider that the imaginary occupation of a male speaking position was a genuine and enabling experiment for Millay, opening up new possibilities of expression in her work?

Rather than stabilising the poem's meaning, Millay's use of a male speaker complicates potential readings of the poem in relation to gender and sexuality, moving beyond heteronormative conventions. For Tennyson and Housman's elegiac poems are of course part of a tradition of male homoerotic writing. In speaking as a bereaved male, Millay's cross-gendered ventriloquism troubles assumed heterosexual desire. Notably, the gender of neither the speaker nor the addressee is revealed within the poem, despite the fact that critics repeatedly refer to the dead beloved as female. As we have seen, Tennyson's speaker refers to himself as a "widow," using the language of heterosexual marriage to honour his loss. In a comparable manner, we could also potentially read "Interim" as voicing homoerotic desire through a mask of heterosexual bereavement. Reviewing Millay's *The Buck in the Snow* in 1928, Maxim Newmark subtly suggests a Sapphic element to her elegies:

> As far back as *Renascence*, we have the beginnings of certain beautiful attachments. [. . .] The same minor key has sounded since from her every subsequent volume of poetry, in the form of elegies from young girls who have died. [. . .] One volume is even dedicated by name to a young girl companion who had died. [. . .] "Interim" comes nearest to the feminine "Thyrsis, or "In Memoriam" than any other long poem of a like nature ever written by a woman. (Newmark 1928, p. 20)

In connecting "Interim," "Memorial to D.C." (written for Dorothy Coleman, a fellow Vassar student who died in the flu epidemic of 1918) and "Evening on Lesbos," Newmark draws affinities between the male homoerotic elegies of Arnold and Tennyson and the celebration of "certain beautiful attachments" between women ("In a Minor Key" was incidentally a poem by Amy Levy, the late-Victorian poet whose work expresses lesbian desire and who plays with ambiguity of the lyric I/you in a similar way to Millay).

Millay therefore uses the male speaker of "Interim," subtly filtered through Tennyson, to develop her own poetic voice and to practice expressing different forms of desire. The gender ambiguity of the lyric "I" and "you" enables a fluid meditation on loss, desire and creativity—for the poem is as much about the writing process as it is about bereavement ("Here, let me write it down! I wish to see/Just how a thing like that will look on paper!" p. 19). Due to this slippage, we can read the poem simultaneously as a dramatic monologue spoken by a man; as expressing heterosexual, male homoerotic and lesbian desire; and as an elegy for a lost aspect of the self. This very ambiguity led the majority of reviewers to regard the poem as a failure. In her otherwise positive review of *Renascence*, Harriet Monroe prefers the title poem and the shorter lyrics to "Interim"; John Hyde Preston thought the poem was too long. In 1918, Louis Untermeyer used "Interim" as an example of "Why a Poet Should Never Be Educated." In contrast to the fresh "naïveté" (p. 29) of Millay's work before Vassar, Untermeyer claimed that university education had made her too "sophisticated" and imitative: "In 'Interim' we see the intrusion of foreign accents; echoes of other dramatic monologues disturb us" (Untermeyer 1993, p. 31). Untermeyer evidently felt that that the poem was derivative, wearing its Victorian, masculine influences too clearly on its sleeve. Millay's adoption of a male voice—those "foreign accents"—make her poem disturbingly polyvocal, whilst also disrupting the girlish authenticity that Untermeyer and others desired to see reflected in her work.

This is just one early indication of how Millay's career was policed by the critics who helped to launch her, as they endeavoured to preserve her in the image they preferred: feminine, fresh, young; a "brilliant child" in one reviewer's words (Anderson 1993, p. 37). This image morphed into that of the naughty girl-about-town with the publication of Millay's second volume *A Few Figs from Thistles* in

1920, as she graduated from Vassar to Greenwich Village. This volume is largely responsible for the (erroneous) enduring conception of Millay as a flapper who wrote teasingly flirtatious lyrics about her own love life. However, this book was shortly followed by *Second April* (1921), a volume that showcases a range of voices, including male-inflected ones (such as the speakers of "The Poet and His Book" and "The Beanstalk") in a similar manner to *Renascence*. These poems remain relatively under-discussed in contrast to the supposedly female-voiced poems of *Figs*. Nonetheless, some critics were perceptive enough to identify the performative quality of *all* of Millay's speakers, male and female. In his 1921 review of *Figs*, Frank Ernest Hill noted "the dominance of the dramatic in almost everything that Miss Millay has done" (Hill 1993, p. 35). Even in seemingly "confessional" pieces, Millay kept up a pose: "These lyrics are, in fact, dramatic monologues in which the author is spying upon herself' (p. 35). This dramatic quality is little surprise when one recalls that Millay was a playwright as well as a lyric poet. In the following section, I will explore how her play *Aria da Capo* develops her experiments with performing masculinity, as a means of critiquing the absurdity and devastation of the First World War.

3. "It Is an Ugly Game": *Aria da Capo*

Millay's experience acting and playwriting at Vassar prepared her for her career on the stage in New York. She moved to Greenwich Village in November 1917 alongside her sister Norma, who was also an actress. The sisters' apartment was conveniently located near MacDougal Street, the home of the Provincetown Players. This independent theatre collective, led by George Cram Cook and Susan Glaspell, was established in Provincetown, Massachusetts in 1915 and, relocating to the Village in 1916, quickly became well-known for its experimental one-act plays devised by local writers. Millay joined the group as an actress in 1917 and in December 1919, contributed a play entitled *Aria da Capo* to a bill that also included plays by Djuna Barnes, Eugene O'Neill, and Wallace Stevens. This 1919–1920 "Season of Youth" marked a period of increased modernist experimentation in the productions of the Provincetown Players. *Aria da Capo* is considered by many to be the "best piece of non-representational theatre the Provincetown Players produced" (Murphy 2005, p. 143). Millay herself described it as "a peach,—one of the best things I've done" in a letter of November 1919 (Millay 1952, p. 90).

The structure of *Aria da Capo* takes its cue from the title, a musical term that means "from the top" (i.e., repeat from the beginning). In keeping with this cyclical A-B-A structure, Millay's play begins and ends in exactly the same manner: with the commedia dell'arte characters Pierrot and Columbine dining at a table piled high with luxurious foods. The play opens with Columbine declaring: "Pierrot, a macaroon! I cannot live without a macaroon!" to which Pierrot replies: You are *so* intense! … Is it Tuesday, Columbine? —I'll kiss you if it's Tuesday" (1921, p. 5). The play continues in this farcical manner, as Millay satirises the absurdities of modernist art and bohemian fads; the sort of movements that attracted the Villagers themselves. For example, Pierrot plays at the idea of being a painter, envisaging Columbine as "six orange bull's-eyes, four green pin-wheels,/And one magenta jelly-roll,— the title/As follows: *Woman Taking in Cheese from Fire-Escape*" (p. 7)—a clear jab at Cubism. The pair move rapidly through artistic crazes, from atonal musical compositions to the latest fashions. Millay even includes a joke at her sister's expense, when Pierrot says Columbine would make a great actress because she is blonde and has no education (a fitting description of Norma Millay, who played Columbine in the original production).

Abruptly interrupting this absurd "Harlequinade" is an interlude of pastoral tragedy featuring the shepherds Thyrsis and Corydon. The scene is directed by Cothurnus, a lofty allegorical figure representing tragedy, who instructs but does not partake in the action. While the shepherds begin by good-naturedly discoursing about their sheep, Cothurnus prompts them to play a game that involves constructing a wall between them (represented by flimsy crêpe paper drawn across the centre of the stage). Tensions swiftly build as Thyrsis has all the water on his side, and Corydon discovers buried jewels. Neither will share their resources and they become increasingly suspicious of each other: "THYRSIS: It is an ugly game./I hated it from the first. How did it start?/CORYDON: I do not know … I do not know … I think/I am afraid of you! —you are a stranger!" (p. 22). The episode culminates in

the shepherds murdering each other. Cothurnus covers their fallen bodies with the dining table and Pierrot and Columbine re-enter the scene, resuming the dialogue from the start the play, but with the shepherds' corpses barely concealed beneath the table. As Cothurnus instructs them: "play the farce. The audience will forget" (p. 35).

As several critics have observed (including McKee 1966, Gilmore 1995 and Murphy 2005), the play's allegory expresses Millay's pacifist views in response to World War I. Early reviewers picked up on the play's symbolic meaning. For example, Alexander Woollcott, the formidable theatre critic for *The New York Times*, suggests that despite its potential obscurity (he likens the play to Browning's *Sordello*), bereaved mothers will immediately understand its critique of war: "Very likely it will pass over the heads of the average unthinking audience, but [. . .] surely no such mother will quite miss the point of *Aria da Capo*" (Woollcott 1993, pp. 40–41). However, whilst Millay could have written a realist play explicitly condemning the war, her experimental fable conveys her point more powerfully. The play's innovative structure and non-naturalist techniques are inseparable from its pacifist message. For example, the "absurdly circular plot structure" (Bay-Cheng and Cole 2010, p. 47) means Pierrot and Columbine's vapid excesses take on new, devastating meaning as the return to comedy underscores the inevitable repetition of cycles of violence. Contradicting Millay's reputation for formal traditionalism, *Aria da Capo* is strikingly experimental, a meta-theatrical "modernist bricolage," the juxtaposition of comedy and tragedy radically unsettling genre (Murphy 2005, pp. 143–44). It is regarded by many as Millay's most modernist work, and has earnt her a place in anthologies of modernist drama, while her poetry is often neglected in equivalent anthologies of modernist verse.

However, this does not mean that Millay entirely dispenses with poetic convention in *Aria da Capo*. The play draws on the well-established forms of commedia dell'arte (originating in the sixteenth century), pastoral (drawn from Theocritus and Virgil) and Greek and Roman tragedy. Moreover, it is most accurately categorised as a verse drama, a form that enjoyed considerable popularity during the nineteenth century (poets including Byron, Shelley, Swinburne, Browning, and Tennyson tried their hands at verse drama, not to mention female practitioners Joanna Baillie and Michael Field), before being 'revived' by T. S. Eliot and Christopher Fry in the twentieth century. Millay's work pre-dates this revival, connecting late-Victorian verse drama with its modern manifestations. While Millay's language in the play is at times sparse and disjointed, she also uses flowing blank verse rhythms and antiquated syntax, as in the lines: "What say you, Thyrsis, do they only question/Where next to pull?—Or do their far minds draw them/Thus vaguely north of west and south of east" (pp. 15–16). Millay experimented with Shakespearean-style verse drama in her play *The Lamp and the Bell*, while her earlier *Two Slatterns and a King* is composed in rhyming couplets (both 1921). Her distinctive mixture "of archaism and modernism" was noted by Harold Shipp in his review of Millay's *Three Plays*, collected together in 1928 (Shipp 1928, p. 279).

Much like her earlier poem "Interim" then, Millay's plays blur the line between lyric and dramatic poetry, creating a generic hybrid. The sense of *Aria da Capo* as *poetry* sometimes gets lost in criticism that focuses on its dramatic qualities in performance, at the expense of its poetic qualities on the page. This means that it is often read outside of the context of the rest of her works; as an anomaly in her oeuvre. But my contention is that Millay's earlier lyrical works such as "Interim" enabled her to develop her range of dramatic and poetic voices, necessary for effective verse drama. Furthermore, *Aria da Capo* uses the hybrid verse-drama form to ponder and critique masculinity in a related way to her earlier work. Thomas Fahy notes that the juxtaposition of the farcical commedia love scenes with the pastoral battle highlights affinities between gender relations and war relations: "Love as a kind of war game—with physical and psychological casualties—provides another connection between the two narratives of *Aria da Capo*" (Fahy 2011, p. 20). Pierrot and Columbine's flippant yet heartless relationship could certainly be read as a subtle critique of gender relations in Greenwich Village. His statements that "I am become/A painter, suddenly,—and you impress me" (p. 7); "I am become/A pianist. I will image you in sound" (p. 8) and "I am become/Your manager. [. . .] I'll teach you how to cry, and how to die./And other little tricks [. . .] You'll be a star by five o'clock . . . that is,/If you will

let me pay for your apartment" (p. 9) all position him as the artist and controller of the image, and Columbine as the exploited, passive muse (and mistress). Millay certainly knew a number of men who tried to cast her in this role, and despite all its claims of liberation and 'free love,' the Village harboured its own unequal gender dynamics (for example, 'free love' licenced male promiscuity without always acknowledging the serious consequences of pregnancy and child-rearing for the women left behind).

Sarah Bay-Cheng and Barbara Cole draw comparisons between Millay herself and the figure of Columbine: "By exaggerating Columbine's feminine wiles in the play, Millay suggests that femininity (perhaps her own) is always a performance constructed for a particular audience" (Bay-Cheng and Cole 2010, p. 48). But *Aria da Capo* also shows that *masculinity* is also a performance—and a particularly destructive one. Pierrot, the shepherds and Cothurnus are all shown to be destructive forces. While Columbine exhibits some dawning concern for the dead shepherds: "How curious to strangle him like that,/With colored paper ribbons" (p. 34), Pierrot simply calls for the bodies to be taken away: "We can't/Sit down and eat with two dead bodies lying/Under the table! . . . The audience wouldn't stand for it!" (p. 35). His apathy and appetite allow the scene to play out over and over again, even if he is not actively involved in the violence. Meanwhile, Cothurnus dictates lines from his "high place in back of stage" (p. 14), symbolising "the propagandistic forces that manipulate human behaviour" (Fahy 2011, p. 11). Both men are not directly violent themselves, but their posturing and inaction enables violence to take place. Thyrsis and Corydon are child-like figures whose petty squabbles escalate at an alarming rate. Millay thus draws parallels between children's games and the paranoia that leads to devastating conflict. In a similar manner to Virginia Woolf's critique of male imperialism, *Three Guineas* (1938), *Aria da Capo* firmly connects greed, imperialism and violence to masculinity via games and rituals. As Pierrot explains at one point: "It's just a matter of form" (p. 10).

However, Millay did not let women off the hook entirely. Her later libretto for *The King's Henchman* (1927) is also a fable of masculine conflict. But here, Millay portrays a beautiful male friendship (the King Eadgar and his loyal henchman Aethelwold) torn asunder by a manipulative woman, Aelfrida. Millay's play shows that women can be threatened by male homosocial love, being invested in the idea of conflict and competition between men (in which women function as the ultimate prize). However, critics were unimpressed by Millay's ventriloquism of masculinity in this play. In a piece entitled "Stand Back, Pretty Lady," Henry Seidel Canby criticises Millay's voicing of men: "She cannot do a man as Shakespeare could do Juliet or Cleopatra. [. . .] *The King's Henchman* is the tragedy of the neurotic woman [. . . giving] us woman's loves in man's guises' (Canby 1993, pp. 55–56). Canby not only regards Millay's men as inauthentic, he also questions her right to voice men at all. Comparing Millay unfavourably to Shakespeare, Canby implies that Millay lacks the expansive imagination (or 'negative capability') that would enable her to get under a male character's skin, in the way that Shakespeare can with his female characters. Moreover, Millay's cross-gendered ventriloquism marks her as a "neurotic woman," acting out her own strange impulses through male characters. This negative response is similar to that prompted by Millay's early poem "Interim." Once again, critics and reviewers urge this "pretty lady" to stand back and stick to articulating the experiences of women who resemble herself. But when she *did* do so, Millay was charged with a narrow, self-absorbed vision— what one reviewer called a "preoccupation with her own emotions and flesh" (The World of Poetry 1941). But such criticism did not deter Millay from voicing masculinity and in 1937, she constructed her most ambitious performance of cross-gendered ventriloquism—the multi-layered, all-male verse dialogue *Conversation at Midnight*.

4. '[T]he Certain Voice/of an Uncertain Moment': *Conversation at Midnight*

In 1935, in the midst of the Great Depression and increasing political tensions across America and Europe, Millay began writing the poem that can be classed as her most formally experimental work. Sections of the poem were originally published in the November 1935 issue of *Harper's Magazine*. Then, in 1936, disaster struck. The complete manuscript of *Conversation at Midnight* was destroyed

in a hotel fire during her stay at the Palms Hotel in Florida. As she recounts in her Foreword, the poem was reconstructed from memory, along with "new poems written within the last year" (1937, p. vii). Milford describes the volume as a departure: "Conversation at Midnight was unlike anything she'd ever written. It was an audacious piece of work, intellectually provocative, colloquial, funny, and cloaked in a masculine voice" (2001, p. 404). However, as we have seen, rather than a sudden shift, Millay had previously experimented with male voices and hybrid poetic forms in her earlier work. However, *Conversation* exceeds these attempts in its ambition and range—both in terms of its intellectual engagement and the diversity of poetic forms through which these ideas find expression.

This 122-page, four-part poem takes place in present-day New York, at an all-male dinner party hosted by Ricardo, a liberal and agnostic. His seven guests from across the political and social spectrum include Merton, a Republican stock broker; Carl, a communist poet; Pygmalion a sardonic writer for popular magazines; and Anselmo, a Roman Catholic priest. As the evening progresses the conversation meanders across topics including hunting and fishing, women (including misogynistic rants about women drivers and overly-sentimental wives), religion and faith, propaganda, politics and even—bizarrely—mushrooms. The poem privileges no single perspective over another; the fluidity of debate and one-upmanship propels the dialogue. In the process, Millay dissects different manifestations of masculinity in modern society as these various male 'types' critique one another through the prism of their own vulnerabilities. For example, Carl launches an attack on Merton's establishment masculinity:

> You, Harvard Club, Union Club, white tie for the opera, black tie for the theatre.
> Trouser legs a little wider this year, sir, [. . .]
> Why, you're so accustomed to being flanked right and left by people just like yourself
> That if they ever should step aside you couldn't stand up! [. . .]
> You, an individual?
> You salad for luncheon, soup for dinner,
> Maine for summer, Florida for winter,
> Wife-pampering dog-worshipper! (1937, p. 117)

Merton responds by accusing Carl of representing "the death of everything I care for" (p. 115). The irony is that neither is an individual as they are both so deeply identified with their respective causes (capitalism and communism).

From the opening references to hunting with "cocked" guns (p. 1), the poem echoes *Aria da Capo*'s commentary on the masculine thirst for violence. With the possibility of war in the air, Pygmalion relishes the opportunity:

> One thing I do know: there's lots of men that love a fight;
> And war—don't you see—it takes them out of their rut. [. . .]
> I know what you mean, I get you all right, but—well—
> It's good for a man now and then to get away from his wife,
> No matter how much he may love her; and anyway, hell!—
> I never had such a good time in my life!
> You say we're in for another: it looks to me not.
> But if we did get into another, I'd go like a shot. (p. 38)

Meanwhile, Ricardo laments that "War is man's god; he has but one" (p. 38). However, men are portrayed as the victims as well as the perpetrators of violence. Ricardo refers to the psychological damage of World War I: "the shell that does not blow the head,/Into unsuspected fragments, makes none the less its furrow in the brain" (p. 37). The poem hints at the pressure that attends man's conventional role as bread-winner when Merton recounts the story of a father that commits suicide so his family can get the insurance money: "he'd spent the last thirty years/Providing for 'em, and I supposed it seemed the only way/To keep on providing: insured right up to his ears,/[. . .] carbon monoxide; found/Dead in his car in the garage" (p. 63).

By the final section, midnight strikes. At this significant hour, the poem reflects on the current political moment. When John, a painter who laments the loss of religious faith, imagines the "whole round world rolling in darkness […]/Not a mortal soul can see his hand before his face" (p. 97), Pygmalion replies:

> I bet you Mussolini gets the outline of his own iron glove
> Even in the dark, damn well. And the outstretched paw
> Of Hitler is a handsome blob of white to him
> No matter what time it is. (p. 97)

In this image, Millay evinces that the only certainty in the Godless "darkness" belongs to the despots. In contrast to her doubting, confused male speakers, Hitler and Mussolini have a sense of purpose, implying that they will dictate the course of future events. Millay's poem uncannily foreshadows the war to come. These escalating tensions are also captured in the narrative, which almost ends in a fight between Merton and Carl, with Pygmalion urging: "Let 'em scrap it out! Come on, all hands,/Let's take up the rugs before the crimson pool expands!" (p. 119). Before the party can erupt into *Aria da Capo*-esque violence, Ricardo concludes the evening: "Have pity upon a nervous host, opposed/Not only to fascism, but also to war" (p. 119). This anti-climax suggests a pause rather than a cessation of violent tensions.

Conversation is diverse not only in topic but in style. The poem is composed of a stunning variety of forms, ranging from free verse to formal sonnets. In her Foreword, Millay makes clear that: "The differences in metrical style […] are an aspect of the book as first planned" (1937, p. viii), rather than a result of the poem's reconstruction. While it might have been tempting to assign certain characters specific forms to reflect their different attitudes (structured sonnets for the conservative, cultured Merton, for instance), *all* characters participate in this democracy of styles and move fluidly between them. In this way, Millay shows that they participate in a shared culture and influence one another's rhetoric, however inadvertently. She also avoids potentially prioritising one viewpoint over another through (an implicitly hierarchised) division of forms. The volume is peppered throughout with sonnets, such as "'I want to talk,' said Lucas, 'about love!'" (p. 45) or Carl's "'It's true I honour the dirt; that's perfectly true'" (p. 66). But Carl also speaks in imagistic free verse, as in the haiku-esque: "Old men, you are dying!/Winter will find you scattered like sparrows over the snow;/Neat little sparrows, folded and stiff on the snow" (p. 114). Many passages are, in Millay's words, "metrically free and freely rhymed" (p. viii), such as Pygmalion's speech about war (cited above) which employs loose iambic/anapaestic pentameter and cross-rhymes before concluding in a suitably blunt final couplet. Metre and rhyme throughout is playful and flexible, capturing the rhythms of a lively conversation. Millay uses line-length to humorous effect in the "As Ogden Nash might put it" (p. 47) section, in which the men complain about women's behaviour:

> And they're always saying "Now don't interrupt me!" and always interrupting, and they
> can't
> let anything drop.
> And they insist of telling long stories, which they do very badly, because they never know
> what to leave out or where to stop. (p. 48)

These comically elongated lines with delayed end rhymes mimic the alleged conversational habits of women, but also show men are capable of speaking in the same way. As Susan Gilmore argues, Millay's "nested series of impersonations" renders *all* dialogue as pastiche, denaturalising both femininity and masculinity through poetic performance (Gilmore 1995, p. 189).

In the poem's final scene, the speakers bid each other goodnight. In contrast to the rest of the poem, the voices are unassigned, free floating on the page as fragmented, unidentifiable utterances. Thus, at *Conversation*'s conclusion, Millay further breaks down the divisions between the characters, suggesting that their various differences are meaningless as they disappear into the night. As well as

collapsing stylistic boundaries, *Conversation* is generically hybrid. It is often categorised as a verse drama, though the original blurb proclaims it "a sequence of poems." Millay explains that: "It would be better to [. . .] think of it in terms of a play" (p. viii). That said, it is difficult to categorise *Conversation* straight-forwardly as a drama, due to the occasional interjections of the narrator (for example, "Merton was angry," p. 57) and the fact that Millay lists "First Lines" in a section at the back, implying that these can be read as discrete poems. In keeping with her earlier "Interim" and *Aria da Capo*, the text blends lyric and dramatic elements in an innovative, genre-defying mix. Through its poetic diversity, *Conversation* collapses "conventional divisions between public rhetoric and personal lyric" (Newcomb 1995). Millay's speakers engage in public debate but also express their personal desires and fears; she employs her oft-praised gift for the 'personal' lyric in the service of wider political engagement.

Millay's radical troubling of boundaries of genre, poetic style and gender unsurprisingly provoked negative criticism. These aspects unsettled the image of Millay that reviewers had enshrined earlier in her career. As Harold Orel summarises: "The gist of their comments was that Miss Millay, *their* Millay, had no business with bastardized form" (Orel 1993, p. 167). This sense of ownership imbues Edmund Wilson's review, in which he laments that Millay has "gone to pieces" (Wilson 1993, p. 81). In violation of her "old imperial line," in *Conversation*: "you see metrics in full dissolution. The stress is largely neglected; the lines run on for paragraphs; sometimes the rhymes fade out. Sometimes poor little sonnets, [. . .] flutter into the all-liquifying flux" (p. 81). This horror of fluidity encodes misogyny: male modernists such as Pound and Hulme often expressed disgust at the soft, wet "slop" that they associated with feminine chaos. Pound, for instance, associates Amy Lowell with "slop" in his letter to Alice Corbin Henderson of March 1917 (Pound 1971, p. 108). Complaining that Millay's metrics were too "loosened," Wilson manages to simultaneously downplay her agency by ascribing her "erratic metrics to the play's status as a reconstructed text" (Gilmore 1995, p. 189) and prefigure the ageism that characterises his response to her in the 1940s: "She had become somewhat heavy and dumpy, and her cheeks were a little florid. [. . .] I noticed for the first time a certain resemblance to her mother" (Wilson 1952, p. 784).

Other reviewers found Millay's cross-gendered ventriloquism deeply disturbing. Untermeyer attacks the poem on these grounds: "For some occult reason she has chosen to express herself like a man" (Untermeyer 1937, p. 6). In a particularly excoriating passage, he portrays Millay as an eavesdropper who is too ignorant to fully comprehend what she has overheard:

> Miss Millay pretends to flash light on a man's world, but it is still the world of a child —a sensitive, angry, confused child who has heard (or rather, overheard) scattered arguments which she tries to reassemble and join. [. . .] She is not a thinker though she tries hard to be one; she is intuitive, not intellectual. (p. 6)

By eavesdropping on a "man's world" that is beyond her understanding, Untermeyer suggests Millay only succeeds in confusing herself. However, his reference to her as a spy, illuminating the male world with a "flash light" betrays his anxiety that she may, after all, have overheard something significant. This image of Millay as eavesdropper and voyeur occurs in other reviews: "Miss Millay has either been behind the curtains at several of the more intellectual stag parties or she has a most observing informer" (Blake 1938, p. 42). Here, the uncanny accuracy of Millay's observations is acknowledged. Is the male critic's anger partly due to a sense of being found out, caught in the act; not misunderstood but understood too well? Untermeyer and his fellow reviewers may be uncomfortable due the way in which Millay dissects masculinity. Her ventriloquism "implies that 'maleness,' because imitable, is neither fixed not natural" (Gilmore 1995, p. 184). Her poem thus exposes masculinity as culturally constructed and vulnerable to analysis. Moreover, as Rachel Blau DuPlessis has recently argued, citing Barbara Johnson on Baudelaire, male modernists revelled in their "right to play femininity" (DuPlessis 2014, p. 20)—to adopt feminine voices and gender-fluid

guises in their experimental poetic works.[4] However, the same flexibility was not afforded to their female peers: "A key structure of maleness in modernism deployed the feminine, the effeminate and masculinity in various ways, yet tried to narrow or obliterate female claims to similar and parallel materials" (DuPlessis 2014, p. 28). In adopting a startling variety of male voices then, Millay defiantly violates the strictures placed on women poets' expression, showing that women are equally capable of transgressing the boundaries of gender and genre.

To return to Untermeyer's response, his remarks suggest that Millay has, like a wayward child, transgressed into spaces where she has no right to be, and has irresponsibly publicised her observations. Women's exclusion from centres of power and intellect was still very much a reality. In 1937, the same year that *Conversation* was published, Millay received an honorary degree from New York University. However, she later learned that she had been excluded from a reception for male recipients. As she wrote to the Secretary of the University; "I am, solely for the reasons of sex, to be excluded from the company and the conversation of my fellow-doctors. Had I known this in time, I should have declined [. . .] I beg of you [. . .] that I may be the last woman to be so honoured, to be required to swallow from the very cup of this honour, the gall of humiliation" (quoted in Milford 2001, p. 403). Here, as in her long poem, Millay refuses to be shut out of the conversation, defiantly claiming a voice in the dialogue.

Despite the mixed critical reviews, *Conversation at Midnight* was widely acknowledged as an important book and was reviewed by over a hundred periodicals. When a poll in the *Saturday Review of Literature* asked: "What books of 1937 do you nominate for this year's Pulitzer Prize awards?" Millay's poem won by a long-shot, being nominated by fourteen out of thirty-seven reviewers, when "No other book received more than four votes" (Newcomb 1995, p. 278). Peter Monro Jack in the *New York Times* considered it "an imperative book of the year, in or out of poetry" (Jack 1993, p. 76). He compared it to other long experimental poems such as Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), Pound's *Cantos* (1925), Hart Crane's *The Bridge* (1930), and Auden's *The Orators* (1932). Despite this, the fact that Millay's work has been completely neglected by studies of the modernist long poem reflects the triumph of those reviewers who sought to stifle her mature career. As John Timberman Newcomb has shown, Millay's politically-engaged work was dismissed by critics who sought to shape the canon along New Critical lines. But Millay's continuing exclusion also speaks to the limitations of our own critical frameworks. *Conversation at Midnight* deserves to be recognised as important long poem both inside and outside of modernism. Through her experiments with gender, form and genre, Millay galvanises innovative, modernist techniques in the services of "social dialogue" rather than "alienated individualism" (Newcomb 1995, p. 269), showing experimental twentieth-century poetry to be capable of immediate political engagement, not just detachment. The poem is also relevant to our own historical moment; its skewering of patriarchal bombast, hypocrisy, and political disenfranchisement unfortunately resonates as strongly today as it did in 1937.

5. "Men Working": Millay's Poetic Labour

One of the poems published posthumously after Millay's death in 1950 is entitled "Men Working" (in *Mine the Harvest*, 1954). In this poem, the speaker compares male labourers erecting an electric light to the "movement of girls about a May-pole" (2011, p. 532). In a similar manner to *Conversation*, Millay eavesdrops on the men's conversation and presents it via unmediated scraps of dialogue rendered in fragmented free verse:

> The grounded pikes about the rising black pole, beautiful.
> "Ed, you'd better get under here with me!" "I'm
> Under!"
> "That's it!"

[4] DuPlessis cites Barbara Johnson's argument that Baudelaire's poetry enacts "male privilege as the right to play femininity" (Johnson 1998, p. 127).

"Ground your pikes" (pp. 532–33)

Comparing the men's work that of "coloured ribbons weaving," Millay draws affinities between feminine ritualistic dancing and the unified movement of the men as they work together, asserting that the men's labour is ultimately "more beautiful" (p. 533). In doing so, she collapses gendered divisions between the ancient and the modern, nature and technology, art and industrial labour. Millay's poem implicitly weaves parallels between the "men working" and her own creative labour—erecting the pole and writing poetry both require "skill/And the balance, both of body and of mind" (p. 533). It is likely that the poem was written in the late 1940s, when electricity was finally installed at Millay's rural estate, Steepletop. As the men work to bring modernity and illumination to her retreat, one may speculate that Millay was sitting in her writing cabin, watching and listening to them as she worked. The poem captures her admiration for the men's co-operation and determination to fix the (feminised) pole: "In the front of each man's mind: 'She's going to go/Exactly where we want her to go'" (p. 534). Rather than viewing this as a fantasy of patriarchal control, Millay notes the men's "respect for the pole" (p. 534). This single-minded determination recalls her own sonnet "I will put Chaos into fourteen lines/And keep him there," also written in the 1940s. Both the men's labour and the act of poetic creation require patience, fortitude and respect for one's materials. Millay thus equates male industry and female art, figuring the "beauty" of masculinity as creative and co-operative, rather than merely destructive. In this post-war poem, the conflicts of *Aria da Capo* and *Conversation* are re-cast as harmonious camaraderie, showing that Millay's fascination with masculinity continued to develop.

I want to conclude by suggesting that a focus on Millay's female-voiced lyrics means we have neglected the range and variety of her poetics, and its engagements with both form and gender. But rather than trying to argue Millay *into* modernism, I have endeavoured to show that putting poets firmly into categories—such as 'experimental' or 'non-experimental'—often creates a distorted impression of their wider oeuvre. This impression is unfortunately supported by the kind of work that gets anthologised. Millay's sonnets are readily anthologised but her longer verse poems are difficult to reproduce in this manner. This makes it all the more vital that we seek out and critique this work. The narrative of modern poetry must accommodate Millay in all her range—both her female-voiced lyrics and the politically-engaged, generically hybrid work that I have discussed here—if it is to accurately capture the diversity of poetic engagements with matters of gender, genre, form and politics in the twentieth century.

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Article

Intertextuality, Christianity and Death: Major Themes in the Poetry of Stevie Smith

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Abstract: Stevie Smith, one of the most productive of twentieth-century poets, is too often remembered simply as the coiner of the four-word punch line of a single short poem. This paper argues that her claim to be seen as a great writer depends on the major themes which—in addition to "death by water"—she shares with T.S. Eliot: Anglicanism and the modern reworking of classical literature, with a strong, and in her case sometimes autobiographical, emphasis on female protagonists. Where the female figures in Eliot's *The Waste Land* are seen as parodic and diminished contemporary versions of their classical originals, Smith enters and reimagines her classical sources, testing the strength of the narrative material which binds Phèdre, Antigone, Persephone and Helen of Troy to their fates. In contrast to Eliot's adult conversion to Anglo-Catholicism, Smith became a convert to agnosticism, engaging in a passionate poetic argument with the faith of her childhood, which led her to challenge Eliot himself. She brings both of these themes together in the most personal of her poems, which celebrate, and ultimately invoke, Thanatos, "the only god/Who comes as a servant", and who puts a merciful end to all stories by "scattering... the human pattern altogether".

Keywords: Stevie Smith; T.S. Eliot; *The Waste Land*; Greek gods; female protagonists; Christianity; suicide; death

On a mid-December morning in 1965, I went beachcombing with Stevie Smith. She had read her poems to the University of Sussex Literary Society the night before, and now she wanted seashells to take home to Avondale Road as proof that she had been to the seaside. It was my task to find the shells, few of which had survived the grinding shingle, but presently, Stevie pounced on a different kind of flotsam. Holding it up by one limp ray, she identified it in her inimitable voice: "A poor dead starfish." She held it for just long enough to let me wonder if she was going to pop it into her shiny black bag ("and take it home to brew with" added the friend who had breakfasted with us when I told the story later) before dropping it back onto the pebbled shore.

Seamus Heaney famously wrote that Stevie Smith's "own performance of her verse" prompted him to revise Auden's definition of poetry as "memorable speech" to "memorable voice", the "beautifully flawed plainsong" of a performer who was both Gretel and witch,[1] while Calvin Bedient perceptively described her as "a fearless and therefore fearful mime".[2] Stevie Smith in performance was a mime artist in words, her sad, expressive eyes and the impeccably unexpected timing of her deadpan delivery reducing audiences to helpless laughter as she felt her way around the bars of the imagined cages, which, one way or another, imprison us all. At the height of her late-flowering fame as a performance artist, to ask Ogden Nash's question, "Who, or what, is Stevie Smith?"[3] in real earnest was to be met with astonishment, as the poet Jonathan Williams discovered:

1 Heaney 1991, p. 211.
2 Bedient 1991, p. 167.
3 Nash 1964.

> I remember once picking up a copy of a faded blue book of poems from the thirties in Bertram Rota's bookshop in Vigo Street, London. I asked Arthur Uphill, who was tending the store: so who's Stevie Smith? "Who's Stevie Smith?" he exclaimed, as though I had failed to recognize Queen Victoria, Dame Edith Sitwell, Gertrude Stein, Mae West, and Bette Davis all walking down Saville Row together.[4]

Yet fifty years after that morning on Brighton beach, Amy Jenkins, writing in *The Guardian*, gives a very different account of her final decade:

> the patriarchy got her in the end. In later years she was overlooked—her poems dismissed as light verse—and she was denied membership of the canon. I can't help thinking she was sidelined for having become a plain and eccentric spinster.[5]

Less than six months later, critical acclaim for Will May's 800 page edition of *The Collected Poems & Drawings of Stevie Smith* proved Jenkins wrong in her belief that "nowadays, Smith is only really remembered for her 1957 poem 'Not Waving But Drowning'"; though David Orr's description of her, in his review in *The New York Times*, as "the English poet so odd that even other poets, most of whom are fairly odd themselves, have never been sure what to do with her" suggests that she may still not have found her place in the canon. However, Orr does go on to say, "she is a great poet whether or not she fits into the stories we like to tell about poets and their greatness."[6]

Establishing Smith's claim to be read as indubitably a major poet, and arguably a modernist one, means moving beyond the aspect of her work represented by her most famous poem. It is all too often supposed that Smith condensed her own autobiography into the twelve short lines of *Not Waving but Drowning*,[7] but although the quiet desperation of little lives is certainly one of her poetic subjects, she never saw herself as among those doomed to the unenviable fate of having "no fate at all".[8] In *Novel on Yellow Paper*, her alter ego Pompey Casmilus remembers the "one dreadful moment" in which Lewis Carroll's Alice "thought she was going to be Mabel", and tells us "that is just one thing we don't have to worry about . . . There are hazards enough in life and death, but Alice can never be Mabel",[9] while the title character of Smith's final book of poems answers the imagined question, "Are you Mrs Briggs, dear?" with the emphatic words, "No, I am Scorpion."[10]

Although *Not Waving but Drowning* offers a warning that "it's a tightrope business, this pulling oneself together, and can give rise to misunderstandings which may prove fatal", Smith treats "the poor fellow who got drowned"[11] with the same ironic pity as the "poor dead starfish". The poem owes its perennial place in lists of the nation's favourite poems, not because of its central importance in Smith's work—it is not, as Amy Jenkins believes, "her masterpiece"—but because of the neat way its four-word title sums up its equally neat reversal of the story of the boy who cried wolf, and because, as the caption to one of her drawings puts it, "We all have these thoughts sometimes".[12] While Smith's ability to skewer her unfortunate human subjects in poems that are sometimes little more than epigrams has often led to her being seen simply as a writer of brilliant light verse with a macabre or tragi-comic twist, I would argue that her true stature as a poet can be judged by her treatment of the three major and related themes through which she looks more deeply into the human predicament: the confrontation between struggling mortals and the implacable Greek gods of tragedy, myth and epic;

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4 Williams 1991, p. 38.
5 Jenkins 1915.
6 Orr 2016.
7 Smith 2015, p. 347.
8 Smith 2015, p. 22.
9 Smith 1969, p. 63.
10 Smith 2015, p. 593.
11 Smith 1981.
12 Smith 1990.

her life-long argument with the Christian God of her childhood; and her preoccupation with Thanatos, the servant-god of death.

A key feature of the reception of Smith's work is that although critics describe her as a literary one-off, a poetic voice too unique to belong to any school, at the same time, they compile lists of the many other poets she resembles, usually beginning with William Blake, against whom Smith herself felt "one should be on one's guard … His are very easy echoes to catch".[13] One of the most perceptive of these lists appeared on the cover of the 1964 American edition of her *Selected Poems*, but this one was written with the benefit of inside knowledge, as Smith provided the blurb herself.

> There may be echoes in her work of past poets—Lear, Poe, Byron, the gothic romantics and Hymns Ancient and Modern—but these are deceitful echoes, as her thoughts may also seem deceitful, at first simple, almost childlike, then cutting at depth with a sharp edge to the main business of her life—death, loneliness, God and the devil.[14]

Hermione Lee, whose own list also begins with Blake, makes the important point that "mixed with this strong attachment to the English tradition, there is a powerful feeling for Greek and French classical tragedy, for Virgil, Homer, Catullus, Plotinus and Seneca, for the liturgy and the Book of Common Prayer".[15] Yet, despite his own powerful feeling for classical literature and the Book of Common Prayer, the author of *The Waste Land* is seldom mentioned in relation to Smith's work. Frances Spalding does suggest that "there are poems in which the influence of Eliot can be detected", but she goes on to say:

> modernism was not her chosen inheritance. Instead her poetry ranges freely over associations connected with older traditions, forms and genres. […] Her aim was to write poetry that comes to the lips as naturally as speech. In this she is an inheritor of a tradition that looks back to the *Lyrical Ballads* and beyond. But her liking for simplicity, her refusal to overdecorate her themes, is only one aspect of her poetics. Another is her constant use of quotations, half-quotations, travesties, echoes and allusions drawn from the work of other poets whose voices infiltrate her own.[16]

Eliot's biographer Robert Crawford makes the point that Eliot's poetry too, "up until *The Waste Land* and beyond", is characterized by the use of "allusion, quotation, echo and resonance", and goes on to compare him to another writer with a distinctively idiosyncratic voice:

> both these poets are tradition-bearers whose ideas blended continuity and disruption, fusing modern literary culture with oral heritage. Some of the most powerful lines in Eliot's work, after all, come from nursery rhymes—whether *The Waste Land*'s "London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down" (a telling line in a poem obsessed with loss of connection), or that distorted nursery rhyme beginning "*Here we go round the prickly pear*" in "The Hollow Men".[17]

The poet in question is Robert Burns, but the passage could just as easily be applied to Stevie Smith.

This is not to suggest that the major themes, which, in addition to "death by water",[18] she shares with Eliot—Anglicanism and the modern reworking of classical literature, with a strong emphasis on female figures—were initially inspired by her reading of his work. Unsurprisingly, these similarities

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[13] Williams 1991, p. 43.
[14] Smith 1964.
[15] Smith 1983, p. 24.
[16] Spalding 1988, p. xvi.
[17] Crawford 2015.
[18] Eliot 1974, p. 75.

involve marked oppositions. Where Eliot manages to make even the fractured idioms of modernist poetry sound lapidary and authoritative, Smith shows a ventriloquist's skill in creating a range of speaking voices to portray or embody the characters in her poems. In contrast to Eliot's adult conversion to Anglo-Catholicism, Smith was an adult convert to agnosticism, engaging in a passionate poetic argument with the faith of her childhood; and, in one trenchant essay, in a passionate exposition of the case against *Murder in the Cathedral*,[19] undeterred by the fact that this hatchet job was her contribution to a symposium for Eliot's seventieth birthday. Above all, where the female figures in *The Waste Land* are parodic and diminished contemporary versions of their classical originals, Smith enters her classical sources, reimagining them from within. Through her off-key subversion of the story material, too ancient and powerful to be subdued, which binds Phèdre, Antigone, Persephone and Helen of Troy to their fates, she creates a kind of narrative double vision, which, paradoxically, endorses the inevitability of the tragic dénouement. These themes, the classical but also the Christian, culminate in poems celebrating and ultimately invoking death as Thanatos, the only god who comes as a servant, and puts a merciful end to stories by "scattering . . . the human pattern altogether".[20]

Although Virginia Woolf was impressed by Eliot's reading of *The Waste Land*, writing that "He sang it & chanted it rhythmed it",[21] surviving recordings no longer capture the excitement of that experience. However, as the actor Fiona Shaw has demonstrated, the poem comes vividly alive in performance, taking the listener into a space disturbingly full of multi-layered narrative echoes. The critic Daniel Albright, commenting on just one of these compound narratives, tells us that:

> Throughout the text, the poet juxtaposes the designified present with the significant past; he reminds us, for example, that Philomel suffered her rape so intensively that she turned into a nightingale, sheer urgent expressive form; whereas the typist suffered her "rape" (or unwanted but unprotested sexual violation) so inertly, so complacently, that she turned into—nothing at all.[22]

While we might well take odds with that "complacently", more than one narrative is being robbed of its classical significance here. In *A Game of Chess*, Philomel, "so rudely forced" by Tereus, becomes a nightingale whose supposedly "inviolable voice" is immediately violated by the following two lines: "still she cried and still the world pursues,/'Jug Jug' to dirty ears."[23] The conventional onomatopoeic representation of the nightingale's song becomes a crude term for copulation, so that when we hear it again in *The Fire Sermon*, in a burst of birdsong ending with a "Tereu" which reminds us of Philomel's assailant, we already know what is about to happen to the typist, whose return home also parodies one of the most famous fragments of Sappho. In a mocking echo of the silencing of the raped Philomel, whose tongue is cut out by her attacker, Eliot also parodies the seduced Olivia's song from *The Vicar of Wakefield*, "When lovely woman stoops to folly", silencing that too. The nearest that the nameless typist can come to expressing her predicament through music is to put "a record on the gramophone".[24]

Even the female speakers in the poem—with the exceptions of the hyacinth girl, a would-be fertility figure whose lover is unable to respond to her, the sinister Madame Sosostris and poor Lil's garrulously treacherous friend—express only emptiness, apathy and despair: the medieval sin of accidie. "I read, much of the night, and go south in the winter."[25] "I can connect/Nothing with nothing."[26] "What shall we do tomorrow?/What shall we ever do?"[27] Whether based on Shakespearian

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[19] Smith 1981, pp. 148–52.
[20] Spalding 1988, p. 243.
[21] Crawford 2016, p. 423.
[22] Albright 1997, p. 238.
[23] Eliot 1974, p. 66.
[24] Ibid, pp. 71–72.
[25] Ibid, p. 63
[26] Ibid, p. 74.
[27] Ibid, pp. 67–68.

or Ovidian heroines, Spenserian nymphs, Wagnerian river daughters, or a Dantean soul in Purgatory, they are represented as the unpitiable victims of neurosis, "unwanted" (or, in the case of the now absent nymphs, remunerated) "sexual violation", marital breakdown and marital rape. The modern Waste Land is spiritually barren because it is a place where the ancient, shaping power of story has been destroyed.

By contrast, as Will May[28] points out, "Smith's poems with explicit classical reference points" are "far from being travesties, parodies, or lampoons", and yet that "commonplace in feminist criticism", "the notion of the female poet as triumphal revisionist", does not apply to her in the way one might expect. Poems such as U.A. Fanthorpe's *Not My Best Side*, and collections such as Carol Ann Duffy's *The World's Wife* turn familiar stories inside out, making witty feminist polemic out of the ragged seams that appear to have been exposed, but in the process some of the power of the original story is lost, and it is precisely that power which Smith wants to harness. May rightly says that she "chooses tragic heroines at their point of crisis", but her "interpretations" do not simply "restate and protect notions of lineage and fidelity" to original texts, as he suggests, but seek to explore the exacting and implacable nature of tragedy itself, as she demonstrates in a 1965 interview on the BBC arts programme, *Monitor*.

Her unseen interviewer, the documentary-maker Patrick Garland,[29] speaking of her exceptional memory for verse, mentions that as a girl "she learnt by heart one hundred and thirty-six lines of Greek phonetically" for "a school production of *The Bacchae* by Euripides". Smith quotes a snatch of the still-remembered speech, then gives a brilliantly condensed, extempore account of the ending of the play, punctuated by laughter at the sheer horror of what she is describing:

> 'the mother coming on, Agave coming on, thinking it's the head of a young lion and stroking it. It's really the head of her son. And Tiresias says, 'You know, I don't think you know what you have in your arms. It's not a young lion at all, it's the head of your son which you've torn off. [. . .] Then when this wretched Dionysus comes on at the end and says, 'It will cure you of this terrible sin of impiety towards the gods won't it, anyway'. And the queen, Agave, says, 'But is there *no* mercy? Must we *now* be sent into exile? Is there *no* help?' And then she looks at him and she says, 'I see there is no help,' and he said, 'Why then postpone the necessity? Why then postpone the inevitable?' Turns on his heel and leaves. Everything in ruins, you see.'[30]

When Garland, in the subdued voice of a man who has been unexpectedly purged by pity and terror on national television, replies, "I suppose there is no help, really," she tells him tartly that "we create our own gods", so shouldn't "create gods of such atrocity, really, as these Greek gods", adding, "Oh it's an extraordinary religion. I don't know whether they believed it."

The cruelty of the Greek gods is central to Smith's poem *Phèdre*,[31] which superficially appears to be an example of the female poet as "triumphal revisionist", wrenching an improbable happy ending out of the resistant matrix of Racine's tragedy. However, the narrative voice, which becomes ever more disingenuous as the poem nears its mock-hopeful conclusion, is not that of Smith herself. In *Novel on Yellow Paper*, she tells us that Racine's *Phèdre* rather than Euripides *Hippolytus* seems to her to be "truly Greek",[32] because "the plot of a tragedy must be bone-straight and simple".[33] Both plays tell "the same story . . . but Euripides is very profoundly restless, so it disturbs the tragedy",[34] while in Racine's *Phèdre*, "the verse and the emotion are perfectly at one, they fuse perfectly and effect the purgation

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28 May 2010, pp. 48–52.
29 Bassett 2012, p. 361, n. 9.
30 1965, BBC, March.
31 Smith 2015, pp. 495–97.
32 Smith 1969, p. 130.
33 Ibid, p. 201
34 Ibid, pp. 129–30.

which is the essence of tragedy".[35] In conversation with Kay Dick in the last year of her life, Smith tells her, "It's a play that means a lot to me. A play I would go to when I've been depressed and terribly sad."[36]

In the poem, the classical Phèdre's shame is made worse by nowadays being played, "with awful ancient agonizing", by mature actresses "like Marie Bell". When that celebrated French diva was filmed in the role in her late sixties, the *New York Times* critic Vincent Canby commented diplomatically, "At this point, Miss Bell is somewhat too majestic to be entirely convincing, even at the center of a tragedy of intellect, but she is a living landmark not easily denied".[37] The Phèdre of Smith's poem is young, "A girl caught in a trap", and the speaker tries to rescue her by rewriting the play as a comedy. This attempt, which absurdly hinges on warding off "*Vénus toute entière à sa proie attachée*"[38] with a half-pound box of soft-centred chocolates, is followed by a return to the dark family history which makes the opening lines from Racine:

> *Depuis que sur ses bords le dieux ont envoyé*
>
> *La fille de Minos et de Pasiphaë*[39]

"As lucid as they are alarming". The end of the poem plays with the key word "simple", which Smith uses in *Novel on Yellow Paper* to characterize the essential nature of tragedy. The optimism of the retelling almost founders on the question of whether "poor simple honourable sweet prim Phèdre" can really be simple enough "To be happy with a prig like Hippolytus". The speaker rallies gamely:

> I think it could have been a go,
>
> If I were writing the story
>
> I should have made it a go.

But, as the conditional tense reminds us, and the opening lines from Racine have already made plain, it is the gods who are writing this story, one in which Venus, "Ancient enemy/Of her family", has already doomed Phèdre before she even sets eyes on Hippolytus.

Smith's sketchbook, *Some Are More Human Than Others*, includes a drawing of a grimly scowling girl with the caption, "I am Antigone and I shall bury my brother!"[40] However, Smith chose a different illustration for *Oh stubborn race of Cadmus' seed* . . . ,[41] one so integral to the poem that she included a description of it in the introduction, almost a poem in itself, with which she prefaced it in performance:

> From Hades, with the fire-flush of Hell upon her cheeks, comes the young Antigone, with a backward-looking, repentant thought for the sister she used to despise so much, the soft
>
> Ismene. Antigone is a very young girl, she stands with bows in her hair, and on her outstretched arm she supports a large and melancholy bird.[42]

The critic Laura Severin takes Smith's insistence on Antigone's youth to mean that she is "a naïve innocent", "caught in a world whose rules are not of her making", whose "rebellion ends merely in her own death".[43] But in fact, it is only in the introduction, not in the poem itself as Severin suggests, that Antigone "walks in the Dark Hall of Hades". The poem, as Smith emphasized in performance by

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35 Ibid, p. 200
36 Dick 1983, p. 75.
37 Canby 1973.
38 Racine, *Phèdre*, Act 1, l. 306.
39 Ibid, Act 1, ll. 35–6.
40 Smith 1990, no page number.
41 Smith 2015, p. 281.
42 Smith 1966.
43 Severin 1997, p. 137.

chanting it in her "beautifully flawed plainsong", is a funeral ritual which enacts what it describes. The bird Antigone is holding is "the bird of burial" which she invokes as she throws the dust which symbolically buries her brother and metaphorically blinds her uncle Creon. It will only be after they have killed her, as she knows they must, that she will "stand in the dark hall", pitting the human capacity for forgiveness against the hostility of the gods to the house of Cadmus by crying "Orchus, see that my sister does not suffer at all."

While Smith's Antigone proudly determines her own fate, as she does in Sophocles' tragedy, she will come to understand, in the dark hall of Hades, that the bond of kinship extends beyond her dead brother to the cowardly but loving sister whose wish to die with her she had contemptuously refused. For Smith's Persephone, "the halls of Hades" are a place of escape from the smothering bond of maternal love. Unlike Milton's kidnapped girl, who

> gathering flowers
>
> Herself, a fairer flower, by gloomy Dis
>
> Was gathered,[44]

she deliberately chooses the icy underground world and summons its dark King:

> Oh can you wonder can you wonder
>
> I struck the doll-faced day asunder
>
> Stretched out and plucked the flower of winter thunder?[45]

In a radio broadcast for schools, Smith told her young listeners:

> The story of Persephone is a story of Winter and Summer, but in my story I have made Persephone a girl who loves winter, and snow, and the curious light you get when there is snow on the ground and you look up, if you are in the house, and the ceilings are bright with the reflection of snow. In my poem, Persephone even likes the dark places in her kingdom, which can be frightening [. . .] There is another thread in this poem—it is what she feels about her mother. She loves her, but at the same time she does not want to be sought for all the time, and wept for, and begged to come home. She wants to be herself, and free to stretch out and take her time.[46]

This is just one of the narrative threads which link Smith's Persephone to the speaker in *I rode with my darling . . .* who defies the repeated warning, "do not stay alone in the dark wood at night", and chooses to be lost.

> Loved I once my darling? I love him not now.
>
> Had I a mother beloved? She lies far away.
>
> My sister, a loving heart? My aunt a noble lady?
>
> All all is silent in the dark wood at night.[47]

The autobiographical details suggest that the unnamed protagonist is Smith herself, but this is autobiography in reverse, an imagined escape from the sometimes painful bonds of family love which held her all her life. In *Novel on Yellow Paper*, she describes the trauma of her mother's death from heart disease and her own anguish at being unable to help her:

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[44] Milton, *Paradise Lost* Bk IV, ll. 268–72.
[45] Smith 2015, p. 283.
[46] Barbera and McBrien 1986, p. 167.
[47] Smith 2015, p. 297.

about this time when it was cold and dark and damp and February my darling mama died.

What can you do? You can do nothing but be there and go on being there steadily and without a break until the end. There is nothing but that that you can do.[48]

Although the Persephone of the poem responds to her mother's bitter and sorrowful calling of her name with a cry of "No returning" as she experiments with the wintery pleasures of her new kingdom, "Snow-drifts on the fingers burning", she is in denial about the cyclical nature of her own story. As Smith points out in the radio talk, "She might not like it so much if she had to stay there all the time".

I had a dream ... [49] is the poem which comes closest to Eliot's treatment of female figures in *The Waste Land*, but here the contemporary version of a classical protagonist finds herself inside the original story. Inevitably, in performance, the opening lines of the poem:

I had a dream I was Helen of Troy

In looks, age and circumstance,

But otherwise I was myself,

identifies the speaker with Smith, but the comic impact of this is short-lived. The dream-Helen, who remembers "Everything one has ever read about Troy", quotes from Lorenzo's speech in *The Merchant of Venice*:

In such a night as this,

When the sweet wind did gently kiss the trees,

And they did make no noise, in such a night

Troilus methinks mounted the Trojan walls,

And sigh'd his soul toward the Grecian tents

Where Cressid lay that night.[50]

and tests it against the brutal reality of war:

Where Cressid lay that night, except they did not say

How beastly Scamander looks under this sort of sky,

And the black Greek ships piled up on the seashore beyond

Like prison hulks, like slugs.

Smith's poem, like Eliot's, is haunted by World War One, but where he uses the imagery of the trenches to explore a toxic personal relationship: "I think we are in rats' alley/Where the dead men lost their bones",[51] she draws on the childhood memories she recounts in *A Soldier Dear to Us*, in which reading Browning's *Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came* at school enables her to visualize the nightmare landscape of the Somme:

Basil never spoke of the trenches, but I

Saw them always, saw the mud, heard the guns, saw the duckboards,

Saw the men and the horses slipping in the great mud ... [52]

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[48] Smith 1969, p. 225.
[49] Smith 2015, p. 489.
[50] Shakespeare, *Merchant of Venice*, Act V, sc. 1, ll. 1–6.
[51] Eliot 1974, p. 67.
[52] Smith 2015, p. 606.

The dream-Helen has entered the story at an "ominous eternal moment": eternal both because of the psychological trick which makes time seem to stop for those awaiting imminent disaster and because this moment of pause must recur in every retelling of the fall of Troy. The dream-Helen, although, like a second Cassandra, she knows what must happen, is powerless either to avert or to explain the coming catastrophe to the other characters, whose fear of the gods helps to trap them in the unchangeable epic narrative. All she can do, "when the pause finishes", is to wake.

"Very cruel, very callous, we think the Olympians", Smith tells us in *Novel on Yellow Paper*, "but of course it is hardly their fault. They have no heart. They have no heart."[53] She was far more troubled by the cruelty of the Christian God, though she struggled to separate herself from the beliefs and rituals of her Anglican childhood. In her third novel, *The Holiday*, which reflects the pain and conflict of that struggle, Celia accompanies her clergyman uncle Heber into his empty country church:

> It is the twenty-eighth evening of the month. I hear my gentle uncle saying softly the psalms for the evening: 'Blessed shall he be that taketh thy children; and throwest them against the stones.'[54]

Smith quotes this psalm again in "The Necessity of Not Believing", her lecture "to the Cambridge Humanists on an anti-religious subject", in which she speaks of "the terrible pictures" Goya "made in the prisons of the inquisition", evidence of a human cruelty which it is impossible for "the Christian of today" to "separate himself from" and "utterly condemn".

> For their gentle Christ was more cruel than this, for the worst cruelties of men end with death, and hell is eternal, and Christ made himself the King of Hell and the judge of torments. For he said that the Son of Man should come in glory and judge both the quick and the dead, and that he should say to the sinning people: Depart from me, ye cursèd, into the everlasting fire . . . where their worm dieth not and the fire is not quenched.'[55]

Smith's acceptance of "the emptiness of an indifferent universe",[56] in preference to the superficial sweetness of a religion which she saw as implacably wedded to "the doctrine of eternal pain",[57] informs her 1958 essay on *Murder in the Cathedral*, in which she describes Eliot's play as "a remarkable evocation of Christian fears, remarkable for the strength of these fears and the horrible beauty in which they are dressed".[58] Although she admitted that her essay was "a very un-birthday present"[59] to the seventy-year-old poet, she cannot be said to have misrepresented Eliot's belief in the spiritual need for religious dread. In a letter of 1930, he tells the Christian apologist Paul Elmer More that to him, Hell is "*giustizia*, *sapienza*, *amore*", [justice, wisdom, love], words taken from the dark inscription above Hell Gate in Dante's *Inferno*:

> *Giustizia mosse il mio alto fattore;*
>
> *fecemi la divina podestate,*
>
> *la somma sapïenza e'l primo amore.*
>
> [Justice moved my high maker;
>
> I was made by divine power,
>
> supreme wisdom and primal love.]

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53 Smith 1969, p. 137.
54 Smith 1949, p. 117.
55 Smith 1958, p. 22.
56 Ibid, p. 31.
57 Smith 2015, p. 448.
58 Smith 1981, p. 148.
59 Spalding 1988, p. 218.

The inscription famously ends in the line, "*Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch'intrate*." [Abandon all hope, you who enter].[60] Eliot sees More's failure to share this belief as a lapse into Humanism, asking him, "Is your God Santa Claus?", and goes on to say:

> To me, religion has brought at least the perception of something above morals, and therefore extremely terrifying. It has brought me not happiness, but the sense of something above happiness and therefore more terrifying than ordinary pain and misery; the very dark night and the desert. To me, the phrase 'to be damned for the glory of God' is sense not paradox; I had far rather walk, as I do, in daily terror of eternity, than feel that this was only a children's game in which all the contestants would get equally worthless prizes in the end.[61]

By contrast, in "The Necessity of Not Believing", Smith yet again enters an ancient and powerful narrative, reimagining the story of the crucifixion from the inside, not simply for polemical purposes but with a real and pitying sense that if the historical Christ was human and not divine, this is how he might have suffered on the cross.

> I have thought that as his life of teaching passed, so his exigencies grew, and his claims grew greater—that he was now divine—and people would not listen to him, and in the end he threw himself upon the cross as the Victim and Sufferer Isaiah spoke of […] And then comes that terrible cry from the cross, 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?' Was it then, that not the mercilessness of men, not the cruelty of the Law, touched him, but the indifference of Nature and the universe, an empty sky, the coming of Death as a friend, as Man's only true friend. Come quickly then, Death, one must have prayed at that moment as for all poor men at the point of anguish.[62]

Christian composers have traditionally incorporated that cry of *Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani* into passion music or oratorios on the Seven Last Words from the Cross, making it a support rather than an impediment to faith, but here, comfort is to be found elsewhere, in the idea that even for the suffering Christ "quiet Death" offers "end and remedy". In her poem *My heart goes out … ,* Smith speaks of her love for her Creator, who has given her, and "all living creatures", that ultimate solace, "which is what they want although/When they are living they do not think so."[63]

But although she continued to question and argue with the faith she had renounced in poems such as *Oh Christianity, Christianity*,[64] Smith also reimagines the figure of Christ in a very different way in one of the most beautiful religious poems of the twentieth century, though one that Eliot would have seen as heretical for its denial of "the dark night and the desert", which were central to his own Dantean belief system. *The Airy Christ*, written after reading E.V. Rieu's translation of St Mark's Gospel, offers us a Christ who "comes in grandeur" not as a judge of the quick and the dead but as a "sweet singer" who "aloofly" foresees that his hands and feet must be nailed to the "wooden bands" of the cross, yet "does not care that he was crucified":

> For he does not wish that men should love him more than anything
>
> Because he died; he only wishes they would hear him sing.[65]

In her interview with Kay Dick, Smith told her, "I'm supposed to be an agnostic, but I'm sort of a backslider as a believer, too. I mean I'm a backslider as a non-believer, because every now and then I think, 'No, I have this feeling that … '"[66]

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[60] Dante, *Inferno*, Canto 3, ll 4–9.
[61] Eliot 2014, pp. 209–10.
[62] Smith 1958, pp. 31–32.
[63] Smith 2015, p. 422.
[64] Smith 2015, p. 484.
[65] Smith 2015, p. 396.
[66] Dick 1983, p. 71.

Yet, as she points out in *Novel on Yellow Paper*, there is an important sense in which Smith had already ceased to be a Christian while she was still a small child, despite being "brought up in an extremely religious way, in a household where there was great love, and a great faith in the Christian religion according to the tenets of the Church of England."[67] She spent three years from the age of five in a convalescent home suffering from tubercular peritonitis, and it was there that she first found strength and comfort in the thought of death by suicide.

> To brace and fortify the child who already is turning with fear and repugnance from the life he is born into, it is necessary to say: Things may easily become more than I choose to bear. That is a very healthy and a very positive attitude. But you should point out that the child is at once no longer a Christian. For the thought: Things may easily become more than I *can* bear, leaves him a Christian, if a half hearted, faithless sort of a Christian [. . .] But that 'choose' is a grand old burn-your-boats phrase,[68]

and one which requires a return, even if only a metaphorical one, to the beliefs and values of the classical world.

> So teach your little ones to look on Death as Thanatos-Hades the great Lord of the Dead, that must, great prince though he be, come to their calling. And on the shadowy wings of this dark prince let them be borne upwards from the mire of makeshift and fearful compromise.[69]

In her essay "Too Tired for Words", Smith describes "putting something into the last two lines" of her version of *Dido's Farewell to Aeneas* "that is not quite in Virgil, to express this proud thought of commanding the great god Thanatos":

> 'Come Death, you know you must come when you're called
>
> Although you're a god. And this way, and this way, I call you.'[70]

In the original passage from Book IV of *The Aeneid*, Dido stabs herself to death in the hope that the sight of her funeral pyre will bring ill fortune to her faithless lover as he sails away from Carthage:

> "moriemur inultae,
>
> sed moriamur," ait. "sic, sic iuvat ire sub umbras.
>
> hauriat hunc oculis ignem crudelis ab alto
>
> Dardanus et nostrae secum ferat omina mortis."
>
> "I shall die unavenged," she cries, "but let me die! Thus, thus I go gladly into the dark! Let the cruel Dardan's eyes drink in this fire from the deep, and carry with him the omen of my death!"[71]

Smith's version turns this into an active, rather than a despairing, summoning of death. Her Dido relegates Aeneas to the past, though admitting she might have been happier had they never met; despite dying unavenged, she cries, "I die as I choose". Smith takes the gladness of "sic, sic iuvat ire sub umbras" literally, and uses the scansion of the final line to translate the first two words of the phrase into two thrusts of the dagger: "*This* way, and *this* way I call you." Later in the essay, she complains that "Christianity absolutely will not allow us this delicious idea of command over Death,

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[67] Smith 1958, p. 19.
[68] Smith 1969, p. 160.
[69] Ibid, p. 161.
[70] Smith 1981, p. 112
[71] Virgil 1932, Bk IV, ll. 659–62.

preferring to team up on this point with Old Mother Nature, that bloody-minded Stakhanovite with her brassy slogan 'Production at all costs."[72]

Smith's suggestion in *Novel on Yellow Paper* that "every intelligent, sensitive child should early be accustomed to the idea of death by suicide"[73] may seem deliberately provocative, but in fact she was perfectly serious about it. In the preface to her anthology for children (a mind-stretching collection including extracts from *The Book of Job*, Chaucer in the original, and Shelley's *The Masque of Anarchy*), she tells her young readers:

> Childhood's thoughts can cut deep. I remember when I was about eight, for instance, thinking the road ahead might be rather too long, and being cheered by the thought, at that moment first occurring to me, that life lay in our hands. Many poems have been inspired by this thought, at least many of mine have been.[74]

She continued to find strength and comfort throughout her adult life in the idea that death must come if she called him.

It is important to stress, though, that this does not mean that she was suicidal in the Sylvia Plath sense, despite the painful incident in 1953 when she cut one of her wrists in the office. Probably more an act of self-harm than a serious attempt at summoning Thanatos, this was completely successful as a cry for help (unlike the fruitless efforts of the drowning man in her most anthologized poem), releasing her with a pension from the dull misery of the secretarial job she had come to hate. Though remorseful at having caused distress to her aunt, she wrote cheerfully to a friend, "I have been pensioned off and am so glad. The doctor said "No more" heaven bless him. So now I do nothing but write poems."[75]

However, despite this incident, Smith's considered take on the subject of suicide is that having the choice to die is an aid to living with fortitude since that too becomes a matter of choice. In the poem *Exeat*, she recalls the story of the Roman emperor who used to tell his "poor prisoners cramped in dungeons" that "they were not yet friends enough for him to give them death", and asks sternly,

> How can a poet commit suicide
>
> When he is still not listening properly to his Muse,
>
> Or a lover of Virtue when
>
> He is always putting her off until tomorrow?[76]

However, the end of the poem, in which Life finally comes with love to the weary and enfeebled old person, giving him permission to die, led to some rather alarming correspondence:

> I keep getting letters from people asking if I will join them in a suicide club. And one lady asked me to tell her how to "manage it" as she couldn't swallow pills. I always write back the most bracing letters telling them to hang on as long as possible as it's absolutely nothing compared with geological time. And that I am afraid it is something they must decide for themselves, I did *not* say, Get your doctor to prescribe it in liquid form![77]

Although her suicide attempt of 1953 seems to have been triggered by clinical depression, Smith did not habitually couple death with despair as critics often suppose. Interviewed by John Gale of *The Observer* in 1969 as the winner of the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry, she copied out "in a good hand a poem about death, which, she thinks, may 'cheer up her Majesty' [. . .] The first line of this poem is

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72 Smith 1981, p. 113.
73 Smith 1969, p. 155.
74 Smith 1970, p. 1.
75 Spalding 1988, p. 214.
76 Smith 2015, p. 481.
77 Spalding 1988, p. 273.

'My heart goes out to my creator in love.'" Although the irony of offering a poem in praise of "quiet Death" to a monarch whose subjects sang "Long live our gracious Queen" on every public occasion cannot have been lost on Smith, the gift was in its way sincere, though doubtless never delivered. She tells Gale:

> I do really think death will be absolutely marvellous. I don't think one could possibly enjoy life without death; one couldn't stand it; not only the pain, but the pleasure. If there wasn't death, I think you couldn't go on.
>
> It's like being drawn into a race of water before it gets to the waterfall. It gets quicker and quicker and more exciting. The older you get the more exciting it gets. I don't know why people have been taught to be afraid of death. If a human being was left to itself I don't think it would fear death. We're taught to believe death is the greatest calamity. It's the greatest blessing.[78]

To the frustration of her biographers, Smith was a writer who managed to keep the details of her private life almost entirely private. Apart from Margaret Spear, the indomitable Lion Aunt, whose steadfast and loving companionship was the bedrock of her life, the most intimate relationship Smith ever writes about is her relationship with death, which she explores in poems ranging from *Tender Only to One*, the title poem of her second collection in 1938, to *Black March* in her posthumously published final volume, *Scorpion and Other Poems*. "I love death", she told Kay Dick, "I think it's the most exciting thing,"[79] while her retort to the composer Elizabeth Lutyens: "When you say 'won't death be a bit of an anti-climax when you come face to face?' you sound rather as if you *had* met him and found him not quite the dish I thought",[80] is almost that of a jealous lover.

In one of the most serene and joyful of these poems, *Venus When Young Choosing Death*, Smith invents her own classical myth about death by water. The Venus of the poem is young, as Phèdre and Antigone are young, the age at which the heroine of an archetypal story chooses her fate or is chosen by it. Standing knee-deep in the warm sea from which she was born, she embraces her fellow gods, who kiss her one by one "in friendship" and bid her farewell. The boatman she is waiting for is no Charon, but a tenderly erotic figure who wears and holds the poppies she tastes on his lips as he kisses her:

> Sleep or Death, Sleep or Death kissed me,
>
> Not for friendship.
>
> You do not kiss one for friendship?
>
> No, for welcome,
>
> To welcome one home.[81]

In her final book of poems, Smith returns to this self-created myth in *Oblivion*. Once again, the speaker is standing "in a sweet and milky sea, knee deep," and "growing deeper", but this time she is called back, despite her reluctance, by "a human and related voice/That cried to me in pain." It is impossible not to hear that human voice as the voice of the Lion Aunt, frail and in her nineties and soon to die herself, calling her beloved Peggy back from the seductive mists of "sweet oblivion". But the speaker in this poem, unlike Venus, is mortal, so she can afford to wait:

> those sweet seas that deepen are my destiny
>
> And must come even if not soon.[82]

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78 Gale 1969.
79 Dick 1983, p. 71.
80 Smith 1981, p. 321.
81 Smith 2015, p. 527. There is a misprint in this poem in May's edition: the line beginning 'Then came out … ' should read 'Then came one … '
82 Ibid, p. 646.

In the event, she did not have to wait for long. Stevie Smith wrote her last poem, *Come Death* (2), while undergoing medical tests for the symptoms, including aphasia, of an incurable brain tumour. In eight short lines, she makes the choice to turn for help not to the Christian God but to the only god who comes as a servant, summoning him at last in words which brook no denial:

> Listen then to this sound I make, it is sharp,
>
> Come Death. Do not be slow.[83]

The closing lines echo the speech she gave to Dido, but with the sharpness of a cry rather than a blade. When a friend visited her in hospital, bringing a typed copy of the poem:

> although her speech had not been good for some time (she had been missing words), Stevie read the poem aloud perfectly. It was a dramatic moment. Visitors, who were on their way out, stopped.'[84]

In "Stevie: A Personal Memoir", her friend and executor James MacGibbon describes how, with "her speech incoherent but her mind unimpaired", she showed him the typescript of the poem, on which she had "made a ring round the word 'death' indicating that she wanted to die without delay", after which an understanding doctor "sedated her more and more heavily" as she slipped quietly away from life.

> There was no more conversation on subsequent visits and all we could do was to hold her hand and hope she realised we loved her. On 7 March 1971 she died, peacefully as far as we could tell. I read that last poem at her funeral. She had written her own oration.[85]

Stevie Smith is still too often thought of as a writer of light verse, though her subject matter could be as dark and weighty as that of T.S. Eliot, a writer she was not afraid to cross swords with. Her greatness as a poet lies in the way she uses her distinctive voice to illuminate the darkness of her material with flashes of startling insight and leaven its heaviness with laughter. Both a ventriloquist and a truth-teller, her work reshapes the limits of what literature can tell us about life and, especially, death as radically as that of any modernist poet.

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[83] Ibid, p. 658.
[84] Barbera and McBrien 1986, p. 292.
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