LINES OF FEELING: MODERNIST WOMEN’S POETRY AND THE LIMITS OF SENTIMENTALITY

BY

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DISSEPTION

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Modernist sentimental poetry is frequently cast as an unfortunate literary and cultural mistake. In an era defined by its novel feats of poetic ambition, modernist sentimental poetry seems inexplicably to regress to the familiar forms and feelings of the nineteenth century. Alongside the modernist proliferation of “new” poetic forms, modernist sentimental poetry has thus been seen as decidedly “old”: an atavistic remnant of an earlier time and place, out of sync with high modernism’s progressive aesthetic vision. This is a foundational rift, which continues to divide the field of poetic modernism. Poets like T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and H.D. are routinely credited with formal theories of poetic innovation. In stark contrast, the so-called “sentimental” poets who comprise this study, figures such as Edna St. Vincent Millay, Sara Teasdale, Genevieve Taggard, and Louise Bogan, have been categorized as conventional lyric poets. Critics have believed, wrongly, that their poetry is coextensive with the aesthetic and political aims of nineteenth-century sentimentality. Through a series of detailed textual and historical readings, “Lines of Feeling” demonstrates that this diverse group of modernist women poets reinvented the traditional form of the sentimental lyric in response to modernity. In so doing, they competed directly with the avant-garde to redefine the proper form and function of modernism.

This dissertation thus represents a critical extension of the vital recovery efforts that have reshaped the field of modernist studies since the 1980s. I draw heavily on the foundational revisionary modernisms of scholars such as Rita Felski, Cary Nelson, and Bonnie Kime Scott.
My work echoes their collective thesis that a turn to cultural and historical context is necessary if we are to reform the fundamentally impoverished vision of “modernism” we have inherited from the mid-century American academy. However, in turning to context, I seek not only to recover this poetry’s vital political and historical collaborations, but also to restore its complex aesthetics. In the 1920s, this influential group of female poets and critics melded nineteenth-century sentimental discourse with modernist aesthetics to produce a provocatively new poetics. Over the next two decades, with the rise of the New Criticism and its concomitant professionalization of literary studies, aesthetic theories such as these, produced by popular poets and journalists, were lost to the field. The New Critics did not simply restrict the canon of modernist poetry; more fundamentally, I argue, they obscured the diverse and often divergent array of aesthetic and critical methods that constituted modernism in the 1920s. As a result, we have lost the aesthetic theories, values, and strategies for reading that arose from within popular poetry and that made sense and meaning out of it. We have lost, in other words, its poetics.

Chapter 1 begins in the 1930s and 40s as “modernism” begins to coalesce in the writings of Allen Tate, John Crowe Ransom, and Cleanth Brooks. In their influential “close readings,” I uncover a problematic of “formlessness” in regard to popular women’s poetry. When the New Critics looked at modernist sentimental poetry, its formal innovations—indeed, its very formal substance—seemed to disintegrate before their eyes. But this was methodological chicanery. Because modernist sentimental poetry experiments with the dynamic materials of affect, gender, and sexuality, it relies on body, culture, and politics to enact its effects. These contingent poetic strategies have proven resistant to the New Critics’ ontological conception of poetic form. Despite more than three decades of revisionary scholarship, this methodological problematic, inhering within the New Criticism, persists today. We still have yet to read—let alone to value
fully—the aesthetic innovations of popular modernist poetries. To advance these claims, Chapter 1 provides an extended historical and formal analysis of Millay’s landmark political poem, “Justice Denied In Massachusetts.” Published first in 1927, this poem served in the 1930s as a key piece of evidence in the New Critics’ campaigns against her. I argue that the New Critics’ dismissal of “Justice” had less to do with the poem’s radical politics than with their collective inability to identify and to interpret its sophisticated formal experiments.

As a historical alternative to the New Criticism, Chapter 2 recuperates the sophisticated poetic theories of Louise Bogan. Poetry reviewer at The New Yorker for thirty-eight years, Bogan began publishing criticism in 1923, simultaneous with the appearance of her first volume of poetry, Body of This Death. Throughout the 1940s and 50s, as her career as a poet waned, Bogan emerged as one of the leading poetry critics of her day. She published more than three hundred reviews in The New Yorker alone, while also contributing frequently to influential magazines such as The New Republic and Poetry. In 1951, Bogan also published the book-length study, Achievement in American Poetry, which departs importantly from the dominant New Critical methodology of its age. Within this rich critical corpus, Bogan repeatedly contests the New Critics’ limited conception of “modernism.” She accuses Tate and Ransom, in particular, of cultivating a “heartless” aesthetics: a poetics in which form is sheared from affect. In contrast to the New Critics’ polarizing vision, Bogan insists that subjective and objective poetries, “personality” and “Impersonality,” productively commingled in the early twentieth century. In the popular women’s poetries of the World War I era—works by Millay, Teasdale, Taggard, and Elinor Wylie—Bogan identifies the roots of this hybrid aesthetics, which she terms a “line of feeling” in modernist poetry. My chapter reclaims Bogan’s long-neglected body of criticism as a necessary corrective to the New Criticism. I argue, moreover, that Bogan’s distinctive poetic
genealogy—her “line of feeling”—has the potential to significantly revise our narratives of modern and postmodern poetic innovation.

With Bogan’s theories as a new foundation, I am able to revalue the objective experiments present within the work of popular poets, such as Edna St. Vincent Millay and Sara Teasdale, who are typically dismissed as conventional lyricists. Chapter 3 examines Millay’s sophisticated mass-cultural experiments surrounding her 1922 collection, *A Few Figs from Thistles*. Published almost simultaneously with *The Waste Land*, *A Few Figs* similarly revolutionized the methods for reading modernist poetry. Borrowing from the rising industry of advertising—as well as her Imagist contemporaries—Millay deftly manipulated her audience’s increasingly visual orientation. Photographs, performances, and a highly cultivated celebrity image supplemented *A Few Figs* and helped to account for its overwhelming success throughout the 1920s. By re-assembling the multiple contexts within which *A Few Figs* initially circulated—newspapers, periodicals, and poetry readings—I demonstrate that it represents a dynamic form of poetic innovation, which relied on the Impersonal mechanisms of mass culture to alter the way readers engaged with poetry.

Chapter 4 similarly challenges Teasdale’s status as a “personal,” subjective poet. Widely denigrated, Teasdale continues to be seen as a quintessential “poetess”: demure, genteel, and decidedly un-modern. In a close study of Teasdale’s uncollected and unpublished poetry, I uncover a sophisticated body of work that challenges this stereotypical conception. I focus on a long-neglected archive of anti-war writings, housed at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library and the Missouri Historical Society, which Teasdale produced in response to WWI. These poems are politically radical, advancing a powerful critique of America’s economic policies, gender politics, and increasingly violent nationalism. But they are also aesthetically
innovative. Within this grief-stricken poetry, Teasdale modernizes ancient forms, such as the pastoral and the sapphic (an intricate stanzaic form modeled on Sappho’s verse), in order to produce a haunting reflection on the value of affective poetry in a time of trauma. In the wake of war, seemingly immobilized by her grief, Teasdale breaks with classic sentimental conventions and inaugurates a radically new era of sentimentality.
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Preface

Before the Modern

The making of art is never itself in the past tense.

—Raymond Williams (Marxism 129)

Over the last thirty years, critics have produced a dense and sophisticated field of scholarship devoted to nineteenth-century American sentimental literature. Beginning in 1977, Ann Douglas incited a generation of critical debate when she characterized sentimentalism as “the political sense obfuscated or gone rancid.” “Sentimentalism,” she continues, “unlike the modes of genuine sensibility, never exists except in tandem with failed political consciousness” (254). Douglas’ now notorious portrait of sentimental literature tends toward caricature, but her polemic succeeded in establishing the tone for a generation of criticism, which argued passionately “for” or “against” sentimentality.¹ In recent years, critics have largely laid aside these wholesale valuations and now embrace sentimentality as a “mixed bag” of aesthetic and political insights across a deeply varied literary field (Howard 65). As critical interest in the sentimental has grown, its definitional parameters have likewise expanded to encompass a disparate array of literary and cultural texts. The current sentimental canon extends far beyond the popular, predominantly female-authored expressions that Douglas relied upon to make her case. Today, critics testify to an overwhelming preponderance of sentimentality that permeates nearly every page of nineteenth-century American literature—from Godey’s Lady’s Book to Ralph Waldo Emerson and Harriet Beecher Stowe to Emily Dickinson. After more than a quarter century of innovative work, sentimentality is now taken seriously as a multi-faceted literary and cultural project in which even the most revered intellectual
figures are entangled.²

Amid this broad field of inquiry, June Howard rightly insists that the trope of sentimentality exceeds any single definition (76). Rather than attempt to delineate a unified and stabilized sentimental tradition, Howard proposes that critics attend “to the sheer variety and flexibility of the form” (73). Perhaps most importantly, Howard challenges critics to re-think the sentimental’s easy identification with nineteenth-century domestic culture. Whereas, Howard explains, “Feminist research over three decades has achieved a rich reconstruction of gender ideologies and women’s lives in past eras,” it frequently contains, “an unremarked, confusing elision between sentimentality and domesticity” (73). Although these two discourses are intricately and suggestively intertwined, the politics of domesticity afford only one, fleeting glimpse into the diverse life of sentimentality. Because of its dominant status in nineteenth-century feminist historiography, literary critics sometimes seem to forget that sentimentality has continued to circulate in many other cultural and historical contexts—some of which may even be at odds with the values and goals of nineteenth-century liberal feminism. Against this familiar domestic perspective, Howard takes a “long, broad view” of the sentimental form that reaches back to the Enlightenment and forward to the present (72). By foregrounding the rich variance within a more broadly conceived sentimental tradition, Howard attempts to denaturalize many of the field’s most common assumptions. In her compelling, alternative vision, the sentimental acquires the status of a transhistorical, transnational, multi-genre, multi-media, multi-disciplinary form—a complex, malleable logic whose sphere of influence extends far beyond its conventional home in nineteenth-century America.
Following Howard, I am interested in the possibilities that result from a more expansive historical and formal conception of sentimentality. If sentimentality is, as Howard suggests, part of an unfolding Enlightenment narrative, then it is possible to re-orient the historical frame through which we view this developing form. Like the very notion of the modern itself, the aesthetic and political project of sentimentality might be incomplete, unfinished, and ongoing. While nineteenth-century critics have largely dominated discussions of sentimentality in recent years, this period might be more accurately depicted as a single formation in a continually emerging historical field of sentimental inquiry. My claim here is not merely that sentimentality survives the nineteenth century. This empirical point is easily enough confirmed by even a cursory glance at any contemporary media. Instead, I am proposing that the aesthetic form of sentimentality represents a vital and changing response to modern art and life that has continued to morph well beyond its late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century origins. I am proposing that the Enlightenment tradition of literary sentimentality inaugurates a dispersed and discontinuous field of sentimental literature.3

In fact, this revision has the potential to trouble a substantial portion of nineteenth-century American scholarship. In contrast to Howard’s shifting historical frames, many nineteenth-century scholars have advanced a stable historical narrative: that the form of the American sentimental burgeoned alongside the young Republic and waned in significance with the onset of the Civil War. According to Julia Stern, for example, the American sentimental novel emerged in the late eighteenth century as a cultural suture to heal the chaos and fragmentation that threatened the nation in the wake of the Revolution. In her reading of Susanna Rowson’s seduction tale, Charlotte Temple,
Stern argues that the novel performs the crucial function of “reimagining the American polity as a body that is both more cohesive and more inclusive than its pre-Revolutionary avatar” (37). As the nation solidified its national identity and culture, so too did the genre of sentimental literature. Jane Tompkins’ seminal 1985 work, Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction 1790-1860, charts the literary and cultural ascendancy of the sentimental novel as a didactic force in antebellum America. Reinforcing its intimate connection to the young nation, Tompkins identifies in the 1852 novel, Uncle Tom’s Cabin, a dangerous spirit of revolt and dissolution: “a vision that would destroy the present economic and social institutions” (145). With the onset of the Civil War and the radical social and political schism it produced, it is perhaps not surprising, then, that the genre of sentimental literature should share a similar fate. In her recent study, Poets in the Public Sphere: The Emancipatory Project of American Women’s Poetry, 1800-1900, Paula Bennett concurs with earlier critical assessments when she notes the disintegration of the genre of sentimental poetry in the years leading up to the Civil War:

   In 1854…white bourgeois women buried literary sentimentality, the principal literary vehicle through which nineteenth century domestic ideology carried out its cultural work. Not that literary sentimentality rolled over and died on the spot. On the contrary, like other residual literary modalities…literary sentimentality remains an available rhetorical option even today, to be tapped whenever the idealization of the domestic or the affectional is wanted. (113)

Bennett’s study offers a number of key advances over previous studies of nineteenth-century sentimental poetry, which are often unyielding in their vision of a unified
national tradition. She identifies a remarkable diversity in the form, which, she argues, evolves significantly across the nineteenth century. She also charts sentimentality’s stubborn persistence throughout the late nineteenth century and beyond, as the quote above illustrates.

However, by labeling later sentimental literature a “residual literary modality” Bennett nonetheless consolidates sentimentality as a genre—a fundamentally antebellum one. While she rightly acknowledges that sentimentality did not die out in the postbellum era, in her conception, the form ceases to evolve at the moment that nineteenth-century domestic ideology begins to lose coherence. In a final reading of the twentieth-century poet Dora Goodale, for example, Bennett refuses to label Goodale’s work “sentimental.” “Although some may view this poem as sentimental,” Bennett begins, “I cannot.” “It is written with too careful and caring a respect,” she continues, “There is sympathy in this poem, but also the acknowledgement of difference. There is communality without merging, appropriation, or sham identification” (215). By clinging to a specific formal and political model that was forged in the nineteenth century, Bennett lends cohesiveness to her vision of the genre of sentimental poetry. But she also severely limits its later historical possibilities.

As a result of this familiar devolutionary narrative, the sentimental remains constitutively bound to the antebellum culture in which it originally emerged. Antebellum sentimental literature is positioned as a fluid discourse that morphs in response to the changing landscape of American culture and politics. In stark contrast, late nineteenth and early twentieth-century sentimental literature supposedly fractures its organic relationship to the national polity and circulates instead as a reified cultural artifact, no
longer connected to modern or modernizing America. In the aftermath of the Civil War, this formerly vital cultural and political form thus comes to occupy the nebulous status of a “residual literary modality.” Put another way, the problematic instigated by the field of nineteenth-century sentimental scholarship is not exclusively or even primarily historical. One could hardly fault nineteenth-century scholars for not extending their collective gaze beyond the nineteenth century. However, by affording later sentimental literature a residual status, critics effectively stabilize the belated iterations of a previously dynamic cultural form and presuppose that the discourse of literary sentimentality remains coextensive with its antebellum origins throughout the late nineteenth century and beyond. After the Civil War, sentimental literature simply re-emerges in the later field of history, untouched by cultural progress—a perfectly preserved missive from antebellum America.

This becoming-static is, in fact, one of the foundational presumptions guiding Lauren Berlant’s influential work on the sentimental. In her seminal 1998 essay “Poor Eliza,” Berlant moves seamlessly between Uncle Tom’s Cabin and a range of twentieth-century texts, including Rogers and Hammerstein’s The King and I (1949) and Robert James Waller’s The Bridges of Madison County (1992). Throughout the essay, Berlant professes to be interested in what she repeatedly calls “the unfinished business of sentimentality.” However, despite the appearance of malleability registered in this concept, Berlant’s tour de force reading ratifies the modern sentimental as an atavistic and politically toxic remnant of antebellum culture. The form of the sentimental was completely “finished” at the moment of its original, antebellum emergence; the later
sentimental merely duplicates the same set of aesthetic and political desires that were determined long ago.

Over the last decade, Berlant has elaborated and significantly refined this earlier analysis of sentimentality, a project culminating in the recently published volume, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (2008). *The Female Complaint* joins *The Anatomy of National Fantasy* (1991) and *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City* (1997) as part of what Berlant terms her “national sentimentality” project. *The Female Complaint*, like these earlier works, defines sentimentality as a form of relationality “that has evolved and shifted around but not changed profoundly in the history of public-sphere femininity in the United States” (2, emphasis added). Sentimentality is tranhistorical, in Berlant’s conception, but only marginally changeable: its formal essence remains intact across myriad, shifting cultural and historical contexts.

For Berlant, this essence is comprised of a structural relation—a form of belonging—which she terms an “intimate public” (viii). “What makes a public sphere intimate,” Berlant explains, “is an expectation that the consumers of its particular stuff already share a worldview and emotional knowledge that they have derived from a broadly common historical experience” (viii, emphasis original). Because of this belated status—a desire on the part of the sentimental consumer to have her already constituted self and her pre-existing store of feelings, thoughts, and fears, reflected back—Berlant characterizes sentimentality as a “love affair with conventionality” (2). It is a place subjects go to be rather than to become—a form which confirms rather than (re)constitutes subjectivity. This is part of its political danger, but also, according to
Berlant, the source of its intense attraction for worried subjects. By labeling the sentimental “conventional,” Berlant does not mean that it lacks aesthetic or political significance. Rather, she is seeking to emphasize a profound affective homology, anchoring an otherwise fluxing U.S. political culture.

Critics of twentieth-century sentimental literature have largely extrapolated the historical and formal apparatus of nineteenth-century criticism, irrespective of its blindness toward the later sentimental. Suzanne Clark’s foundational study *Sentimental Modernism: Women Writers and the Revolution of the Word* epitomizes this approach. Deeply indebted to the model established by Jane Tompkins, Clark essentially re-circulates antebellum sentimental literature’s social and political capital throughout a modernist milieu. As Clark announces at the outset of her work, “The sentimental is here connected loosely to a version of liberal humanism: valuing the individual, intrinsic value, emotion or pathos, the endorsement of niceness and cooperation, and the family farm” (12). Clark admits to a radically different context for modernist sentimental poetry, yet nonetheless insists that it vies for similar cultural, political, and aesthetic values as its predecessors. In her reading of the poet Edna St. Vincent Millay, for example, she assesses, “In the age of Eliot, defined by the failure of relationship and the antiheroics of the poetic loner, Millay was writing most of all about love…she was writing in a way…that invites the reader in, that makes community with the reader and tries to heal alienation” (69). Clark’s reading merely transposes the adhesive facility that nineteenth-century scholars frequently attribute to antebellum sentimental literature onto the aesthetic field of literary modernism. Rather than “healing” the cultural fragmentation brought on by the American Revolution, Millay’s writing attempts to bridge the gendered
“alienation” of high modernism. As a result of this act of historical transference, modernist sentimentality is rendered as a vague, half-remembered cultural inheritance. While *Sentimental Modernism* provides an invaluable defense of a previously denigrated tradition of women’s writing, it envisions the form of modernist sentimental poetry as a static, transparent vehicle for a lost and nearly forgotten America. The danger of this paradigm is that it selectively excludes any and all developments in the aesthetic and political form of modernist sentimentality that are not immediately recognizable as being derived from a relatively narrow set of nineteenth-century sentimental texts.

A “sentimental modernism” presupposes that early twentieth-century women poets mimed the aesthetic and political conventions of an earlier tradition and then elaborated them within a modernist context. A “sentimental modernism” thus unites a disparate group of women poets across two centuries—through the Civil War, the abolition of slavery, Reconstruction and Post-Reconstruction America, World War I, women’s achievement of suffrage, and beyond—through their purported adherence to the literary and political discourse of sentimentality. While there are undeniably threads of continuity that connect the early nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, categorizing so much of American women’s poetry as “sentimental” has effaced the aesthetic and political distinctions that matter.

As Raymond Williams suggests, any act of historical recovery is ineffectual “unless the lines to the present…are clearly and actively traced” (116). Yet, as Williams also notes, the practice of urging an earlier tradition forward often has the unintended consequence of producing “a sense of predisposed continuity” between the past and the present (116). In the case of nineteenth-century sentimental literature, the skill and
subtlety with which critics have consolidated the antebellum period as an originary point in a seamless sentimental narrative has occluded the significance of discontinuities that occur within this tradition throughout the twentieth century and beyond. The influential paradigm established by nineteenth-century Americanists does not permit the possibility that the aesthetic form and cultural function of sentimental poetry could have altered “profoundly” in response to the changing scene of the modern.

In part, this collective blindness is the result of a fundamental misrecognition regarding modernist sentimental poetry’s status as a “residual” form. According to Williams, a “residual” form is clearly distinct from an “archaic” one. Whereas an archaic form is “wholly recognized as an element of the past,” a residual form “has been effectively formed in the past, but is still active in the cultural process, not only and often not at all as an element of the past, but as an effective element of the present” (122). Previously, critics have stabilized modernist sentimental poetry as an “archaic” form, one which merely hearkens back in history, without actively forming and being formed by its rearticulations in the present. One of the foundational methodological moves this dissertation makes is to restore an aesthetic and political distance between nineteenth and twentieth-century forms of sentimentality. This is a strategic, provisional bracketing of the connections between these two traditions. And it is, as I will show, necessary in order to reclaim a space for modernist sentimental poetry’s crucial rearticulations—in order to make visible its organic connections to a changing modern.

By building upon June Howard’s key insights, this dissertation will demonstrate that the aesthetic form and cultural function of sentimental poetry remain fundamentally malleable into the modernist era. The sentimental’s stubborn persistence beyond the
nineteenth century signals much more than a mere extension of its previous life. The sentimental “poetess” writing at the height of modernism is most decidedly not the same figure as her corollary a century before. The waning of domestic ideology, the onset of World War I, the progress of mass culture, the right to vote, the New Woman, the New Negro, and the aesthetics of literary modernism—all of these alter the form of sentimentality profoundly. As America modernizes, so too does sentimental literature—often in surprising and nearly unrecognizable ways.

My portrait of modernist sentimental poetry in the pages that follow will push the boundaries of recognition for readers expecting to find the stylistic and ideological conventions of nineteenth-century sentimental literature. Indeed, it is the aesthetic and political breaks this poetry makes with nineteenth-century conventions, which tend to preoccupy me. All of the poets who comprise this study—Edna St. Vincent Millay, Louise Bogan, Genevieve Taggard, and Sara Teasdale—fundamentally re-formed their nineteenth-century lyric inheritance using the materials of modernist culture. Millay, for instance, relied on a wealth of contextual material—photographs, footnotes, supplementary prose, performances, and recordings—to disrupt the apparent autonomy of her lyric texts. In so doing, she altered the methods for reading modernist poetry. Like her high modernist and avant-garde contemporaries, Millay forged a powerfully new poetics, which influenced a wide range of lyric poets from Frank O’Hara and Anne Sexton through to contemporary Slam poetry today. None of these dynamic innovations have been made visible in previous studies of modernist sentimental poetry.

But despite this fundamental elasticity, which I attribute to the form, I am nonetheless arguing that modernist sentimental poetry remains “sentimental.” A
modernist novel might shatter utterly the narrative conventions and readerly expectations that came before it. But it is no less a novel for doing so. The threads by which an innovative form clings to its past inheritance are often thin and yielding. Each of the figures I examine in this dissertation displays a unique, although equally complex, relationship to the nineteenth century. But, for all their struggling to reconcile the past and the present—and, at times, their fierce rejection of that which came “before the modern,” before, that is, their modern—these influential women writers considered themselves to be the guardians of an American “poetess” tradition that they had inherited from the nineteenth century. Their work is marked fundamentally by this ambivalent backward glance.

However, it was the New Critics who taught us to believe that a generation of women poets, who thrived in the age of Eliot, were conventional, genteel, and un-innovative. Our dominant critical paradigm of a “sentimental modernism” has perpetuated rather than challenged this profoundly gendered presumption. A “sentimental modernism” has enabled us to recuperate and to revalue these poetries, but, in so doing, we have unwittingly re-inscribed their conventionality. This is why sentimentality has seemed like an effective strategy for revaluing so much of the poetry women produced in the modernist era. We have presumed that these were traditional poets, producing conventional poetries. In contrast, “Lines of Feeling” argues that this diverse group of modernist women poets reinvented the traditional form of the sentimental lyric in response to modernity. In so doing, they competed directly with the avant-garde to redefine the proper form and function of modernism.

Chapter 1 begins in the 1930s and 40s as “modernism” begins to coalesce in the
writings of Allen Tate, John Crowe Ransom, and Cleanth Brooks. In their influential “close readings,” I uncover a problematic of “formlessness” in regard to popular women’s poetry. Because modernist sentimental poetry experiments with the dynamic materials of affect, gender, and sexuality, it relies on body, culture, and politics to enact its effects. These contingent poetic strategies have proven resistant to the New Critics’ ontological conception of poetic form. Despite more than three decades of revisionary scholarship, this methodological problematic, inhering within the New Criticism, persists today. We still have yet to read—let alone to value fully—the aesthetic innovations of popular modernist poetries. To advance these claims, Chapter 1 provides an extended historical and formal analysis of Millay’s landmark political poem, “Justice Denied In Massachusetts.” Published first in 1927, this poem served in the 1930s as a key piece of evidence in the New Critics’ campaigns against her. I argue that the New Critics’ dismissal of “Justice” had less to do with the poem’s radical politics than with their collective inability to identify and to interpret its sophisticated formal experiments.

As a historical alternative to the New Criticism, Chapter 2 recuperates the sophisticated poetic theories of Louise Bogan. Poetry reviewer at The New Yorker for thirty-eight years, Bogan began publishing criticism in 1923, simultaneous with the appearance of her first volume of poetry, Body of This Death. Throughout the 1920s, Bogan contributed regularly to the journal The Measure, which Taggard also helped to found, and where many of her ideas regarding poetry and poetic form found a ready audience. Although this history is largely elided by our current sentimental paradigm, I demonstrate that Bogan and Taggard, as well as Millay, were part of an innovative, new
generation of American poets and critics all of whom sought to remake the modern lyric in the aftermath of WWI.

Moreover, in the 1940s and 50s, as her career as a poet waned, Bogan emerged as one of the leading poetry critics of her day. She published more than three hundred reviews in The New Yorker alone, while also contributing frequently to influential magazines such as The New Republic and Poetry. In 1951, Bogan also published the book-length study, Achievement in American Poetry, which departs importantly from the dominant New Critical methodology of its age. Within this rich critical corpus, Bogan repeatedly contests the New Critics’ limited conception of “modernism.” She accuses Tate and Ransom, in particular, of cultivating a “heartless” aesthetics: a poetics in which form is sheared from affect. In contrast to the New Critics’ polarizing vision, Bogan insists that subjective and objective poetries, “personality” and “Impersonality,” productively commingled in the early twentieth century. In the popular women’s poetries of the WWI era—works by Millay, Teasdale, Taggard, and Elinor Wylie—Bogan identifies the roots of this hybrid aesthetics, which she terms a “line of feeling” in modernist poetry. My chapter reclaims Bogan’s long-neglected body of criticism as a necessary corrective to the New Criticism. I argue, moreover, that Bogan’s distinctive poetic genealogy—her “line of feeling”—has the potential to significantly revise our narratives of modern and postmodern poetic innovation.

With Bogan’s theories as a new foundation, I am able to revalue the objective experiments present within the work of popular poets, such as Edna St. Vincent Millay and Sara Teasdale, who are typically dismissed as conventional lyricists. Chapter 3 examines Millay’s sophisticated mass-cultural experiments surrounding her 1922
collection, *A Few Figs from Thistles*. Published almost simultaneously with *The Waste Land*, *A Few Figs* similarly revolutionized the methods for reading modernist poetry. Borrowing from the rising industry of advertising—as well as her Imagist contemporaries—Millay deftly manipulated her audience’s increasingly visual orientation. Photographs, performances, and a highly cultivated celebrity image supplemented *A Few Figs* and helped to account for its overwhelming success throughout the 1920s. By re-assembling the multiple contexts within which *A Few Figs* initially circulated—newspapers, periodicals, and poetry readings—I demonstrate that it represents a dynamic form of poetic innovation, which relied on the Impersonal mechanisms of mass culture to alter the way readers engaged with poetry.

Chapter 4 similarly challenges Teasdale’s status as a “personal,” subjective poet. Widely denigrated, Teasdale continues to be seen as a quintessential “poetess”: demure, genteel, and decidedly un-modern. In a close study of Teasdale’s uncollected and unpublished poetry, I uncover a sophisticated body of work that challenges this stereotypical conception. I focus on a long-neglected archive of anti-war writings, housed at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library and the Missouri Historical Society, which Teasdale produced in response to WWI. These poems are politically radical, advancing a powerful critique of America’s economic policies, gender politics, and increasingly violent nationalism. But they are also aesthetically innovative. Within this grief-stricken poetry, Teasdale modernizes ancient forms, such as the pastoral and the sapphic (an intricate stanzaic form modeled on Sappho’s verse), in order to produce a haunting reflection on the value of affective poetry in a time of trauma. In the wake of
war, seemingly immobilized by her grief, Teasdale breaks with classic sentimental conventions and inaugurates a radically new era of sentimentality.

“Lines of Feeling” thus resituates these purportedly “sentimental” poets within the specific literary and cultural communities that they helped to shape in the modernist era: Bogan at *The Measure* and, later, *The New Yorker*; Millay as part of an influential group of artists and activists centered in Greenwich Village; and Teasdale, who is perhaps the most widely caricatured “poetess” of the twentieth century, within the specific aesthetic and political culture of WWI. In this modernist context, “sentimentalism” has functioned as a placeholder for a variety of poetic experiments—grounded in affect, attentive to audience, and housed within the lyric—for which we have no other name. “Lines of Feeling” thus attempts to restore a more innovative history for these influential women poets. This is not a nineteenth-century poetics and these are not traditional, sentimental “poetesses.”
Chapter 1

Modernist Women’s Poetry and the Fallacy of Sentimentality

The kind of coherencies we should start looking for ought to have less to do with chronology or periods than with habits of reading.

—Richard Poirier (100-101)

What do we call Edna St. Vincent Millay’s poetics? By “poetics,” I mean a formal theory or method that reveals itself within and through the poetry—as Charles Bernstein puts it, “some ‘complex’ beyond an accumulation of devices & subject matters” (9). Is there a word, like Imagism, Impersonality, Cubism, or Surrealism, which characterizes her poetic method? If we were to label some poetic moment “Millayan,” what might we mean? Despite nearly three decades of revisionary scholarship dedicated to Millay, our answers to these foundational aesthetic questions remain radically insufficient. “The great modernisms,” Frederic Jameson writes, “were predicated on the invention of a personal, private style, as unmistakable as your finger-print, as incomparable as your own body” (114). Displayed prominently within and through the modernist work of art, this formal aesthetic signature functions as a crucial dividing line between the “high” and the “low,” the properly “modernist” versus the merely “mass cultural” (114). Millay, in contrast to her formally innovative high modern and avant-garde contemporaries, has been seen as all “devices & subject matters”—no poetic “finger-print.” She was one of the most influential poets of the twentieth century, and, yet, do we know what it is that other poets have borrowed?

Tillie Olsen, the writer and activist whose career spanned the better part of the last
century, considered both Millay and Sara Teasdale to have been crucial influences on her poetic development. When she was a fellow in residence at the Radcliffe Institute in 1963, she discovered, to her great surprise, that Anne Sexton shared this ostensibly “shameful” secret:

I quoted Sara Teasdale and Anne said “Oh, so you love her too! But you must never, never admit it to anyone.” I said, “What do you mean?” She told me that once she had let slip in a writing class her feeling for Teasdale, and discovered that S.T. was considered the lowest of the low. Our love of Sara Teasdale and Edna St. Vincent Millay didn’t shame us with each other. We never needed to be guarded or to dissemble. Besides the deepest caring for each other’s work, it was the love for and the talking about the writers—accepted or not—who were life to us that created the special bond between us then. We shared old loves and new discoveries. (qtd. in Middlebrook 19).

Olsen’s chronicle provides a number of extraordinary insights into the restructuring and subsequent consolidation of the modernist canon that was occurring at mid-century. Teasdale and Millay, who had been not only popular, but also well-respected throughout their lifetimes, were now being reinvented retrospectively as the “lowest of the low.” In the late teens and twenties, they had been part of a vital tradition of lyric poetry, practiced primarily but not exclusively by women, which included figures like Louise Bogan, Genevieve Taggard, Elinor Wylie, and Léonie Adams. This is the tradition we now know as “modernist sentimental poetry.” In the late teens and twenties, these poets occupied a seemingly secure place in the field of modern American poetry. By the 1960s, as Olsen and Sexton testify, they had become the stuff of furtive whispers.
Consider, as evidence of this profound shift, the changing status of Teasdale’s most famous collection *Love Songs*. When it appeared in 1917, *Love Songs* was hailed by New York’s literary elite as one of the finest poetic achievements of the World War I era. In 1918, Teasdale was awarded the Columbia Prize for Poetry, the precursor to the Pulitzer Prize and the field’s highest honor. The *New York Times* confidently declared, “It takes no particular powers of divination or prophecy to foresee that Sara Teasdale’s lyrics will far outlast this period and become part of that legacy of pure song that one age bequeaths to another” (Rev. of *Love Songs* 51). The *New York Times* was correct in presuming that Teasdale’s poetry would live on; they could not have anticipated, however, its astonishing relocation within the literary field. In 1969, *Love Songs* was reissued by Hallmark, Inc., purveyor of greeting cards, as a gift book intended exclusively for mass-cultural consumption. While Hallmark can thus be credited with keeping Teasdale’s reputation alive in the popular imagination, their quaint volume depoliticized and, hence, simplified her complex poetics, a process I take up in greater detail in Chapter 3. After mid-century, Teasdale’s poems did survive, but their devaluation was so fundamental that they ceased to occupy a place within the literary-critical establishment. One could browse a distorted version of *Love Songs* when shopping for greeting cards, but Teasdale’s work would not be found among the increasing number of anthologies, scholarly texts, and syllabi dedicated to the newly legitimated field of poetic “modernism.”

From their vantage in the 1960s, Olsen and Sexton seem to appreciate the subtlety of this transformation: mid-century critics were not simply debasing or devaluing modernist sentimental poetry, they were reinventing it as a non-literary, non-poetic
discourse. Notice that Sexton tells Olsen she first learned the shame of sentimental poetry in a “writing class.” This was, almost certainly, John Holmes’ poetry workshop at the Boston Center for Adult Education, where Sexton first enrolled in 1957. According to Maxine Kumin, Sexton’s close friend, who was also at the Radcliffe Institute in 1963, Sexton’s “progress in Holmes’ workshop in 1957 was meteoric” (xxiv). Sexton enrolled as an unknown amateur poet, but after adopting Holmes’ workshop method, she started to place her work in prestigious literary publications, including *The New Yorker, Harper’s Magazine*, and the *Saturday Review*. “As a result of this experience,” Kumin writes, “Anne came to believe in the value of the workshop. She loved growing in this way, and she urged the method on her students at Boston University, Colgate, Oberlin, and in other workshops she conducted from time to time” (xxv). In these workshops, where Sexton was trained effectively to be a practicing, publishing poet, she learned not only that Teasdale and Millay were “bad” writers, but also that they did not belong within the newly professionalized space being carved out for modern poetry.

It is the latter of these lessons that concerns me here: not the making “bad” of modernist sentimental poetry, but its cordoning off from the burgeoning critical field of literary modernism. To be made “bad” is a *valuative* problematic, and one that previous studies of modernist sentimental poetry have foregrounded almost exclusively in their attempts at recuperation. It is true: popular poets like Teasdale and Millay went from “good” to “bad” in the span of a lifetime. But we severely underestimate the scope of modernist sentimental poetry’s marginal status within the academy when we focus exclusively on these valuative dimensions. “Bad” is a judgment well within the bounds of critical practice. As such, it can be contested, debated, reinterpreted via similar modes of
criticism. A “bad” poet, for all her badness, could still exist within a matrix of evaluation. When Sexton tells Olsen, “you must never, never admit it to anyone,” she is miming a critical lesson of a far different order. Mid-century critics, as I will show, did devalue modernist sentimental poetry; but their valuative proclamations were symptoms of a more foundational suspension of judgment. John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and Cleanth Brooks, all of whom notoriously disdained this popular lyric tradition, claimed repeatedly and convincingly that it lacked the material substance necessary to warrant professional evaluation. When subjected to the close scrutiny of the New Critical method, sentimental poetry failed, ostensibly, to reveal any textual depth or formal nuance, indeed, any sophisticated meaning at all. It was therefore categorized as a non-literary discourse and subsequently ceded to the terrain of mass culture. This supposedly “simple” poetry could appear in Hallmark gift editions, but not in the poetry classroom. These are methodological maneuvers, not strictly valuative ones, and they continue to impact our understanding of modernist poetry substantially.

In fact, this methodological problematic, which develops within the New Criticism, but persists into the present, helps to explain why Millay and her sentimental contemporaries still have no poetics. There is a fundamental distinction, which lies at the heart of our habits of reading modernist poetry, which renders certain ostensibly “mass-cultural” poetries substantively, materially unreadable. Following the New Critics, we read these poetries differently from high modern and avant-garde texts—we do not read, that is, for form. When the New Critics looked at modernist sentimental poetry, its formal innovations—indeed, its very formal substance—seemed to disintegrate before their eyes. But this was methodological chicanery: they needed modernist sentimental poetry to be a
formless, flat, stable straw man in order to substantiate the formally innovative, aesthetically “difficult” poetics of high modernism. Because of these complex methodological maneuvers, our knowledge of modernist poetry—of the diverse forms poetic innovation took in the modernist era—remains radically partial. One of the central claims this dissertation advances is that we do not know “modernist sentimental poetry.” This is no minor loss: our inability to recognize its forms of innovation, to identify and to analyze its material experiments, points toward a broader methodological limitation in the field of modernist studies. This is the true crisis of modernist sentimental poetry—the reason for its tentative foothold in the academy and its ongoing marginality in the field of poetic modernism. We still do not know how to read this popular lyric form.

The Problem of Simplicity in Modernist Sentimental Poetry

In 1924, the poet and critic Genevieve Taggard issued a manifesto on behalf of a burgeoning tradition of lyric poetry. “Classics of the Future,” published in The American Review, announced the end of “modernist poetry” as we know it and inaugurated an even newer poetic era. Some of the figures affiliated with Taggard’s movement are familiar—Millay, Teasdale, Bogan, and Wylie—while others have faded into oblivion—Hazel Hall, Winifred Welles, Bernice Lesbia Kenyon, and Hildegarde Flanner. In the teens, Taggard claims, the “free-versists” and “imagists” had had their say; and yet, by the early twenties, the majority of modern readers remained unconvinced by their experiments:

The free-versists, headed by Amy Lowell and Harriet Monroe, preached the good gospel that poetry should return to the homely, unpretentious material of everyday experience and scrap the artificial Faun, the gilt Goddess and the abstract Vices and
Virtues that crowded the poetic line in the years in between 1890 and 1910. Of course, they were right. But, alas! How often does this paradox not occur? The poets who became converted by these missionaries, forthwith set out to obey by writing verse about shoes, soup, factories, backyards and subways in the most self-conscious manner conceivable, the total resulting, that we had more pretentiousness, and very little art. No one will want these poems in ten years, unless...they are brought out as literary oddities, which, indeed, they always have been, dull novelties for the notion counter. (621)

According to Taggard, the “oddities” of what we now term “high modernist” poetry were the business of the “curio-collector,” not the reader. “Lay audiences,” as well as a new, “insurgent generation” of poets, had begun to reject these “dull novelties” in favor of a more lasting, lyric tradition. Rather than Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein, H.D., or T.S. Eliot, it was Carl Sandburg, Edwin Arlington Robinson, Robert Frost, and A.E. Housman who lined their bookshelves (620).

Taggard’s essay is significant, in part, because of the inaccuracy of its forecast. “After all,” she confidently proclaims, “it is not very hard to tell in our own time which poetry will live and which will not” (620). She continues, “Can there be any doubt that two hundred years hence (unless the language is Chinese, and even then perhaps in translation) old men and children, young men and maidens will be repeating [Millay’s poem] God’s World?” (620-621) Presumptions like these—she dismisses “high modernism” as a fluke and places popular, “sentimental” poetry alongside Shakespeare and Milton—attest to the radical fluidity of her historical moment. For Taggard was no naïf. She spoke with the authority of a successful, publishing poet—her volume For Eager Lovers had appeared to considerable acclaim in 1922—and also as the editor of a
respected literary journal. From 1921 to its demise in 1926, Taggard served on the editorial board of *Measure*, a little magazine that she founded along with Maxwell Anderson as a formal corrective to “high modern” and “avant-garde” poetics. Anderson announced in the inaugural issue that contemporary poetry was becoming too “minor.”

To fight that trend, *Measure* would favor “musical and rounded forms” over “half-said, half-conceived whimsicalities,” “impassioned utterances” over the merely “suggestive” or “telegraphic” (Anderson 23). Its opening essay focused exclusively on Millay, whom it termed “the most interesting person in American poetry”—a noteworthy, early accolade for the poet still awaiting celebrity (Hill 25).

“No critics need coerce in the interests of Edna St. Vincent Millay,” Taggard similarly praised, “On the contrary it is the critics who are in some cases attempting to put the brakes on her importance, while the rest of the world accepts her with immense relief” (620-21). In this, the most telling of Taggard’s observations, she hints at a nascent restructuring in the critical order. From their vantage in the early twenties, neither she nor *Measure* could imagine that critics might wholly disregard popular taste, or that a reader’s “instinctive preferences,” as she hails them, might no longer count toward a poetry’s value (620). The wrongness of Taggard’s prognostications does not reveal a faulty sense of judgment on her part, so much as an obsolete one. This was a moment before the categories shifted.

The following decade, in 1938, John Crowe Ransom would ratify a “new” critical constitution. In his seminal essay, “Criticism, Inc.,” he famously delineates “the proper business of criticism”—a professionalized practice distinguished sharply from the so-called “amateur” assessments of the past (327). It is a powerful and compelling case for a
newly systematic literary method. While Ransom was not the first to call for such reforms, a confluence of favorable cultural and institutional events meant that this time the reforms would stick. In his richly detailed history of the literary academy, Gerald Graff cites this moment, 1937-41, punctuated by Ransom’s essay, as “the turning point for the consolidation of criticism in the university” (152). One of the signal achievements of the so-called New Criticism—which was not a uniform discourse, Graff reminds us, but a motley assortment of strivings toward change—was this institutional “consolidation.” Criticism “must be developed by the collective and sustained efforts of learned persons,” Ransom writes, “which means that its proper seat is in the university” (329).

To shore up their fledgling enterprise, the New Critics had to establish their primary—indeed, exclusive—authority in the field of literary production. For Ransom, this project was, importantly, two-fold. In the teens and twenties, scholars had competed fiercely among themselves regarding the proper methods and goals of literary study. Hence, a large portion of “Criticism, Inc.” is pitched toward other professors of literature—in particular, literary historians, philosophers, New Humanists, and “Leftist” or Marxist critics. To this academic audience, Ransom advocates a practice of textual, aesthetic “criticism” over the hodgepodge of history, biography, ethics, sociology, and other contextual strategies currently being practiced within the academy. These methodological claims—the turn to the text that Ransom famously incites—would come to emblematize the New Criticism.

But Ransom has another audience simultaneously in mind throughout “Criticism, Inc.” To make his methodological case, he must contend not only with academics, but
also with a vital critical establishment outside the academy: a quasi-professional field of poets, novelists, playwrights, political activists, and artists of all manner, who felt qualified to assess the merits of contemporary literature, in particular. As Graff observes, in the 1920s,

Many of the younger critics with generalist inclinations gravitated toward journalism and bohemia—options still open in an economy that permitted a living to be eked out on book reviewing, translating, and occasional editorial work. A distinctly antiacademic class of literary journalists took shape in the twenties, enlisting such figures as Van Wyck Brooks, H.L. Mencken, Edmund Wilson, and Malcolm Cowley. (147)

While “antiacademic” may serve as an apt characterization of some of these “literary journalists,” I would not attribute such a reactionary posture to the class as a whole. Indeed, there is nothing even approaching ideological coherence within this broad field of popular criticism that Graff references. Rather than “antiacademic,” I would call it “extra-academic,” a term that has the advantage of registering a condition of critical surplus, which was certainly the case in 1920s America. Everyone, it seemed, fancied him or herself a literary critic.

Ransom feared that this spirit of dilettantism was destroying the profession. “It is not just anybody who can do criticism,” he insists (336). This is the second, cultural portion of Ransom’s agenda. As Graff writes, “first-generation New Critics were neither aesthetes nor pure explicators but culture critics with a considerable ‘axe to grind’ against the technocratic tendencies of modern mass culture” (149). The weight of Ransom’s aversion to mass culture falls, in this case, upon an “extra-academic” class of critics and
journalists. They are “home-made critics,” he jokes, “Naturally, they are not too wise, these amateurs who furnish our reviews and critical studies” (337). His devaluation of their craft is more than a little ironic: Ransom was shopping a supposedly vanguard method, which, on closer inspection, was nearly indistinguishable from the form of “criticism” being produced by some literary journalists and book reviewers. Academics, as Ransom knew, needed to be convinced of the merits of aesthetic “criticism”; but many popular critics had been practicing this mode of textual “judgment” since at least the 1920s.

Indeed, this is why Ransom attaches the “Inc.” to his “new” form of “criticism”: in an attempt to distance his method from other, mass-cultural iterations. Unlike the “amateur” criticisms of the past, the newly coined “Criticism, Inc., or Criticism, Ltd.” will be systematic, rigorous, replicable, and evaluable. In today’s parlance, we would call this effort a “rebranding” and “market segmentation.” For Ransom does not merely reinvent criticism’s identity; he also inserts a fundamental wedge between literary journalists and the academy—segments the market—and delivers his newly rebranded product exclusively to an academic niche. “A change of policy suggests itself,” he writes, “Strategy requires now, I should think, that criticism receive its own charter of rights and function independently” (346).

What did we lose when we followed Ransom and left Taggard behind? When we ceded a capacious though unruly field of modernist criticism for a narrow but systematized method? To read Taggard’s essay today is to recognize immediately that we have lost a canon of once prominent poets; but this canonical thinning, however significant, is only one aspect of our impoverishment. More fundamentally, I will argue,
we have lost an aesthetic method—a set of theories, values, and strategies for reading that arose from within that poetry, that made sense and meaning out of it. We have lost, in other words, its poetics.

In addition to these charges of amateurism, which Ransom famously leveled, the New Criticism also convincingly shrouded modernist sentimental poetry in a veil of “simplicity.” As a result, even those critics who attempt to revalue modernist sentimental poetry continue to believe that it lacks the material difficulty, the textual depths and formal nuances, of high modernist and avant-garde texts. “No one can object to difficulty,” Richard Poirier writes, “and anyone who refuses to cope with it had better forget about reading literature altogether” (102). Leonard Diepeveen, echoing Poirier, similarly observes, “The triumph of difficulty has been so complete that it is hard to recognize what it replaced as literary criticism” (214). However, in recent years, a number of modernist scholars, like Poirier and Diepeveen, have begun to question the seemingly incontrovertible truth of modernist difficulty. Rather than a “necessary and virtuous” attribute of modernist texts, “difficulty,” Poirier writes, is the result of a “complicit agreement” among a relatively small “faction of readers” to alter their reading habits (98). Following Poirier and Diepeveen, it is possible to posit a methodological—rather than ontological—conception of difficulty. Difficulty, these critics suggest, is a function of how we read modernist texts, not a pure product that inheres within them.

Alan Golding notes, for instance, that *The Waste Land’s* ascendance within the field of modernist poetry coincided directly with the rise of the New Criticism and its
concomitant professionalization of literary studies. According to Golding, *The Waste Land* is thus the *urtext* of New Critical modernism. He writes,

*The Waste Land* represented the ultimate test of a critic’s ability to find unity in disparateness. It was also the ideal ground on which to respond to contemporary historical scholars and prove the validity of New Critical method. A large percentage of people might be able to read, or write criticism on, Carl Sandburg, Vachel Lindsay, Edgar Lee Masters, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Sara Teasdale, or even Whitman or Frost…Far fewer could deal with *The Waste Land, The Cantos,* or a Dickinson lyric. A critical method that could unlock the mysteries of the more arcane modernist texts, that could create unity and coherence out of discontinuity and fragments, could instantly prove its value and necessity to the profession. Thus it served the interests of up-and-coming academics in the 1930s and 1940s to canonize “difficult” work, work not readily accessible to the unaided reader, and that justified the existence of “specialists.” A New Critical reading of *The Waste Land* showed that in fact not just anyone could do criticism—only the pros could. (77-78)

I quote Golding at length, because his emphasis upon the mutual dependency of modernist critics and modernist poetry reminds us to interrogate even the most seemingly self-evident truths of *The Waste Land*’s textuality. In *The Waste Land,* critics identified “new” depths of meaning, “new” layers of complexity. It was a poem so intricate, in fact, that it demanded an entirely “new” class of professional critic to unearth its textual mysteries. Yet, as Golding suggests, Eliot’s difficulty was, at least in part, critical mirage: critics needed *The Waste Land*’s “difficulty” to make their methodology and their
profession matter.

In what follows, I will argue that modernist sentimental poetry’s “simplicity” has been similarly achieved through the use of smoke and mirrors. Millay’s most popular collection, *A Few Figs from Thistles*, appeared the same year as *The Waste Land*. This historical proximity has given rise to polarizing treatments. If *The Waste Land* serves as the *urtext* of difficult modernism, then *A Few Figs from Thistles* is its aesthetic opposite—all simplicity and accessibility. It has thus served as the preferred emblem of mass-cultural modernism. However, as I will show, the flatness, conventionality, and superficiality typically attributed to Millay’s poetry, all serve to legitimate high modernism’s difficulty, innovation, and complexity. This is not to say that these two bodies of poetry are identical: there are important distinctions between Millay and Eliot, so-called “sentimental” versus “modernist” poetries. But this type of crucial, material comparison—a process that occupies a significant portion of my attention throughout this dissertation—cannot occur until we understand the categorical imbrication of these two poetries. Modernist sentimental poetry, as we have inherited it, is the result of a “complicit agreement” among mid-century critics to read this popular lyric poetry differently from high modernist texts. “Modernism” is thus involved in everything we know, or think we know, about it: it has determined, in fact, its very form.

I focus primarily on Millay throughout this chapter, because she has served as the acknowledged leader of the broader poetic tradition that I document throughout this dissertation. As far back as 1942, Horace Gregory and Marya Zaturenska, in their foundational study *A History of American Poetry 1900-1940*, assign Millay to this role. Gregory and Zaturenska recount that “a flood of female self-revelations” had saturated
the American poetry scene in the wake of World War I, “revelations in which no details of a love affair were spared the public, and whole schools of women poets announced proudly that they were with child” (101). Millay, they claim, “rode the crest of that wave,” soon coming to emblematize a confessional, expressive mode of lyric poetry, which attracted vast readerships throughout the 1920s (101). Millay produced the largest body of poetry, achieved the greatest celebrity, and subsequently elicited the strongest mid-century condemnations of any poet affiliated with this “feminine” lyric movement, which would, in the 1980s and 90s, come to be known as “modernist sentimental poetry.”

But the problems affecting Millay’s critical reputation have been shared by all of her “sentimental” contemporaries. No one has ever accused Sara Teasdale, Louise Bogan, Genevieve Taggard, or Elinor Wylie of harboring a distinctive poetics—let alone one sophisticated enough to compete with T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, or Gertrude Stein. Even their staunchest advocates, those struggling to revalue this poetry, nonetheless characterize it as an impoverished aesthetic. Does modernist sentimental poetry truly lack an innovative poetics? Or have we collectively failed to see it?

**Contemporary Contexts for Modernist Sentimental Poetry**

A vast majority of critics, even the most sympathetic ones, have considered Millay to be a formally conservative, conventional poet. This is an important paradox structuring her critical reputation: she is credited with a radical politics, but denied a radical aesthetics; classified as “modern,” but never “modernist.” For instance, in her recent study *Genders, Races, and Religious Cultures in Modern American Poetry*, Rachel Blau DuPlessis makes a brief but telling reference to Millay. Focusing on a diverse field of early
twentieth-century feminist poetry, DuPlessis draws a firm line between “sentimental” poets like Millay and another tradition of writers whom she claims “tend toward stylistic innovation” (26). In marking this distinction, DuPlessis then dispenses with Millay, whose radical politics, she suggests, are not matched by an equally revolutionary aesthetic. “Although both exemplified a New Woman elan,” DuPlessis writes, “I will err on the side of Mina Loy rather than Edna St. Vincent Millay” (26). It is a small moment within a richly detailed study. As a whole, DuPlessis’ revisionary portrait of modernist poetry strives toward inclusivity, and it seems clear that the decision to exclude Millay was not made lightly. She notes that her study brings many “under-scrutinized texts and authors into some relation to more scrutinized ones,” and proposes that her “findings should be applicable to poets whose work is not discussed” (26). But the problem Millay poses for DuPlessis is not simply one of representation, as these comments imply. Millay’s absence in DuPlessis’ study is not nearly as troubling as her presence, in this seemingly minor moment. It is the polarization of Loy and Millay, and the divide that cuts between them, which reveals a crucial limit to DuPlessis’ methods of reading modernist poetry.

To distinguish between Loy and Millay, DuPlessis relies upon a familiar opposition, what she terms the “two ‘news’” of early twentieth-century poetry: the “rhetorical” or “stylistic” newness of “modernism,” on the one hand, and the “ideological” or “political” newness of “modernity,” on the other (26). DuPlessis is interested in poetries, like Loy’s, that traverse these two categories: that innovate aesthetically as well as politically, in terms of formal or stylistic elements as well as cultural or ideological content. Indeed, DuPlessis has even proposed a distinct
methodology—“social philology”—to help mediate between this often inscrutable
doubleness, which is a hallmark of modernist poetry.

Poetry scholars, as DuPlessis notes, have been particularly reluctant to embrace
the methods of cultural studies. This is because they fear that a primary focus on
historical, cultural, or political context detracts from poetry’s inherent, formal
complexities. DuPlessis writes,

The potential weak point of any kind of contextualization is its thin textual
specificity. Contextualization and cultural studies sometimes do not resist an
extractive attitude to texts and may elide or erase the specificity of linguistic
texture…One wants any study of poetry to engage with poetry as such—its
conventions and textual mechanisms, its surfaces and layers—and not simply
regard the poetic text as an odd delivery system for ideas and themes. (6-7)

Social philology, which DuPlessis characterizes as a “post-formalist, yet formally
articulate cultural analysis of poetry,” is intended as a methodological compromise
between the “close reading” of the New Criticism and various modes of cultural and
political “contextualization” housed within cultural studies (7). DuPlessis wants explicitly
to reserve close reading’s “rich formal investigations and textual intimacies,” while
simultaneously engaging with the historical, cultural, and political desires mobilized
within and through the text (10). This is a fundamentally reparative strategy: DuPlessis
seeks to undo the profound disenfranchise of the mid-century American
academy—to bring a wealth of grievances and demands for entailment based on race,
class, gender, sexuality, and religion back into our vision of modernist poetry—all while
retaining the crystalline core of the New Critical agenda. Social philology is therefore
utopic, but constructively so—it condemns the worst and consolidates the best the twentieth-century academy had to offer. Yet, to be clear, it still owes a substantial debt to the New Criticism: it is a “reactivation of close reading,” not a rejection of it (1).

For this reason, Rita Felski categorizes “social philology” as a project of “political formalism” rather than one of “cultural studies.” Cultural studies, as Felski notes, adheres to the concept of “articulation,” as developed by Ernesto Laclau and taken up influentially by Stuart Hall, among others.8 “An articulation,” Felski summarizes, “is a hookup, a temporary linkage, a forged connection between two or more elements. It is a contingent link between phenomena that do not share a unifying or essential identity and one that is unmade and remade over time” (511). This concept, central to cultural studies for more than three decades, remains a source of ongoing conflict among poetry scholars, and, Felski adds, modernist critics, more broadly. A theory or method of articulation requires that one juxtapose and adjudicate between the aesthetic and cultural, historical, and/or political registers. According to Felski, many literary critics, while initially drawn to such multiplicity, ultimately synthesize these competing interpretative possibilities into a “textual politics.” They are not willing, in other words, to cede the inherent primacy of the text.9 Cultural studies, unlike political formalism, posits that “a text cannot be inferred from its internal form or logic, but derives from its position in a constellation of texts, practices, and interests” (511). In retaining close reading, DuPlessis departs from this articulated mode of textuality. Despite her importantly repurposed cultural and political reading strategy, she holds on to many of the New Critics’ central aesthetic presumptions. Primary among these, she follows the New Critics in privileging close reading as the preferred method for making a text’s ostensibly internal material visible.
Like DuPlessis and Felski, I am interested in methods that reside at the intersection of literary and cultural studies. DuPlessis is right when she suggests that poetry might harbor something inscrutable, which cultural studies cannot know. Theodor Adorno termed this poetic function “protest,” and it is central to his conception of poetry’s political power. In “On Lyric Poetry and Society,” he calls for a radically acculturated lyric, to replace the rarified, a-historical one that critics had previously imagined. Yet, despite his insistence on a socially and historically mediated text, he nonetheless identifies within poetry a potential to turn away from or to disrupt that circuit. He writes,

The lyric reveals itself to be most deeply grounded in society when it does not chime in with society, when it communicates nothing, when, instead, the subject whose expression is successful reaches an accord with language itself, with the inherent tendency of language. (43)

This linguistic recalcitrance is a kind of disarticulation, but one that offers a means to remake, or rearticulate, the social. Like DuPlessis, I want to reserve this possibility for poetry, as a crucial portion of its singularity as a cultural form. Poetry presents distinct, methodological challenges to cultural critics, and it is not my intention here to efface those complexities. Nonetheless, I agree with Felski that we have to push harder on political formalism, and think seriously about the ways that a theory or method of articulation might productively reform our inherited notions of textuality and poetics.

This dissertation offers a response to these methodological debates, arising at the site where modernist studies, poetry studies, and cultural studies meet. It is not a polemic on behalf of cultural studies. As Felski warns, the idea that cultural studies might be “the
telos, redeemer, or utopian future of literary studies” is largely “misguided” (515). Too much of literary studies’ rich institutional history, its distinctly disciplinary concerns and methodological innovations, cannot be absorbed by cultural studies. Questions of poetics and poetic form are paramount among these uniquely literary preoccupations. In its insistence on the centrality of poetics and poetic form, this project is determinedly literary in its stakes and ambitions. Even so, in this chapter and throughout this dissertation, I argue that cultural studies’ insistence on an articulated textuality can make visible a mode of experimentation, present within modernist sentimental poetry, which has remained stubbornly invisible to literary critics for nearly a century.

Virginia Jackson has recently advanced a similar set of claims on behalf of Emily Dickinson. In her innovative study, *Dickinson’s Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading*, Jackson demonstrates how Dickinson’s writing, which often defied the conventions of traditional genres, was subsequently made lyric: pared and shaped by critics, teachers, and readers into an isolated but eminently readable form of textuality. “Of the many formal and historical influences on the formation of literary genres,” Jackson observes, “the most persistent is the influence of critical theory itself” (52). A virtually inscrutable scrap of writing embedded within an unpublished letter or scribbled in the margins of a page—something like what Dickinson tended to produce—did not serve the interests of a rising profession. How would they study it, teach it, reprint it, know it, and make it known? A lyric, in contrast, is bounded, familiar, and lends itself readily to evaluation. By admitting the radical instability of Dickinson’s archive, Jackson disrupts the purported coherence of Dickinson’s alleged “lyrics” and uncovers, instead, a more complex, material form of experiment. Her reading simultaneously posits a new theory of the
modern lyric: if Dickinson’s foundational “lyrics” can be thus “undone,” was there ever a
stable ground for this genre? Following Jackson, my readings will similarly challenge the
“lyricization” of modernist sentimental poetry: the process by which critics have de-
contextualized, flattened, and stabilized it, to make it conform to the limited expectations
they have set for the genre of the lyric.

**Recovering from Mid-Century Modernism**

Over the last three decades, a rich body of criticism has emerged dedicated to revaluing
the tradition known as “modernist sentimental poetry.” Landmark studies by Suzanne
Clark and Cheryl Walker have brought modernist sentimental poetry back into the critical
fold, transforming its literary reputation. While importantly distinct in terms of content
and interpretation, these works share a similar indifference to aesthetics. Questions of
form and formal poetics, which routinely preoccupy scholars of high modernist and
avant-garde poetry, have been almost completely absent within studies of modernist
sentimental poetry. Admittedly, this has been a strategic choice on the part of many
critics: rejecting the New Critics’ narrowly constituted, textual aesthetic has been crucial
to the success of their cultural and political recoveries. In tabling traditional, formal
aesthetics, critics have been able to look beyond the text, and bring to the fore a wealth of
historical, cultural, political, and biographical material, which went utterly unnoticed by
previous generations of scholars. I want to mark the significance of this revisionary
scholarship, and my support for its collective methodological thesis: that historical,
cultural, and/or political contextualization is necessary if we are to understand modernist
sentimental poetry. However, by focusing almost exclusively on context, critics of
modernist sentimental poetry have left un-interrogated many of the textual, aesthetic presumptions they inherited from the mid-century American academy.

For instance, it is not unusual to find within this scholarship foundational aesthetic concessions regarding modernist sentimental poetry. Walker, who surveys a broad field of popular women poets, including Millay, Teasdale, Bogan, Amy Lowell, and H.D., argues that only H.D. qualifies as a “true modernist” (105). Walker is right that H.D.’s poetry—her early imagist experiments, at least—more closely resembles the tenets of high modernism than, say, Teasdale’s. But Walker’s designation evinces much more than a mere stylistic affinity. As a “true modernist,” H.D. is also afforded a true poetics: in this case, an innovative, formal theory of time and temporality, which is identified within her poetry. In contrast, Walker positions the other figures within her study as minor technicians—all content, no formal poetics. Even Bogan, who produced an extensive corpus of criticism on modern poetry and poetics, is limited in terms of aesthetic ambition. Walker, in fact, dismisses Bogan’s criticism as an “exhausting” and “debilitating” distraction from her primary lyric craft (190). “All we can say with certainty,” she concludes, “is that Louise Bogan succeeded in creating some superb lyrics” (190).

However, this aesthetic hollowing out finds its clearest expression in Suzanne Clark’s Sentimental Modernism, and, especially, in regard to Millay. Following Andreas Huyssen—whose paradigmatic conception of the “great divide” informs Sentimental Modernism substantially—Clark demonstrates, convincingly, that a gendered fear of mass culture forced high modernist critics to bracket the “modernist” from the “sentimental.” Clark writes, “The modernist new critics used aesthetic antisentimentality
to make distinctions, to establish a position of authority against mass culture. Mass culture was a feminized enemy they saw as powerful and dangerous” (5). Clark’s thesis, and the terms through which it reconstructs the field of poetic modernism, namely as a struggle between Eliotic “modernism” and Millayan “sentimentality,” has been profoundly influential. For instance, it is Clark’s landmark study that DuPlessis invokes in her neat dismissal of Millay nearly fifteen years later (26). Following Clark, critics routinely situate modernist sentimental poetry in opposition to high modernism, in general, and Eliot, in particular. *The Waste Land* and *A Few Figs from Thistles* thus serve as twin poles in a radically divided literary field where elite, masculine “modernism” battles with popular, feminine “sentimentalism.”

For all its rhetorical appeal, and its effectiveness in bringing modernist sentimental poetry back into the critical fold, there are serious intellectual limits to this polarizing vision of poetic modernism. To begin, the lineage of this paradigm should give us pause. Despite her wholesale revaluation of modernist sentimental poetry, Clark’s insistence that it functions as the sentimental “underside” to high modernism—its formal, political, and valuative opposite—is not new. This particular insight, and its concomitant restructuring of the field, arrives, as Clark herself acknowledges, via the radically revisionary scholarship of the New Critics. John Crowe Ransom, Cleanth Brooks, and Allen Tate launched remarkably effective, histrionic campaigns against Millay, in particular, which utterly transformed her critical reputation. Their disdain for Millay and the brand of “sentimental” lyric poetry she purportedly espoused are now notorious within the critical field of American literature.
While Clark challenges the New Critics’valuative assessments, she nonetheless maintains their reductive, oppositional aesthetic logic. Ransom, for instance, once famously declared, “Miss Millay is rarely and barely very intellectual, and I think everybody knows it” (784); while Tate similarly derided, “[Millay] is not an intellect but a sensibility” (“Miss Millay’s Sonnets” 121). Clark bristles at the charge that Millay’s poetry lacks value, but she does not counter the foundational presumption that it offers a distinct—and distinctly “unintellectual”—alternative to literary modernism. Clark characterizes modernism as the era,

When poetry—serious poetry—divorced itself from character to become impersonal, when all serious writing was also seriously objectified, alienated, aloof in its literariness from context. Millay, more than any other poet, male or female, represented the opposite extreme, a merging of public and private identities, of self, subject, and persona, a failure to establish by irony or invention any distance between her writing and the ritualized declamations of mass ceremony, mass selfhood. (94, emphasis added)

Millay emerges, in Clark’s ostensibly revisionary treatment, as a poet of “sensibility,” which is, ironically, the precise point where she began. If we reverse the valuative assessment, Clark’s reading of Millay is methodologically indistinguishable from Ransom’s or Tate’s. Millay remains the “opposite extreme” of high modernism—all self, personality, and emotion—just as Ransom and Tate complained. Even more crucially, this designation segregates Millay from the “serious”—and seriously “intellectual”—business of poetic modernism. Notice, for instance, that “failure” remains a constitutive feature of Clark’s reading of Millay. Just like the New Critics, Clark
defines Millay’s poetics negatively: it is, simply put, everything modernism isn’t. Rather than a foundational unsettling of modernist and/or New Critical logic, Sentimental Modernism therefore offers a reversal of its valuative priorities.

Like Clark, I share a deep distrust of the New Critics’ valuative register, and find their categorical proclamations regarding modernist sentimental poetry to be fundamentally suspect. Indeed, I believe that our indictments have not gone far enough. Tate’s and Ransom’s winning point, here and throughout their criticism of Millay, is this radical restructuring of “modernism” as a terrain factionalized by poets of “sensibility” and those of “intellect.” The real problem with their formulation is not their devaluation of “sensibility,” so much as their redeployment of this category as the perfect counter to the newly legitimated, “intellectual” field of “high modernism.”

What if we refute the proposition entirely: say to Tate and Ransom that there is no ontological distinction between high modernists like Eliot and “sentimental” modernists like Millay; no poets of “intellect” versus those of “sensibility”; no neat or clean divide between subjective and objective poetries within the field of literary modernism. This would mean returning to the New Criticism and pushing even harder on its foundational aesthetic presumptions regarding poetic form. It would mean, moreover, moving beyond the available compromise positions in regard to modernist sentimental poetry. Clark’s “sentimental modernism,” like DuPlessis’ “social philology,” for all its crucial political advances over the New Criticism, fails to challenge their limited and limiting aesthetics. This is my primary point of departure from these revisionary scholars: if we are to recover a fuller historical and political vision of modernist poetry, we must reclaim, simultaneously, a diversity of aesthetic forms. Formal innovation does not reside solely
within high modernist and avant-garde poetries; but this powerful conceit, prevalent within the New Criticism, continues to limit the poetic ambitions of popular modernist poetry.

John Guillory has also criticized the de-aestheticization that I am highlighting within this earlier field of recuperative scholarship. Modernist sentimental poetry perfectly matches Guillory’s vision of a “noncanonical” discourse, as that classification has emerged in the wake of the canon wars. In their attempts at recovery, Guillory argues, critics have too often taken “noncanonical” literatures to be intrinsically noncanonical, as if they derive their very identity from a prior critical act of devaluation—as if their marginality were their essence (9). Guillory cites Cheryl Walker, in fact, as an emblematic example of this mode of criticism (346, n.15). He identifies within Walker’s work a near-exclusive focus on the author and the author’s experience of exclusion, as the sole determinants of literary value. This type of valuative claim, made on behalf of an author’s identity, Guillory writes, “necessarily reasserts the transparency of the text to the experience it represents” (10). In focusing on method and methodology, I am echoing the call by Guillory, and other scholars, including Gerald Graff and Lawrence Rainey, to place institutional conditions at the center of textual analysis. In so doing, I depart from the expressive, narrowly identitarian reading strategies that Guillory attributes to many scholars of “noncanonical” literatures. As Guillory has convincingly shown, no claim for canonical inclusion, advanced on behalf of an individual author or set of authors—however forcefully expressed—can repair a rift between “canonical” and “noncanonical” literatures, which inheres within our very institutions, classrooms, and methods.
Nonetheless, I also want to mark an important distinction between my own critique of textual transparency and Guillory’s. In contrast to Guillory, I do not claim that this hollowing out of the text—this crucial act of making certain literatures formless—is a symptom of liberal pluralism and its politics of representation. It is not simply a will to identity, among culturally and politically-minded scholars, which has given rise to this deep formal discrepancy between “modernist” and “sentimental” literatures. The problematic precedes the canon debates of the 1980s and early 1990s, and it has persisted, too, well beyond that era. Walker’s presumptions about form are not new; and they do not arise as a result of modernist sentimental poetry’s becoming “noncanonical.” It is within the historical field of modernism, among a loose group of scholars soon to become known as the New Critics, that this radically uneven bestowal of form and formal innovation develops. Their elaborate architecture of “modernist” form would not have been possible without the ostensibly stable ground of “sentimental” poetry. In the remainder of this chapter, I return to the New Criticism, and reconsider its lasting aesthetic hold on the contemporary field of modernist studies. I also offer a substantial re-reading of Millay’s poem “Justice Denied In Massachusetts,” which played a central role in the New Critics’ broader devaluation of her poetry, beginning in the 1930s. This is one, foundational example of how a poem can be made formless.

The New Critics and the Limits of Close Reading

The New Critics were famously insulting to Millay and her brand of “sentimental” poetry. Their harsh assessments reveal a profound conservatism: systemic blindesses in regard to gender and Leftist politics fundamentally compromise their claims to aesthetic
objectivity. Ransom’s essay “The Poet as Woman” is worth mentioning solely as a testament to these limits. It is a veritable index of mid-century misogyny, arising from a gendered panic over Millay’s prominence in the field of modern poetry. She was, at the time that Ransom authored this essay, still considered to be a major poet. In fact, the essay was occasioned by the publication of Elizabeth Atkins’ *Edna St. Vincent Millay and Her Times* (1936). The appearance of this full-length critical study threatened to increase Millay’s literary and cultural capital significantly. Ransom thus sets out to limit Millay’s sphere of influence, and he does so in a reprehensible manner: by reminding his readers that she is not only a poet, but also, more importantly, a woman. “She therefore fascinates the male reviewer but at the same time horrifies him a little too,” Ransom confesses at the opening of his essay (77). He goes on to argue that Millay’s identity as a woman fundamentally limits the value of her poetry; she may plumb the intricacies of love, but she will never display any real “intellect.”

Many critics before me have challenged the limits of the New Critics’ gender politics, particularly in regard to modernist sentimental poetry, and these analyses form a crucial foundation for my work. Nonetheless, despite a chorus of indictments across the last three decades, the New Critics’ aesthetic assessments of modernist sentimental poetry remain surprisingly intact within the contemporary critical field. It is therefore necessary to take these aesthetic evaluations seriously, however compromised the underlying logic might seem. Critics who would never conscience Ransom’s gender politics, for instance, often still support his aesthetic critique. In the less hysterical portion of his essay, Ransom argues against what was then a common aesthetic equation between Millay and John Donne. Atkins had recently relied on this analogy in her study of Millay, and it
provoked Ransom’s ire. Donne’s metaphysical poetry was, of course, essential to the modernist and/or New Critical re-conceptualization of form. In the preceding decade, Eliot had popularized the metaphysical poets—Donne, in particular—through his Clark and Trumbull Lectures, delivered at Trinity College, Cambridge, and Johns Hopkins University, as well as in a series of six broadcasts on seventeenth-century poetry for the BBC.¹ Millay’s close affiliation with Donne thus presented a valuative crisis for the New Critics; they had to disentangle his “serious,” “intellectual” poetry from her “little-girl things,” as Ransom derisively terms them (82). In a line-by-line comparison, Ransom purports to show that the two poetries, while superficially similar, are substantively distinct. Millay’s poetry emerges in Ransom’s assessment as a “pretty,” “lovely” surface, completely lacking in material substance (82). By the end of his reading, Ransom has dislodged Millay from her position alongside Donne, and installed Hart Crane, Allen Tate, and Ezra Pound in her place, as the true inheritors of a metaphysical poetics (90-91).

Like Ransom, Cleanth Brooks also places key aesthetic limits on Millay’s poetry, which have had lasting implications for her literary reputation. His essay “Miss Millay’s Maturity” makes plain the fact that Millay posed a serious aesthetic problem for the New Critics. At the outset, he concedes that her poems “invite and demand criticism as major poetry” (1). It is this and only this—her status as a major poet—that he purports to challenge:

Miss Millay fails at major poetry—that is, at poetry which makes major predictions about life. Her distinction lies in a poetry of narrower limits and on a lower plane. […] So successful are these sonnets that the narrowness of their
range has been somewhat disguised. But the limitations are really very strict. (4) Indeed, Brooks readily admits to the “success” of Millay’s poetry—but only as a minor poetry. “If this seems scant praise,” he continues, “one points out that there is little enough successful poetry of this sort, and Miss Millay in general is very successful” (4). Brooks equates “major” poetry with a diffuse characteristic he terms “maturity.” As he explains, the “failure” of Millay’s poetry is “not because she is a woman, and not because she is a love poet. The failure springs from an essential immaturity.” “Miss Millay,” he continues, “has not grown up” (2).

It is tempting to dismiss such aesthetic accusations as mere rationalizations—simplistic screens for a more primary gender bias. Brooks is, after all, calling Millay a little girl, and Ransom, chiding her for allowing sex to spill provocatively onto the page. But there is an aesthetic method that emerges out of this madness: a powerful, collective claim to distinction between Millay and “major” poets—provoked, undoubtedly, by gender, sex, and body, but proven, ostensibly, through close reading. Brooks’ charge of “immaturity,” for instance, resonates with Freud and his fundamentally passive conception of femininity. According to this patriarchal logic, Millay’s love poems could never achieve maturity, because female sexuality itself is considered to be fundamentally stunted.11 But this charge is also importantly aesthetic: Brooks is aligning body with poetry, femininity with form, and claiming that both have failed to develop. While the appeal of mid-century misogyny has thankfully waned, this “essential” aesthetic distinction remains.

As I will show, the overarching goal of the New Critics’ active campaign against Millay was to establish her categorical, ontological distinction from high modernism, in
general, and Eliot, in particular—to reinvent her, in other words, as a “minor” poet. They did so by collectively obscuring her poetry’s form and formal innovations. Although Allen Tate was not the sole architect of Millay’s demise, it is within his work that these structures are laid bare. The structural limits that Tate installs at the heart of Millay’s poetry continue to impoverish her critical reputation, and, by extension, the broader field of modernist poetry. Millay’s poetry is not, as Tate has taught us to believe, the aesthetic opposite of *The Waste Land*. Believing so has made “modernism” a neater space, but it has also simplified our inherited notions of poetic innovation.

“Justice Denied In Massachusetts” served as a key piece of evidence in the New Critics’ campaigns against Millay. Both Tate and Brooks feature the poem in influential essays that contributed significantly to her critical devaluation. “Justice Denied In Massachusetts” is a well-known political poem, written on behalf of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, Italian immigrants and Anarchists who were convicted of murder and subsequently sentenced to death in a sensational 1921 trial. The battle to save their lives continued for much of the decade. In the spring of 1927, the courts rejected their final appeals and scheduled Sacco and Vanzetti’s executions for August 23, 1927. In response, a grass-roots movement dedicated to saving the two men began to attract national attention. In April 1927, Millay, along with hundreds of other artists and activists, including Katherine Anne Porter, John Dos Passos, Dorothy Parker, Lola Ridge, and Michael Gold, marched to protest the injustice of the proceedings. For Millay, the protest marked the beginning of a passionate commitment to Sacco and Vanzetti, which would extend well into the 1930s—well beyond Sacco and Vanzetti’s deaths. In the fall of 1927, in the immediate aftermath of their executions, Millay published the essay,
“Fear,” which I examine in detail later in this chapter, and also continued to protest her arrest from the demonstration in April. Like many protesters, she had been issued a fine for “sauntering and loitering,” which she very publicly refused to pay. As she wrote to her mother in October 1927, she planned to use the publicity from her court appearances—and, if necessary, a jail term—to keep Sacco and Vanzetti in the news: “Anything to keep people from going to sleep on the subject!” (Letters 224).

“Justice Denied In Massachusetts” is one of seven poems, published between 1927 and 1934, all of which focus explicitly on Sacco and Vanzetti: “The Anguish,” “Justice Denied In Massachusetts,” “Hangman’s Oak,” “Wine From These Grapes,” and “To Those Without Pity,” which form Part Two of The Buck In the Snow (1928); and “Two Sonnets In Memory,” both of which appear in Wine From These Grapes (1934).

However, Millay’s political commitments in this period and her profound disillusionment over Sacco and Vanzetti’s deaths resonate throughout these two volumes—well beyond these seven poems. For instance, although it does not mention Sacco and Vanzetti by name, “Dirge Without Music,” from The Buck In the Snow, can be brought into productive conversation with her Sacco-Vanzetti poems and the political events surrounding the case:

I am not resigned to the shutting away of loving hearts in the hard ground.
So it is, and so it will be, for so it has been, time out of mind:
Into the darkness they go, the wise and the lovely. Crowned
With lilies and with laurel they go; but I am not resigned.

Lovers and thinkers, into the earth with you.
Be one with the dull, the indiscriminate dust.
A fragment of what you felt, of what you knew,
A formula, a phrase remains,—but the best is lost.

The answers quick and keen, the honest look, the laughter, the love,—
They are gone. They are gone to feed the roses. Elegant and curled
Is the blossom. Fragrant is the blossom. I know. But I do not approve.
More precious was the light in your eyes than all the roses in the world.

Down, down, down into the darkness of the grave
Gently they go, the beautiful, the tender, the kind;
Quietly they go, the intelligent, the witty, the brave.
I know. But I do not approve. And I am not resigned.

The poem is unmarked by any reference to Sacco and Vanzetti. Yet, the collective dead that haunts the speaker points toward a social or cultural rather than personal or individual experience of loss: “They are gone. They are gone to feed the roses,” “Gently they go,” “Quietly they go.” The poem’s catalog of the dead—“The wise and the lovely,” “Lovers and thinkers,” “the beautiful, the tender, the kind,” “the intelligent, the witty, the brave”—accumulates losses in a manner similar to Elizabeth Bishop a half-century later, when she would progress from losing “door keys” to “two rivers, a continent” (“One Art” 178). The heartbreak that dominates *The Buck In The Snow* is diffuse: it travels from poem to poem, person to person, generation to generation. It is not strictly personal or individual, but a public, collective feeling, which leaves virtually no one and no thing untouched.

As a result, the weight of the speaker’s protest is correspondingly strengthened.

The word “dirge” comes from the Latin *dirige*, which means “direct.” It is taken from the first word of an antiphon at Matins in the Office of the Dead: “*Dirige, Domine, Deus meus, in conspectu tuo viam meam,***,” “Direct, O Lord, My God, my way in thy sight” (OED). “Dirige” is therefore a performative rather than constative utterance: it seeks to bring a new perspective, a new vision, into being. Millay’s “Dirge Without Music” is true to the form’s performative roots. Her stubborn refusal—“I know. But I do not approve. And I am not resigned”—reaches outward rather than inward, transforming
grief and depression into a productive form of political protest. She is refusing the final
closure of the grave—“the shutting away of loving hearts in the hard ground,” “Down,
down, down”—in words that echo Emily Dickinson’s: “The Sweeping up the Heart / And
putting Love away / We shall not want to use again / Until Eternity” (Dickinson 1078). In
so doing, Millay carries the ostensibly private labor of grief out of the domestic sphere
and into the world; she will not shut the feeling away or sweep it up. The conjunctions at
the end of the poem—“But,” “And”—signal an ongoing protest, which begins rather than
ends in grief. As Millay knew, the Sacco-Vanzetti case was a watershed for the American
Left. In the wake of their executions, many artists and intellectuals—Millay among
them—lost faith in the capacity of collective action to produce institutional reform.¹³
There is a rich archive of literature surrounding the Sacco-Vanzetti case, but Millay’s
poetry renders the pathos of this “political depression” unlike any other artistic or
political contribution. Moreover, as my readings will show, her attempt to re-form this
negative affect through poetry represents a distinctive and sophisticated poetic
achievement.¹⁴

Given his notoriously reactionary politics, Tate’s disdain for “Justice Denied In
Massachusetts” should come as no surprise. Writing in 1938, he is undoubtedly
attempting to diminish the symbolic weight of this Leftist historical landmark. But, if we
take him at his word, his objections to the poem are not political at all, but purely
aesthetic. “I am not attacking social justice,” he defensively insists (“Tension” 77). Even
if we reject such claims, Tate’s aesthetic maneuvers do warrant further consideration.
Tate may have disliked “Justice Denied In Massachusetts” because of its political
sentiments, but his sophisticated translation of the terms of its value into a narrowly aesthetic register demands closer examination.

For instance, Tate’s initial objection to “Justice Denied In Massachusetts” has to do with a footnote appended to its title. As he rightly points out, the title itself is vague. Only through a footnote would a reader—particularly, a 1938 reader—be apprised of the poem’s specific connection to the Sacco-Vanzetti case. This is the text of the poem, as it appeared in *The Buck In the Snow* in 1928:

Justice Denied In Massachusetts

Let us abandon then our gardens and go home
And sit in the sitting-room.
Shall the larkspur blossom or the corn grow under this cloud?
Sour to the fruitful seed
Is the cold earth under this cloud,
Fostering quack and weed, we have marched upon but cannot conquer;
We have bent the blades of our hoes against the stalks of them.

Let us go home, and sit in the sitting-room.
Not in our day
Shall the cloud go over and the sun rise as before,
Beneficent upon us
Out of the glittering bay,
And the warm winds be blown inward from the sea
Moving the blades of corn
With a peaceful sound.
Forlorn, forlorn,
Stands the blue hay-rack by the empty mow.
And the petals drop to the ground,
Leaving the tree unfruited.
The sun that warmed our stooping backs and withered the weed uprooted—
We shall not feel it again.
We shall die in darkness, and be buried in the rain.

What from the splendid dead
We have inherited —
Furrows sweet to the grain, and the weed subdued —
See now the slug and the mildew plunder.
Evil does overwhelm
The larkspur and the corn;
We have seen them go under.

Let us sit here, sit still,
Here in the sitting-room until we die;
At the step of Death on the walk, rise and go;
Leaving to our children’s children the beautiful doorway,
And this elm,
And a blighted earth to till
With a broken hoe.

This is the standard version of “Justice Denied In Massachusetts”; it is, importantly, not
the only published version of the poem. Moreover, it is likely not the version from which
Tate was drawing, since he explicitly references and critiques the presence of a footnote:
“Why (as we are told in a footnote to the poem) the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti
should have anything to do with the rotting of the crops, it is never made clear” (77). This
particular complaint is, of course, highly ironic: a devotee of The Waste Land is quibbling
over footnotes and admonishing ambiguity. But this, the standard version of the poem,
does not contain any overt references to the Sacco-Vanzetti case within the title or the
stanzas that follow. The injustice of the event is opaquely termed “this cloud” in lines 4
and 6; and “we have marched upon but cannot conquer” in lines 7 and 8 is perhaps the
most explicit reference to activism in the entire poem.

Another version of the poem—the first published version—appeared in the New
York Times on the morning of August 22, 1927 (Figure 1). It contains supplementary
material of the type that Tate references—although not, technically, a footnote. To the
best of my knowledge, none of the published versions of “Justice Denied In
Massachusetts” circulating between 1927 and 1938 contained an actual footnote.
Even when the poem was reprinted in Millay’s Collected Lyrics (1943) and Collected
Poems (1949)—still no footnote. This is not to discount Tate’s complaint. Whether the
footnote was real or Tate was speaking metaphorically, he is correct in calling attention to a textual insufficiency, which resides at the heart of the poem. What do Sacco and Vanzetti have to do with “the rotting of the crops”? And why is the text of the poem so unwilling to yield these answers?

The *New York Times* version of “Justice Denied In Massachusetts” provides some measure of defense against Tate’s readerly concerns. As Figure 1 makes plain, the newspaper explicitly embeds the poem within the context of Sacco and Vanzetti’s recent trial and impending executions. That day, the *Times* carried nineteen articles and interviews in addition to Millay’s poem all of which focused explicitly on Sacco and Vanzetti. The coverage depicts protests across the United States, as well as in Japan, Germany, France, and Cordoba, Argentina, where the bombing of a Ford plant was thought to be connected to Sacco and Vanzetti. The poem’s supplementary titles—“Poem by Miss Millay on Sacco and Vanzetti” and “Written as Her Contribution to the Campaign to Save Them”—direct the reader to these political events that were immediately unfolding—within the very pages of the newspaper.

The executions of Sacco and Vanzetti were scheduled for midnight, August 23, 1927—just hours after the poem’s initial publication. Published as it was on the eve of their executions, the poem was designed, ostensibly, to pressure the Governor of Massachusetts, Alvan T. Fuller, to issue a stay of execution. On the morning of August 22, simultaneous to the poem’s publication, Millay had secured an interview with Fuller. Later that day, she sent him an urgent letter:

Tonight, with this world in doubt, with this Commonwealth drawing into its lungs with every breath the difficult air of doubt, with the eyes of Europe turned
Westward upon Massachusetts and upon the whole United States in distress and harrowing doubt—are you still so sure? Does no faintest shadow of question gnaw at your mind? (Letters 222)

As the letter continues, Millay appeals to the Governor’s faith as well as his ego, by comparing him to Christ: “Think back. Think back a long time. Which way would He have turned, this Jesus of your faith?—Oh, not the way in which your feet are set!” And she closes her letter with a passionate plea: “I cry to you with a million voices: answer our doubt. Exert the clemency which your high office affords. There is need in Massachusetts of a great man tonight. It is not yet too late for you to be that man” (222).

Ironically, in the Times, Millay does not exploit—at least not fully—the considerable power of her individual celebrity. She was in 1927 one of the most famous and well-regarded poets in America, a distinction that she shared with the likes of Robert Frost, Edwin Arlington Robinson, and Amy Lowell. Yet, in the newspaper’s very public pages, her poetic identity and her lyric voice are strategically effaced. When she wrote to the Governor, Millay had exerted a distinctly personal form of pressure: “During my interview,” “I called to your attention,” “I suggested,” “I believed,” and “I cry” (222, emphasis added). But in the newspaper, it is the “million voices,” a collectivity of political activists and supporters of Sacco and Vanzetti, who stand in the fore. Indeed, the supplementary text claims that “Justice Denied In Massachusetts” was not even submitted to the Times by Millay herself; it was passed on by “Ruth Hale, who has been active in the Sacco-Vanzetti defense campaign.” Hale endorses the poem, as an expression of the “feeling many of us have about the Sacco-Vanzetti execution.” The poem reinforces this collective logic; it is filled with “we,” “us,” and “our”—not a single
“I” or “me.” The absence of the first-person singular subject is particularly striking coming from Millay—a poet whose entire reputation had been staked on autobiographical lyrics.

In January 1928, “Justice Denied In Massachusetts” was also re-printed in the poetry anthology America Arraigned! edited by Lucia Trent and Ralph Cheyney. Again, no footnote was necessary, since the entire anthology was devoted to the Sacco and Vanzetti trial, their executions, and the aftermath. Millay’s poem is one of more than fifty contributions, written by influential figures, including John Haynes Holmes (who helped to found both the NAACP and the ACLU), Louis Ginsberg (father of Allen), John Dos Passos, Countee Cullen, Lola Ridge, Babette Deutsch, John Gould Fletcher, Witter Bynner, Arthur Davison Ficke, as well as Trent and Cheyney. The anthology also opens with two substantive essays, a Foreword by Trent and Cheyney and an Introduction by Holmes, both of which emphasize the particular, ongoing historical events to which the poems are responding. The anthology divides the poems into three chronological sections, which further detail the timeline of events and situate the poems in their appropriate historical contexts: (1) “Before Governor Fuller and His Advisory Commission Refused To Intercede”; (2) “After Intercession Was Refused But Before the Crucifixion”; and (3) “After the Crucifixion.” Interestingly, “Justice Denied In Massachusetts” appears in the third and final section. Although it is true that the poem was published just prior to Sacco and Vanzetti’s executions, this is, strictly speaking, a historical misrepresentation: the poem was authored and initially published “Before the Crucifixion.” This editorial decision places America Arraigned! at odds with the New York Times. In its first published version, “Justice Denied In Massachusetts” is presented
as a plea designed to “save” Sacco and Vanzetti; by its second iteration, it has been transformed into an elegy.

All of the print material surrounding “Justice Denied In Massachusetts” is essential to unearthing the poem’s complex meanings. Context does not simply enrich this poem—it elucidates it fundamentally. Without recourse to material residing outside the poem—be it papers, persons, or political feelings—the poem remains fundamentally illegible. On this point, Tate is absolutely correct: “Justice Denied In Massachusetts” demands supplementation. However, I want to underscore the fact that this contextual material in no way resolves the poem; no more than Eliot’s footnotes resolve *The Waste Land*. From the *Times* and *America Arraigned!* we can already begin to see some of the ways that “Justice Denied In Massachusetts” uses contextual material to press against the lyric’s conventional boundaries. This is not a traditionally Romantic conception of poetic production; the feelings the poem evokes and the events it chronicles—its very authorship and readership—are plural and shifting. Even the most seemingly incontrovertible truths about this poem—its aesthetic form and political function—are contextually determined and, hence, unstable. The poem is not cryptic, but strategically, intentionally unfinished. It requires a community to pass it on, and a dynamic, material context of presentation to make sense and meaning out of it. It is, in this sense, an open, innovative form: it reaches outward rather than inward, fuses rather than unfolds meaning. This is not simply a politicization of the classic function of the lyric; it is also the innovation of a new aesthetic form. As my readings will demonstrate, Millay’s poetry harbors a logic of articulation—a formal sense of contingency—at its very core.

In advancing these claims, I build strategically on the work of cultural studies
scholars who have come before me. Cary Nelson, in particular, has provided a rich archive of poetic evidence testifying to the necessity of contextualizing political poems. His landmark study *Repression and Recovery* (1989) famously expands the canon of modern American poetry; however, in so doing, he also issues a powerful methodological challenge. According to Nelson, democratizing the field of modernist American poetry means more than simply adding previously marginal or repressed literatures into the canon. The canon determines what poems we read; but it also seeks to limit the ways that we read them. The New Critical canon, Nelson observes, is marked fundamentally by the reductive, polarizing logic of mid-century America: an ideological worldview that pitted “freedom” against “communism,” the United States against the Soviet Union, and that made “most of the world’s diverse cultures simply invisible to us” (37). The New Critics, he argues, similarly attempted to manage modernist poetry’s “wild diversity” through a rigidly ordered binary of poetic and non-poetic discourses (37). Sentimentality, I have already suggested, represents one of the primary means by which scholars have attempted to rescue modernist women’s poetries from the domain of the non-poetic. However, in revaluing these poetries as “sentimental,” we have in fact reified their distance from the world of form and aesthetics—from the poetic—almost entirely. Although positively revalued, modernist sentimental poetry remains stuck in a reductive opposition to high modernist texts.

Following Nelson, we can trace this problematic back to the New Critics’ desire to “fix” poetry’s social function:

The canon is not only a model of a particular culture’s notions of literary quality; it is a guide to how literature should engage such matters as sexuality, politics,
race, religion, and individuation. This becomes a decidedly anti-intellectual force when its results are fixed and unchallenged, since a stable canon tends to close the process of interrogating these cultural relations. They become naturalized, given features of our received notions of literariness. The canon suggests that both literary quality and the nature of literature’s social relations are always already substantially decided, rather than being sites of continuing struggle and negotiation. (38)

The New Critics did not simply exclude political poems from the modernist canon; more fundamentally, they attempted to control “the nature of literature’s social relations.” This methodological move has given rise to a profoundly limited vision of modernist poetic form. Only by restoring the fluid, indeterminate, and fundamentally open nature of those relations prior to the New Criticism, can we recover the historical diversity of modernist poetry in the teens and twenties. “Justice Denied In Massachusetts”—like all of the ostensibly “minor” poems contained within this dissertation—thus poses a very real epistemological threat to the dominant New Critical order. It is therefore not surprising that the New Critics could not or would not read it. Within and through “Justice Denied in Massachusetts,” Millay is battling over the nature of modernist poetic form and contesting the lyric’s changing relationship to modernity. This is why the poem can shift, chameleon-like, from a plea to an elegy: its formal relationship to modern society is always at stake or being staked through the act of reading.

“The beautiful doorway”

From its opening line, “Justice Denied In Massachusetts” invites the reader repeatedly into its world: “Let us abandon then our gardens and go home,” “Let us go home, and sit
in the sitting-room,” “Let us sit here, sit still.” These repeated invocations of “us” and “we” actively solicit the reader’s involvement, and ultimately render her complicit in the failure of justice surrounding the Sacco-Vanzetti case—“we” who would “sit” idly by while two men die. In her essay “Fear,” which was issued in pamphlet form by the Sacco-Vanzetti Defense Committee in the fall of 1927 (after appearing in *Outlook* on November 9, 1927), Millay similarly faults her passive readers for failing to save Sacco and Vanzetti. “The executions of the death sentence upon them went forward without interference,” she bitterly observes, “there were no violent demonstrations” (3). In the aftermath of their deaths, Millay attempts to awaken her reading public from this state of complacency:

You are as cross as an old dog asleep on the hearth if I shake you and try to get you out into the rainy wind. This is because what you want most out of life is not to be disturbed. You wish to lie peacefully asleep for a few years yet, and then to lie peacefully dead. (“Fear” 4)

Millay places the blame for Sacco and Vanzetti’s deaths squarely on the shoulders of an American citizenry that she believes has become dangerously disconnected from public life — those who would “sit here, sit still, / Here in the sitting-room until we die” (lines 30-31). “For you so long to return to your gracious world of a year ago,” she writes,

Where people had pretty manners and did not raise their voices; where people whom you knew, whom you had entertained in your houses, did not shout and weep and walk the streets vulgarly carrying banners, because two quite inconsequential people, two men who could not even speak good English, were
about to be put forever out of mischief’s way. Do let us forget, you say; after all, what does it matter? (“Fear” 3, emphasis original)

Politically, Millay is condemning the conservatism and privatization that were sweeping America in the decade after WWI—the arrival, we might say, of Warren G. Harding’s long-awaited “normalcy.”

But Millay’s critique in both “Justice Denied In Massachusetts” and “Fear” is also importantly aesthetic. For instance, her indictment of sitting in the “sitting-room” provides an ironic counterpoint to John Donne’s “The Canonization,” and its classic resignation, “We’ll build in sonnets pretty rooms” (line 32). (Donne’s male speaker, it is worth noting, also implores his female beloved, “For God’s sake hold your tongue, and let me love.” This is a line to which the bulk of Millay’s love poems might be said to respond—in the negative.) Such consolations against the world—the palliative function of verse—are bitterly undercut by Millay’s venom: “In a freedom already so riddled and gashed by the crimes of the state this ugly rent is with difficulty to be distinguished at all” (“Fear” 3). To read—or to love—privately and passively—to pass our time “Here in the sitting-room until we die”—is no longer enough. A world that we have carefully cultivated is decaying before our eyes: “Evil does overwhelm / The larkspur and the corn; / We have seen them go under” (lines 27-29).

“Justice Denied In Massachusetts” also offers a strategic rearticulation of “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” and its opening solicitation, “Let us go then, you and I.” John Timberman Newcomb thus argues that Millay is mocking “the fashionably alienated stance towards contemporary society exemplified by Eliotic high modernism” (n.pag.). However, in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” Eliot was also mocking a
claustrophobic domesticity: an oppressive innerscape of coffee spoons, tea cups, and marmalade, which numbed his neurotic narrator to the world, and rendered him fundamentally impotent. Eliot was critiquing—not condoning—a world of idle chatter and inactivity: “In the room the women come and go / Talking of Michelangelo.” Despite their important political differences, Millay and Eliot share a similar disdain for bourgeois domesticity, and, concomitantly, the domesticated form of the traditional lyric. Millay is therefore mimicking—not simply mocking—some of Eliot’s key aesthetic strategies, in Prufrock and throughout his work, for opening the traditionally closed lyric form: for disrupting its temporal, spatial, and vocal integrity. As we will see in Chapter 4, Sara Teasdale redeployes “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” to similar effect in her radical anti-war poem “Sons.” Indeed, all of the poets who comprise this study issued sharp critiques of traditional domestic politics and conventionally domesticated poetry, which often brought their poetry and prose into conversation with their avant-garde and high modern contemporaries. Charting these intertextual resonances represents one, important tactic for breaking down the deeply entrenched divide between “sentimental” and high modernist poetries.

As Michael Thurston notes, the political poems contained within America Arraigned! work collectively, intertextually, to produce their effects. This polyvocality, he claims, aligns the volume provocatively with an Eliotic poetics. Whereas The Waste Land presents a single poet doing many voices, Thurston writes, America Arraigned! offers multiple poets attempting to speak in a single voice (26). In Revolutionary Memory, Cary Nelson suggests that this polyvocality—what he terms a “choral poetics”—represents a constitutive feature of the poetry of the American Left. For
example, in an analysis of the anti-fascist poetry produced in response to the Spanish Civil War—a tradition that includes poems by Langston Hughes, Kenneth Rexroth, Edwin Rolfe, Genevieve Taggard, and even Millay herself, for her contribution, “Say That We Saw Spain Die”—Nelson documents how the name “Madrid” echoes like “a rallying cry and an incantation” across myriad, diverse poetic contexts. “Madrid Madrid Madrid Madrid / I call your name endlessly, savor it like a lover,” Rolfe writes in “City of Anguish.” “In poem after poem in country after country,” “across time and space,” Nelson shows, other poets took up Rolfe’s cry (128). This meta-poetic collaboration undoubtedly strengthens the poems’ political weight, as Nelson observes. But it also changes the way that readers engage with this political poetry. Choral poems demand a uniquely plural strategy of reading. They cannot be considered in isolation from one another, because their tropical repetitions and rearticulations are essential to their collective meaning. A “choral poetics” is therefore radically contingent upon context.

In its earliest published forms, “Justice Denied In Massachusetts” functions effectively as a choral poem. As Ralph Cheyney writes in “The White Terror,” one of his poetic contributions to America Arraigned!, “Come, let our voices all be heard / In revolutionary thunder” (lines 10-11). In fact, reading this call and response within America Arraigned! helps to shed light on one of the poem’s most frustrating ambiguities; as Tate asked, what do Sacco and Vanzetti have to do with “the rotting of the crops” (77)? Many poems contained within America Arraigned! deploy natural or pastoral imagery, similar to “Justice Denied In Massachusetts,” in order to render the tragedy of Sacco and Vanzetti’s executions. This reliance on the pastoral, I would argue, represents one of the volume’s most sophisticated aesthetic strategies.
Although it is outside the scope of this chapter to chart all of these complex associations, two poems do warrant particular attention. The first is “A Half Hour Before the Execution of Sacco and Vanzetti” by Ettore Rella. Rella’s poem is poised on the same temporal brink as “Justice Denied In Massachusetts” had been when it appeared in the *New York Times*. In that first publication, Millay’s “blighted earth” (line 34) had served as an apocalyptic warning, not yet reality; in subsequent printings, however, it would be transformed into a realistic account of the present. This terrifying future tense is made even more explicit in the text of Rella’s poem: “There will be no light / in a half hour” (line 1-2); “In a half hour / there will be no sound” (lines 7-8). Yet, Rella still holds out hope for the future:

Molten streams
trickle into countless hearts
and black shells
sound the thin crackle of doom.
The very earth
quivers and splits
and there is only ruin at her heart. . . .

Women have not lost their ancient wail. (lines 25-32, ellipses original)

The poem establishes a stereotypical equation between women and nature; emotion is also very familiarly coded as female. However, Rella seizes hold of these conventional associations in order to highlight their radical potential. The cry of women, which is also the cry of Earth itself, is not one of sorrow, resignation, or defeat. Here, this “ancient wail” represents the locus of political change. The spatial logic of the pastoral is therefore crucial to Ettore’s lyric; he balances the dynamic outer world of “molten streams” against the static inner “ruin” of the “heart.” But unlike traditional domestic verse, the heart, here, will not be contained—emotion will not remain strictly personal. The “ancient wail”
in the poem’s final line exteriorizes emotion—sets it free. As in “Justice Denied In Massachusetts,” we can read this spatial shift as an important commentary on the status of the lyric: it signals a rejection of the cloistered, domestic forms of the nineteenth century in favor of a more liberated, worldly lyric.

Lucia Trent’s poem “How Your World Trembles” further strengthens these new formal associations:

Lovers, glide through your mirrored halls,  
Or kiss a while by your garden walls,

Pink tea ladies with gold lorgnettes  
Expatiate on your red sunsets.

Your way of life is any easy thing  
Where one may chuckle and choose and sing.

In another world is an iron door.  
Two men stare at a sullen floor.

Watch from citadels of ease  
How your world trembles at men like these! (44)

Trent juxtaposes two competing scenes of domestication: one is a site of bourgeois affluence and the other, a prison. However, in Trent’s vision, it is the prisoners who exert real power, not the wealthy. “Mirrored halls” create the illusion that the pleasures and privileges of the “Pink tea ladies” extend infinitely beyond their walls; just as a garden provides a semblance of nature and “expatiating” on sunsets serves as a substitute for actually watching them. But the inhabitants of this “citadel of ease” have been duped: their power is a paltry thing, a right to “choose,” sandwiched between the limited options of chuckling and singing. The real power, capable of making the world tremble, arises from within the iron walls of this prison. As in “Justice Denied In Massachusetts” and “A Half Hour Before the Execution of Sacco and Vanzetti,” the lyric harbors the capacity to
make private emotions public—to channel the negative emotions of “sullenness,” sorrow, and resignation into positive political action. Each of these poems explicitly critiques a traditionally sentimental, domesticated lyric—one in which emotions simply mirror back onto themselves. By seizing hold of the pastoral, they demonstrate that these negative emotions have the potential to change the world. In Chapter 4, I examine the relationship between sentimental and pastoral forms in greater detail. Understanding the complex imbrication of these two forms, since at least the Enlightenment, can help us to chart a richer aesthetic legacy for modernist sentimental poetry.

In their introduction to *America Arraigned!*, Trent and Cheyney explicitly alert their readers to the dynamic forms of poetry that follow:

This book is published with a three-fold function. It is a memorial tribute to Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, martyrs for world brotherhood and freedom. It is a protest against the rape of justice by Massachusetts in murdering these noble and innocent men and also by the Justices of the Supreme Court of the United States and by President Calvin Coolidge in not interfering. We hope that it will serve likewise as a clarion-call to participate in the labor movement for which Sacco and Vanzetti gave up their lives on the electric chair and which alone can prevent the repetition of such a tragedy. (9)

“Memorial,” “protest,” and “clarion-call to participate”—each of these formal functions underscores poetry’s performative capacities. *America Arraigned!* is not a static index of historical events; it seeks, instead, to enact historical change. These are poems designed to make something happen.
Trent and Cheyney also inform their readers that a portion of the manuscript of *America Arraigned!* had originally been sent to Governor Fuller to try to persuade him to issue a stay of execution for Sacco and Vanzetti. They reprint the letter that had accompanied that first draft of the manuscript:

In the name of the foremost poets of America we are sending you part of the manuscript of an anthology of poems protesting against the conviction and punishment of Sacco and Vanzetti, which will be published in the event that these men are not set free. These poems are an indication of the attitude of our poets in regard to this case. If these innocent martyrs are sent to the chair as victims of war hysteria...this book will live to cry shame on the justice of Massachusetts. (9)

The letter, which is also signed, “Yours for American fair play,” forges an intimate connection between the juridical and literary establishments. This grounding homology is essential to *America Arraigned!*: where the juridical system has failed, poetry will step in.

We know that the executions of Sacco and Vanzetti signaled a profound political crisis for the American Left. Writers and activists like Millay were stunned by the failures of their own activism (“We have marched upon but cannot conquer”); the passive indifference of the American public (“Let us abandon then our gardens and go home); and the unwillingness of America’s political leaders to intervene in a judicial process that they strongly believed had run amuck (“The sun that warmed our stooping backs and withered the weed uprooted — / We shall not feel it again.”) But I am arguing that this moment of political failure paradoxically yielded a newly productive aesthetics. In a moment of political impasse, poetry was re-formed.
This is why Millay claims that she publishes the essay “Fear”—even though Sacco and Vanzetti can no longer be saved. There is a “blindness and fear” infecting American society that will live on, despite their deaths, but which, Millay believes, is not yet “beyond our power to change” (3). John Dewey, whose essay “Psychology and Justice” accompanies Millay’s in the Sacco-Vanzetti Defense Committee pamphlet, advances a similar claim. “Sacco and Vanzetti are dead,” his essay bluntly begins, “No discussion of their innocence or guilt can restore them to life” (10). Dewey continues,

That issue is now merged in a larger one which in turn is merged in the comprehensive issue of the tone and temper of American public opinion and sentiment, as they affect judgment and action in any social question wherein racial divisions and class interests are involved. These issues did not pass with the execution of these men. (10)

Following Sacco and Vanzetti’s deaths, Dewey recasts the political crisis surrounding the Sacco-Vanzetti case in decidedly affective terms: the problem is one of “tone,” “temper,” “public opinion,” and “sentiment.” This emphasis is significant: Dewey is suggesting that the legal and social challenges America faces in regard to race, ethnicity, class, and immigration might be productively approached, if not resolved, through recourse to affect and emotion. The executions of Sacco and Vanzetti, Dewey says, “lie heavy on the conscience of many, and they will rise in multitudes of unexpected ways to trouble the emotions and stir the thoughts of the most thoughtless and conventional” (3).

Millay is likewise attuned to the affective dimensions of the Sacco and Vanzetti case. “Unkindness, hypocrisy, and greed,” she writes, “these are the forces that shall bring us low and enslave our children” (4-5). At the outset of “Fear,” she also announces
that she will not “name” Sacco and Vanzetti at any point in the essay, because of their powerful effect on her readers:

I do not call these men by name, for I know how nervous and irritable you become at the sight of these names on the printed page; how your cheek flushes and you cluck with exasperation; how you turn to your family with words on your tongue which in former times you would not have used at all—“vipers, vermin, filth.” (3-4)

As in “Justice Denied In Massachusetts,” Millay is thus strategically non-specific about the case: she refers to Sacco and Vanzetti as “they,” “them,” “these men,” or “these men whom I do not name” (3). However, as she makes clear, this is a conscious strategy, designed to subvert her audiences’ automatic, unconscious, bodily responses to the “blindness and fear” of classism, racism, nationalism, and xenophobia. In the face of these powerfully affective forces, her readers’ behavior and language—indeed, their very cheeks and tongues—are not their own. In refusing to name Sacco and Vanzetti, Millay is encouraging her readers to supply the names themselves—to be forced to speak the names, to remember Sacco and Vanzetti.

Millay’s sophisticated insights into the fundamentally affective nature of racial and class politics gesture importantly toward recent developments in the contemporary field of affect theory. One of the key claims anchoring these otherwise diverse studies is that affect and emotion are not only individual, psychological, and subjective, but also social, physical, and objective. Sara Ahmed, whose work proves especially relevant to Millay’s, has made this case in a particularly convincing fashion. Rather than viewing affects and emotions as the private property of individuals, Ahmed theorizes what she
terms “affective economies”; these are public, collective sites, which are bodily, social, and material as well as psychic. In these “affective economies,” Ahmed writes, “emotions do things”:

They align individuals with communities—or bodily space with social space—through the very intensity of their attachments. Rather than seeing emotions as psychological dispositions, we need to consider how they work, in concrete and particular ways, to mediate the relationship between the psychic and the social, and between the individual and the collective. (“Affective Economies” 119, emphasis original)

Borrowing from Freudian psychoanalysis as well as Marxist theory, Ahmed argues that it is the mobility or “nonresidence” of these affects, which enables them to so successfully “bind” subjects and objects together (“adherence”) and to create communities (“coherence”) (“AE” 119). In Ahmed’s economic model of emotions, “emotions work as a form of capital,” meaning that “affect does not reside positively in the sign or commodity, but is produced only as an effect of its circulation” (“AE” 120). This observation is central to Ahmed’s work, because it helps her to account for how emotions slip so easily between bodies and objects, through spaces, and across time. That is, an economic model of affect shows not only that affects attach themselves to a shifting array of subjects and objects, but also that they harbor the power to bring those entities into being.

Moreover, like Millay, Ahmed is particularly concerned with the slipperiness—and, hence, constitutive power—of fear. Fear, Ahmed notes, has often been defined in contrast with anxiety; whereas fear is considered to have an object—a material
threat on which the affect is based—anxiety is perceived as having none (Cultural Politics 64). Ahmed challenges this traditional model by suggesting that fear is “linked to the ‘passing by’ of the object” (65). The logic of fear, she suggests, is fundamentally “metonymic”: it involves a continual displacement of and fleeing from the object(s) of fear (CP 65). Fear, like anxiety, is therefore mobile, diffuse, and shifting. Ahmed writes, “To this extent, fear does not involve the defense of borders that already exist; rather fear makes those borders, by establishing objects from which the subject, in fearing, can flee” (67).

We can see this metonymic logic at work in the Sacco and Vanzetti case: even after Sacco and Vanzetti’s deaths, the public’s fear did not subside. Indeed, according to both Millay and Dewey, these dangerous affects were, in fact, intensifying and proliferating. White middle-class Americans had displaced their fears regarding race, class, and immigration onto these two working-class Italian immigrants. They had believed, wrongly, that they could protect America’s national borders and, hence, the integrity of the white middle-class body, by executing Sacco and Vanzetti. But with the loss of this object, their fears merely multiplied—circulating onto new objects, investing in new subjects, and requiring the policing of yet more borders. As a result, their flight had also become increasingly desperate. Americans were now moving away from the entire world. Ahmed thus argues that fear, in essence,

Involves a particular kind of bodily relation to the world, in which openness itself is read as a site of potential danger, and as demanding evasive action. Emotions may involve readings of such openness, as spaces where bodies and worlds meet and leak into each other. Fear involves reading such openings as dangerous; the
openness of the body to the world involves a sense of danger, which is *anticipated as future pain or injury*. In fear, the world presses against the body; the body shrinks back from the world in the desire to avoid the object of fear. Fear involves shrinking the body; *it restricts the body’s mobility precisely insofar as it seems to prepare the body for flight*. (CP 69, emphasis original)

I have already begun to highlight some of the key strategies that Millay uses within the *New York Times, America Arraigned!* and the standard text of “Justice Denied In Massachusetts” to open the traditionally closed lyric form and, in so doing, to challenge the increasing passivity and privatization of American politics. Following Ahmed, we can also connect Millay’s aesthetic “openness” to a progressive racial and class politics. Ahmed notes that Western culture’s fear and degradation of emotion is motivated in large part by an irrational fear of the animal-like, the uncivilized, the primitive—at root, it is a fear of becoming “less white, by allowing those who are recognized as racially other to penetrate the surface of the body” (CP 3). In “Fear,” Millay consciously attempts to subvert these deeply entrenched affective and racial structures.

For instance, in one of the essay’s more opaque passages, Millay writes, “For whether or not these men whom I do not name were guilty of the crime of murder, it was not for murder that they died. The crime for which they died was the crime of breathing upon the frosty window and looking out” (4). In this assessment, Millay deploys “the frosty window” as a metonym for a cold-hearted nation. She is suggesting that Sacco and Vanzetti died for the sheer audacity of their faith in American democracy—for attempting to make America—through the very act of their breathing—more transparent, more open. Millay draws on this imagery again later in the essay:
These men were castaways upon our shore, and we, an ignorant and savage tribe, have put them to death because their speech and their manners were different from our own, and because to the untutored mind that which is strange is in its infancy ludicrous, but in its prime evil, dangerous, and to be done away with.

These men were put to death because they made you nervous; and your children know it. The minds of your children are like clear pools, reflecting faithfully whatever passes on the bank; whereas in the pool of your own mind, whenever an alien image bends above, a fish of terror leaps to meet it, shattering its reflection. (5)

Here, Millay inverts the typical logic of racism; it is white America—“we”—who are represented as the “ignorant and savage tribe.” Notice, too, the pun on “prime evil” (“primeval”). She suggests that America is regressing, while the rest of the world—“strangers”—are modernizing and maturing. Millay thus attempts to highlight a racial paradox: it is the closed nation, not the open one, which devolves into savagery. The minds of young Americans are open, clear, and capable of adapting to “whatever passes”; while older Americans, sticking to their fears and prejudices, are blind to everything but “terror,” which mirrors continually back onto itself. Millay deploys this poetic imagery in an attempt to re-form America: to dispel white Americans’ fears and to involve them actively in a newly dynamic, open nation. Millay does not flee from America’s fears; she faces them directly and productively.

Despite its echoes of “Forlorn, forlorn,” “Justice Denied In Massachusetts” is therefore not a traditionally sentimental, resigned, or solipsistic poem. In the poem’s final stanza, Millay writes,
Let us sit here, sit still,
Here in the sitting-room until we die;
At the step of Death on the walk, rise and go;
Leaving to our children’s children the beautiful doorway,
And this elm,
And a blighted earth to till
With a broken hoe.

There is much more to be said about this remarkably complex poem. It deserves an even closer analysis than the one I have provided. But I want to suggest, before I return to Tate and the New Critics, that we consider this powerful imagery as a material basis for Millay’s poetics. To answer Tate’s question: Millay renders Sacco and Vanzetti’s deaths in natural imagery because she is seeking a newly organic metaphor for both poetry and the nation. The nineteenth-century sentimentalists who preceded Millay had forged a similar intimacy: through their domestic poetry, they sought to reform America’s domestic politics. Millay’s image of the “beautiful doorway” retains a trace of the feminine, domestic heritage that she will rely upon throughout her career; but it also points toward her bold, “new” innovations. If Sara Ahmed relies on the metaphor of capital to register the dynamic circulations of bodies and affects that constitute modern life, then “Justice Denied In Massachusetts” models a textual and metaphorical “field.” Millay is therefore pursuing a radical opening of the traditionally private stuff of affect and affective poetry.  

“A lady-like lyric”

In a letter to Arthur Davison Ficke written in May 1938—the same year that Ransom’s “Criticism, Inc.” appeared in The World’s Body and Tate issued “Tension In Poetry”—Millay provides a rare reflection on her changing critical status. She tells Ficke
that she believes that the Pulitzer Prize in Poetry, which she had been awarded in 1923, was now “being given or with-held more for moral than for aesthetic reasons” (Letters 294). As evidence, she cites, first, the “puzzling” snubbing of Elinor Wylie, whose Collected Poems had been published posthumously in 1932 to great critical acclaim. “What could they have against her?” Millay asks, “Then it came to me. They knew, as everybody knew, that she had left her husband and child to run off to Europe with a married man. That was why she never got a Pulitzer Prize” (295). Next, she makes a similar argument on behalf of Robinson Jeffers: “Why had he never gotten it? This was easy…Rape, incest, homosexuality and other forms of plain and fancy fornication are the subject matter of all his books. No chance for him” (295). Finally, Millay turns to her own case. I cite a lengthy portion of the remainder of this letter, because it provides a number of sophisticated insights into the changing nature of the critical academy and Millay’s tenuous foothold within it:

I wondered why I, having been once awarded this prize in 1923, never received it afterwards, although Robert Frost and [Edwin Arlington] Robinson seemed to be taking turns at receiving it year after year. I remembered that not so very long after “The Harp-Weaver” was published I went to Boston and walked up and down before the State House and carried a placard protesting against the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti, suggesting that President Lowell of Harvard was withholding evidence which might have freed these men; that I was arrested and taken to jail for this and that the whole country knew it. With how much affection following this action of mine would an aged professor of Harvard look upon my subsequently published volumes? […]

Now take Robinson and Frost. What a relief these two poets must have been to the harassed judges of the Pulitzer award. If their private lives, both sexual and political, were not thoroughly blameless, I have never heard about this. The judges must have felt entirely happy and at ease in their minds the moment that either Robinson or Frost published a new collection of poems. (295-296)

Millay is absolutely correct in presuming that her radical politics were coming to bear importantly on her critical reputation. She also anticipates how central a role “Justice Denied In Massachusetts,” and her activism surrounding the Sacco and Vanzetti case, would play in determining her institutional fate. But Millay, in fact, underestimates the scope and significance of these transformations. She suggests that by the late 1930s morality had become a substitute for aesthetics; in actuality, the two forces had become complexly, almost indistinguishably, entangled.

This is why the gendered and political stakes of modernist sentimental poetry are always also aesthetic. It is not just the “private lives” of modernist women poets that proved so damning within the academy, but their persistent poetic telling. As Genevieve Taggard argues, many male modernists—there are, of course, important exceptions, like Jeffers—were encumbered by rigid gendered codes, which forbid direct emotional expression. Their lyrics nonetheless found a new freedom, but only in terms of language, rhythm, rhyme, and meter. It was an “insurgent generation” of women poets who pushed the modern lyric open even further:

The men poets as a whole show the ill effects of the prejudice against personal feeling, by writing with either a half-hearted desire, or an over-sophisticated covering for their lyric impulses. Men are mistakenly supposed to be less fragile
than women. In America quite the reverse is true. Vitality marks the women, and an almost fatal delicacy, a Hamlet-like neurosis is the outstanding characteristic of such widely differing kinds of poets as Conrad Aiken, Wallace Stevens, Max Eastman, and George Sterling. (“Classics of the Future” 626)

“An over-sophisticated covering,” “a fatal delicacy,” and “a Hamlet-like neurosis”—this material residue, we might say, is the “difficulty” that has come to be known as modernist poetic form. It is also the ostensibly “Impersonal” armor that protected many male modernists—and some women poets too—from the condemnations of a New Critical academy that was increasingly “prejudiced against personal feeling.” It is not the feelings that bothered the New Critics, so much as the formal openness and seeming simplicity required to convey them. A permeable poem, like a porous nation, strikes fear in the hearts of many white middle-class Americans.

Instead of engaging actively with “Justice Denied In Massachusetts,” Tate simply turns away from the poem. He writes,

These lines are mass language: they arouse an affective state in one set of terms, and suddenly an object quite unrelated to those terms gets the benefit of it; and this effect, which is usually achieved, as I think it is here, without conscious effort, is sentimentality. Miss Millay’s poem was admired when it first appeared about ten years ago, and is no doubt still admired, by persons to whom it communicates certain feelings about social justice, by persons for whom the lines are the occasion of feelings shared by them and the poet. But if you do not share those feelings, as I happen not to share them in the images of desiccated nature, the lines and even the entire poem are impenetrably obscure. (77, emphasis added)
If we were to bracket the phrase “without conscious effort,” the operation that Tate identifies within Millay’s poetry might not be “sentimentality” at all, but, rather, the “objective correlative.” At stake in Tate’s reading, as in Eliot’s famous formulation, is the process by which emotion manifests in and is communicated through poetic form. By displacing the “affective state” of the Sacco-Vanzetti trial onto a natural landscape, Millay has enacted a process notably similar to the one that Eliot advocates. “The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art,” Eliot proclaims, “is by finding an ‘objective correlative’; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked” (48).

By accusing Millay of affecting emotional transference without conscious effort, Tate denies her the formal materiality of an objective poetics. He is also borrowing from Eliot a remarkably inelegant distinction between “personal” and “Impersonal” poetries. “The bad poet,” according to Eliot, “is usually unconscious where he ought to be conscious, and conscious where he ought to be unconscious. Both errors tend to make him ‘personal’” (43). Without conscious effort means, to both Tate and Eliot, that a poet sidesteps the material world of form entirely and communicates subject to subject, as if telepathically. This is what it means to be a “personal,” “sentimental,” or “mass-cultural” poet: it is to produce a formally “unconscious” poetry—one in which form remains inert, unmanifest, unrealized. Thus, Tate can suggest that the already initiated will share automatically in the feelings evoked by “Justice Denied In Massachusetts”: they carry those feelings already within them. But the uninitiated, like Tate, will find the poem
“impenetrably obscure,” for there is nothing within the poem, its text, its form, or even its footnote, to convey its store of meaning. The form itself is hollowed out, constructed as it was without conscious effort. Put another way, we might say that according to Tate and Eliot “personal,” sentimental,” or “mass-cultural” poetry equals form subtracted from modernism.

Because there is, ostensibly, nothing there to substantiate the poem, Tate claims that he is unable to read it. He writes,

Good poetry can bear the closest literal examination of every phrase, and is its own safeguard against our irony. But the more closely we examine this lyric, the more obscure it becomes; the more we trace the implications of the imagery, the denser the confusion. (78)

Tate terms this condition of formlessness the “fallacy of communication in poetry” (76). He cites William Empson as a contemporary authority on this critical concept, but also acknowledges that the “communicative fallacy” lies at the heart of Romanticism, and thus extends back to at least 1798, if not before (77). In retrospect, we can also connect Tate’s concept to an intricate network of mid-century American criticism, which he anticipated and inspired, including the influential work of W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley. Tate’s “communicative fallacy” bears a striking resemblance to their “intentional” and “affective” fallacies. At stake in each of these subtly distinct concepts is the problematic of unmediated expression. As Wimsatt and Beardsley explain, “The outcome of either Fallacy, the Intentional or the Affective, is that the poem itself, as an object of specifically critical judgment, tends to disappear” (21).
This alleged formlessness, which is the ostensible result of the communicative, intentional, or affective fallacies, continues to distinguish modernist sentimental poetry fundamentally from high modernism. Critics continue to believe that sentimental poetry “cannot bear” the same close scrutiny as high modernist poetry due to the immateriality of its form. These aesthetic conclusions, which Tate reaches in regard to “Justice Denied In Massachusetts,” remain intimately bound to modernist sentimental poetry more than a half-century later.

But what if the fallacy lies not in the poetry but in the critical method? In his recent analyses of the New Criticism in both *The Crafty Reader* (2001) and *The Paradoxy of Modernism* (2006), Robert Scholes argues that the whole of the New Criticism rests on a false dichotomy between “poetry” and “rhetoric.” We see this logic at work in Cleanth Brooks’ assessment that Millay’s “poems are essentially a triumph of utterance—of rhetoric” (4). He means by this that her poetry contains “no subtle insights,” and that “The conventional and even abstract themes are stated largely and fully, without evasions and without sentimentality” (4). It is clear from Brooks’ reading that the divide between poetry and rhetoric not only separates the poetic from the non-poetic, but also functions as a mode of discriminating within the poetic realm. For Brooks, its rhetorical status is what makes Millay’s poetry “minor.”

Scholes also suggests that this devaluation of poetry’s rhetorical forms is what enables the New Critics to effectively obscure the active role that audiences play in creating textual meaning. Tate writes, “Mass language is the medium of ‘communication,’ and its users are less interested in bringing to formal order what is sometimes called ‘the affective state’ than in arousing that state.” This problem, he
claims, can be found “equally within a lady-like lyric and in much of the political poetry of our time” (76). What Tate calls “mass language” is, in fact, a radical openness—to the active forms of resistance that affect, readers, bodies, and context might bring to bear on a poem. To use poetry to “arouse” rather than to bring to “formal order” is to invite this purportedly damaging sense of contingency into the poem. The ideal New Critical reader is, in this sense, perfectly passive, utterly subordinated to the text’s overwhelming will. As Northrop Frye famously quipped, there is “no word for the audience of the lyric” (31). In his own reading of “Justice Denied In Massachusetts,” Scholes posits an alternative theory: what if Tate is really just a lazy reader—stubbornly unwilling to do the difficult work demanded by Millay’s poetry?24

As I have already begun to demonstrate in my analysis of “Justice Denied In Massachusetts,” these claims to formal distinction between Millay and high modernism do not hold up. Each of these mid-century fallacies posits that modernist sentimental poetry functions in the same subjective, expressive manner as the sentimental poetries of the past. They insist upon a reductively Romantic reading of modernist sentimental poetry—which, undoubtedly, does a disservice to Romantic poetry, as well. To reach these conclusions requires a willful suppression—indeed, a refusal to read—everything that is modern about modernist sentimental poetry.

In the following chapter, I examine the criticism and poetry of Louise Bogan. Bogan’s poetics, which was produced alongside the New Criticism, in conversation with and critique of the work of Eliot, Tate, and Ransom, theorizes a far more complex relationship between emotion and poetic form, the so-called “personal” and “Impersonal” dimensions of modernist poetry, than either Eliot or the New Critics. Indeed, it is on this
primary point, the status of emotion in modernist poetic form that Bogan founds a distinct mode of formalism—a hybrid aesthetics—lying somewhere between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, sentimentality and modernism.
FIGURES

Figure 1. Description preceding “Justice Denied In Massachusetts” in the New York Times on August 22, 1927.

POEM BY MISS MILLAY
ON SACCO AND VANZETTI

Written as Her Contribution to the Campaign to Save Them.

Ruth Hale, who has been active in the Sacco-Vanzetti defense campaign, sent to The Times yesterday the following poem by Edna St. Vincent Millay, who, Miss Hale says, wrote it “as her contribution to the registering of the feeling many of us have about the Sacco-Vanzetti execution”:
Chapter 2

“Who wants to live in a machine?”:
Louise Bogan and the Remaking of Modernism at Mid-Century

My gift depended on the flash—the aperçu. The fake reason, the surface detail, language only—these give no joy.

—Louise Bogan

Disciple of T.S. Eliot, close friend of Allen Tate, poetry reviewer at the New Yorker for thirty-eight years, and consultant in poetry to the Library of Congress (i.e., Poet Laureate) from 1945-46, Louise Bogan had a very different set of academic credentials from Edna St. Vincent Millay or Sara Teasdale. Rather than being marginalized by the mid-century American academy, Bogan was the academy. In her lifetime, Bogan published six books of poetry. The first three—Body of This Death (1923), Dark Summer (1929), and The Sleeping Fury (1937)—contained primarily new material, which established her reputation. The latter three—Poems and New Poems (1941), Collected Poems (1954), and The Blue Estuaries (1968)—relied heavily on poetry she had produced in the 1920s and 30s. For this reason, many of Bogan’s critics and friends have puzzled over her “near silence after 1940” (Bowles 136).

It is true that poetry became an increasingly rare pleasure for Bogan in later years. One of the few poems she produced in the 1940s, “Song for the Last Act,” was inspired by a chance meeting with T.S. Eliot, as she recounts in a letter to her close friend, the critic Morton Zabel, on November 28, 1948:

I sat beside the Great Man at lunch; and I looked into his Golden Eye! […] We talked, during the end of the entrée and through the coffee and ice cream! Of
form, and Youth’s fear of form; of rhythm (we got it back to the heartbeat and the breath); of the true novelist talent; of Henry Miller and little magazines; of Brancusi and modern architecture (“who wants to live in a machine?”) and, finally, of the cat poems! I asked if he had enjoyed writing them; and he said that he had tried them out on “various young listeners.” My favorite, I remarked, was the cat who taught the mice how to crochet. O yes, said he; that, among others, had “scandalized my adult readers.” One adult reader, namely Allen Tate, was being visibly scandalized, just across the luncheon board. (PP 176, emphasis original)

As Mary Kinzie notes, the elation that Bogan experienced from that conversation ended a poetic dry spell that had begun in 1941 (PP 176). As Eliot departed for Stockholm to receive the Nobel Prize, Bogan drafted “Song for the Last Act,” which was published in the New Yorker in October 1949 and subsequently collected in The Blue Estuaries.

But if Bogan ceased to write poetry, in large measure, after 1940, she never stopped writing or thinking about it. As her letter to Zabel makes clear, Bogan had become increasingly preoccupied with questions of poetic form—“the heartbeat and the breath”—and, moreover, the formal legacy of modernism—“who wants to live in a machine?” These are the primary issues with which Bogan grapples in her critical prose, an extensive body of writing produced between 1923 and her death in 1970. As her career as a poet waned, in the 1940s, 50s, and 60s, Bogan reinvented herself as one of the leading poetry critics of her day. She published more than three hundred reviews in The New Yorker alone, while also contributing frequently to a host of other journals and magazines, including Measure, The New Republic, The Nation, Partisan Review, and
Poetry. In 1951, Bogan also published the book-length study, *Achievement in American Poetry, 1900-1950*, which departs importantly from the dominant New Critical methodology of its age. Throughout this rich critical corpus, Bogan weighs in on every poetic advancement—and, as she seems to enjoy pointing out, setback—from Euripides to Emily Dickinson, T.S. Eliot to René Char, and Edna St. Vincent Millay to Anne Sexton. Across a critical career spanning nearly a half century, Bogan had the opportunity to review and then to revise her opinions on major modernists, such as William Butler Yeats, Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, Marianne Moore, H.D., James Joyce, and Virginia Woolf, as they and she shifted from the early to late phases of their careers. (Bogan loved Joyce, for instance, but detested *Finnegan’s Wake*, and had once admired Pound, but mourned his decent into “scatology” and “pure race hatred.”)

This chapter will make an extended case for the significance of Bogan’s poetry criticism. This is an argument, which, unfortunately, still needs to be made, despite Bogan’s indisputable centrality to the field of mid-century American poetry. Mary Kinzie’s elegant volume, *A Poet’s Prose: Selected Writings of Louise Bogan* (2005), brings an invaluable selection of Bogan’s criticism—and thoughtfully edited excerpts from her journals and letters—thankfully back into print. But it is necessary, if we are to appreciate fully the scale and scope of Bogan’s accomplishments, to place this work within the context of the New Criticism against which it was formed. In this chapter, I analyze a series of debates, between Bogan and Allen Tate and John Crowe Ransom, on the point of poetic emotion. Bogan, I will show, developed a sophisticated theory of poetic emotion and its relationship to poetic form, which provides an important critical and philosophical alternative to the New Criticism. At stake in this reading is not merely
the visibility of one body of criticism—one poetics—but our ability to identify and to value the formal innovations of an entire tradition of modernist sentimental poetry. Bogan’s criticism, I will argue, offers a framework for valuing—indeed, a means of seeing—the aesthetic innovations present within her own poetry and the broader field of modernist women’s poetry. While my reading will foreground Bogan’s poetic theories, I will move between her poetry and criticism throughout this chapter, in order to model these methodological contingencies.

Bogan’s theories first arose from her encounters with nineteenth-century French poetry: the Symbolism and Decadence of Charles Baudelaire, Arthur Rimbaud, and, in particular, Stéphane Mallarmé. Early in her career, Bogan discovered Arthur Symons’ *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, first published in 1899, which introduced these influential French poets to an English-speaking audience. Symons emphasized the centrality of emotion to the Symbolists—to Mallarmé’s poetry, in particular:

“Poetry,” said Mallarmé, “is the language of a state of crisis”; and all his poems are the evocation of a passing ecstasy, arrested in mid-flight. This ecstasy is never the mere instinctive cry of the heart, the simple human joy or sorrow, which…he did not admit in poetry. It is a mental transposition of emotion or sensation, veiled with atmosphere, and becoming, as it becomes a poem, pure beauty. (Symons 67)

Mallarmé’s ideas regarding poetic emotion—as translated by Symons—influenced the development of Bogan’s own poetic method significantly (Bowles 23). In a journal entry, dated 1935, Bogan echoes Symons, writing, “Whatever I do, apart from the short cry (lyric poetry) and the short remarks (journalism), must be in the form of notes. Mine is the talent for the cry or the cahier” (PP 83). She makes a virtually identical comment in a
letter to Theodore Roethke dated November 6, 1935, in the course of a witty indictment of the novel form. “I believe in the short story and the long short story,” Bogan writes, “the novel, never. To hell with the novel. But I have such a wonderful idea for one. But my talent is for the cry or the cahier…” (WTWL 117, emphasis and ellipses original). Bogan signs the letter, “Louise Sappho Bogan.”

The “cry” of a female heart—typically a sentimental, and, hence, devalued trope—acquires in Bogan’s conception the status of an innovative form. As this chapter will show, the cahier and the related concept of the aperçu, which Bogan develops elsewhere in her writing, provide metaphors for modeling a complex collision between the subjective and objective dimensions of poetry, emotion and form, sentimentality and modernism. Even as her modernist, and, later, New Critical contemporaries, moved toward an overwhelmingly linguistic approach to poetic form, Bogan refused to abandon this emotional and “feminine” aspect of her poetics. As a result, Bogan produced a foundational critique of New Critical formalism, as she explains in a 1953 essay,

The close examination of poetic texts, which has become a practice in what has come to be known as the “new” criticism, has its virtues. It fastens the attention on the poem itself, without introducing extraneous matter of one kind or another, concerning the poet. But this method of “explication” has certain limitations. No poem can be reduced to a set of dictionary meanings or to a series of snippets and “facts.” Such treatment destroys the poem’s atmosphere and ambiance—one could almost say its “aura.” It breaks the delicate intricacy of design and negates the carefully planned checks and balances with which the poet has endowed his work. One must remember that the aesthetic experience is, primarily, emotional
rather than intellectual. (“Reading Contemporary Poetry” 59)

A contemporary reader cannot help but note the traces of Walter Benjamin suggested by Bogan’s use of the term “aura.” By 1953, Bogan likely had not encountered Benjamin’s work, which was not published in an English translation until 1968. But the two writers had, apparently, been reading the same French poets. Benjamin cites the Aesthetics of Paul Valéry in the epigraph to “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” the essay in which he theorizes the concept of the “aura,” and this inheritor of Symbolism had had a profound impact on Bogan’s thinking, as well. For Bogan, the “aura” represents one, among many attempts, to account for the “emotional” material a poem carries with it. By “emotional,” Bogan means to signal a complex of extra-linguistic content expressed within and through the poem—feelings, textures, images, rhythms, and energies—which are not reducible to language—and which cannot, therefore, be known through linguistic or “intellectual” methods. The “aura” is, in this sense, structurally similar to both the aperçu and the cahier, and, taken together, these concepts provide a provocative account of the slippery ways that poetry formalizes “emotion”—that is, renders it, in form.

“A craftsman in the masculine mode”

In the 1920s, Bogan was categorized as part of a “feminine” movement in lyric poetry, which was sweeping America. Her first collection, Body of This Death, was read alongside the poetry of Millay, Teasdale, Elinor Wylie, Genevieve Taggard, and Léonie Adams (whose poetry and criticism, now almost completely forgotten, was once considered to be an essential complement to Bogan’s). Critics placed these poets together because of their shared commitment to a “feminine” topos: each of them wrote primarily
about love from the perspective of a modern woman. Bogan, however, always resided uneasily within this “feminine” canon. Like Amy Lowell and H.D., she displayed an Imagists’ predilection for concrete visual representations and sparse diction—a stylistic economy that put her at odds with Millay’s rhetorical flourishes, in particular. Years later, in a letter dated October 31, 1961, Bogan would warn May Sarton of the dangers inherent in the form of the sonnet sequence (Sarton had included a sonnet sequence in Cloud, Stone, Sun, Vine). Bogan claimed that the sonnet sequence had been the “kiss of death” for both Millay and Wylie. “Women should not write [sonnet sequences], any more!” Bogan exclaims, “The linked formality makes [the] chance of discursiveness too great; and the sonnet, as such, is never discursive. It is dramatic; the dramatic lyric framework” (PP 185, emphasis original).

In the 1930s, as the critical tide turned against Millay, Teasdale, Wylie, Taggard, and Adams, Bogan’s rhetorical restraint—her lack of “discursiveness”—was said to be her saving grace. Writing in 1930, Malcolm Cowley observes that

Critics writing about Louise Bogan have usually discussed her technique, and there is good reason for this emphasis. What seemed to be the subject matter of her first two volumes was not at all striking—love that is all-powerful but fleeting, chastity that is a lie, tears shed alone at night; in general the themes that were being treated by dozens of women poets during the 1920s. (58)

Cowley highlights a foundational divide between form and content, which structures Bogan’s early reception. Compared to the avant-garde sensibilities of Gertrude Stein or Marianne Moore, Bogan’s love lyrics appeared to be dangerously “feminine.” In an age defined by a constant and continual pursuit of the “new,” critics were suspicious of her
seemingly inexplicable attachment to the emotional, debased subject matter of an
unfashionable, nineteenth-century tradition. This is why, among sympathetic critics, there
is a near exclusive focus on “the sheer brilliance of the craftsmanship” of Bogan’s poetry
(Winters 32) and her “unusually exact economy” (Untermeyer 37). Mark Van Doren, for
instance, writing in 1923, admires the perfectly chiseled lyrics contained within Body of
This Death:

The thirty pages which they cover are packed as tightly with pure poetry as any
thirty pages have been for a generation. The poet would be rare at any time who
could achieve so much concentration and so unquestionably sustain it. […] There
is no rhetoric—hardly a phrase could be reduced by a word. (30)

Indeed, in its exquisite sparseness, Body of This Death shares a deep formal and stylistic
affinity with the “terrible / wind torn place” of H.D.’s Sea Garden (1916). Like H.D.,
Bogan attempts to cultivate a “new beauty” in an impoverished landscape of rocks, fire,
and shards (“Sheltered Garden” 56-58). Throughout Body of This Death, Bogan’s poetics
is marked by an austere desire to coax beauty out of society’s discarded remnants:

Do not guard this as rich stuff without mark
Closed in a cedarn dark,
Nor lay it down with tragic masks and greaves,
Licked by the tongues of leaves.
...
Rather, like shards and straw upon coarse ground,
Of little worth when found,—
Rubble in gardens, it and stones alike,
That any spade may strike. (“Memory” 22)

One of her most overtly meta-poetic reflections, “Memory” abandons the “rich” and
“tragic” mode of Bogan’s sentimental predecessors in favor of a modernist predilection
for “straw” and “rubble.” Following Eliot’s The Waste Land, which was published in the
year preceding *Body of This Death*, Bogan interrogates not merely the style and form of modern poetry, but the broader question of its cultural and historical “worth.” Because it engages so directly with the stylistic tenets of Imagism, specifically, and the literary values of modernism, more broadly, Bogan’s writing appears, on the surface at least, to be decidedly unsentimental.

But amid the “straw” and “rubble” traces of a “feminine” tradition incongruously—yet persistently—surface. “Chanson Un Peu Naïve,” which arrives toward the end of *Body of This Death*, models this complex collision between femininity and formal innovation:

> What body can be ploughed,  
> Sown, and broken yearly?  
> She would not die, she vowed,  
> But she has, nearly.  
>   Sing, heart sing;  
>   Call and carol clearly.  

And, since she could not die,  
Care would be a feather,  
A film over the eye  
Of two that lie together.  
   Fly song, fly,  
   Break your little tether.  

So from strength concealed  
She makes her pretty boast:  
Plain is a furrow healed  
And she may love you most.  
   Cry, song, cry,  
   And hear your crying lost. (*Body of This Death* 28)

Deborah Pope rightly characterizes “Chanson Un Peu Naïve” as a “curious” poem, noting that its “naïve, childish singer seems out of place beside the emerging, toughened women” who appear elsewhere in the volume (37). Apostrophes like “Sing, heart, sing,” “Fly, song, fly,” and “Cry, song, cry,” epitomize the type of clichéd subject matter that
Cowley cites as a major limitation in Bogan’s poetry. Yet, as Bogan’s biographer Elizabeth Frank reminds us, “Bogan was an astute observer of contemporary sexual mores”; and, moreover, the seemingly sincere “Chanson Un Peu Naïve” was first published in the very sophisticated pages of *Vanity Fair* (67). Frank thus argues that the poem is ironic both in its rendering of sentimentality—what Frank refers to as “the O-God-the-pain motif”—and sexuality—in the form of an incisive critique of the popular doctrine of “free love.” According to Frank, the poem’s opening question, “What body can be ploughed / Sown, and broken yearly?” undercuts the promiscuous ingénue’s belief that a surfeit of sex will set her free. It is this promise of bodily liberation, and the “pretty boasts” of free love’s adherents, which the poem considers to be naïve. In “Chanson Un Peu Naïve,” the practice of free love has left its modern subject ravaged, nearly dead, and trapped in a vicious cycle of “exhaustion, self-deception, and bravado,” from which the poem’s repetitive form will not permit her to escape (Frank 68). The eruptions of song, within the poem’s refrains, serve as sad reminders of a freedom—and an innocence—which remains always just out of reach.

Jeanne Larsen hints at yet another layer of sophistication, lurking beneath the poem’s naïve surface, when she suggests that “Chanson Un Peu Naïve” might be addressed to one, particularly famous practitioner of free love—Edna St. Vincent Millay (229). Indeed, Millay had been extremely ill throughout 1923, and made headlines on July 18, when she had her appendix removed—on the same day that she married the businessman Eugen Boissevain. One New York newspaper ran a front page headline reading, “Famous Love Lyricist Belies Her Own Philosophy by Marrying” (qtd. in Milford 255). Bogan’s lines, “She would not die, she vowed, / But she has, nearly,” are
resonant with the ironies of Millay’s hasty operation-marriage. In this biographical reading, the adverb, “nearly,” could qualify both Millay’s illness—she nearly died—and her marriage—she nearly vowed. However, because the poem appeared in *Vanity Fair* in July 1923, it likely went to press *before* Millay made headlines. In this case, history seems to have conspired in Bogan’s favor, lending her poem even richer layers of irony, than she herself may have intended.

It is on the level of form, I would argue, that “Chanson Un Peu Naïve” makes its most sophisticated statement concerning sentimentality and sexuality. The form of the poem is decidedly un-free: it is comprised of three sestets, and the lines of each stanza alternate between iambic and trochaic trimeter—a meter that is at once conversational (“A film over the eye”) and highly constraining (“Plain is a furrow healed”). Because of the brevity of each line, which is difficult to sustain, there are few English poems written entirely in trimeter. (One well-known exception is the 1948 poem “My Papa’s Waltz,” by Theodore Roethke, Bogan’s one-time lover and life-long friend.) Bogan’s use of this strict meter has the effect of challenging the “naïve” presumption, on the part of free love advocates, free versists, and sentimental “poetesses” alike, that a lack of structure will lead to greater freedom. The poem’s refrains model this formal lesson. The first line of each refrain, which yearns for a quasi-Romantic freedom, is pared to an even more Spartan dimeter: “Sing, heart, sing,” “Fly, song, fly,” and “Cry, heart, cry.” By the poem’s end, all of the singing, caroling, and flying—classic tropes of a “nightingale” tradition—have gotten the clear naïve speaker nowhere. In breaking her “little tether,” she has been “lost”—subsumed, that is, into formlessness. The singer—whether she is Millay or some other popular, “sentimental” poetess of the 1920s—has not been
trivialized or banished in Bogan’s treatment—she has been re-formed.

This desire to reshape the emotional content of a sentimental poetic tradition represents the defining feature of Bogan’s poetics. Yet, beginning in the 1930s, critics consistently overlooked or effaced this “feminine” portion of her poetic project. This was, in some cases, a sympathetic act: as critical tastes changed, Bogan’s male colleagues went to great lengths to distinguish her from the popular “poetesses” of the 1920s, whose literary stock had begun to fall precipitously. Allen Tate, for instance, in a 1937 review, claims that Bogan is a fundamentally different poet from Millay and Wylie, both of whom he dismisses as merely “popular” and “technically proficient” (184). Millay and Wylie were never willing to “efface themselves,” Tate complains, “Miss Millay never let us forget her ‘advanced’ point of view, nor Mrs. Wylie her interesting personality” (184). In contrast, Tate considers Bogan to be a “purer” poet: “Women, I suppose, are fastidious, but many women poets are fastidious in their verse only as a way of being finical about themselves. But Miss Bogan is a craftsman in the masculine mode” (184-185).

Theodore Roethke espoused a similar brand of exceptionalism in regard to Bogan. I quote the opening of his 1961 essay, “The Poetry of Louise Bogan,” at length, because it provides a veritable index of mid-century misogyny:

Two of the charges most frequently levelled (sic) against poetry by women are lack of range—in subject matter, in emotional tone—and lack of a sense of humor. And one could, in individual instances among writers of real talent, add other aesthetic and moral shortcomings: the spinning-out; the embroidering of trivial themes; a concern with the mere surfaces of life—that special province of
the feminine talent in prose—hiding from the real agonies of the spirit; refusing to face up to what existence is; lyric or religious posturing; running between the boudoir and the altar, stamping a tiny foot against God; or lapsing into a sententiousness that implies the author has re-invented integrity; carrying on excessively about Fate, about time; lamenting the lot of the woman; caterwauling; writing the same poem about fifty times, and so on.

But Louise Bogan is something else. (87)

In their assessments of Bogan, both Tate and Roethke rely upon a fundamental opposition between femininity and form. For the female poet, to write her self—her individual emotions and experiences, or “the lot of the woman,” more broadly—is to slip into a condition of formlessness. This dangerous line between “caterwauling” and craft, “posturing” and poetics, rests on the female poet’s ability to re-form (or, perhaps, to repress) sex and gender. If she succeeds, she is transformed into “something else”—a “poetess” no more—“a craftsman in the masculine mode.” However, if she fails, she is relegated to the status of a minor poet, as in the cases of Millay and Wylie. Because their poetries are said to advance a feminine “point of view” or to express a female “personality,” they are considered to be subjective rather than objective poets. As I discussed in Chapter 1, this false designation has obscured a rich variety of formal innovation within the field of poetic modernism. Our belief in the subjectivity of Millay’s poetry—and, attendantly, its sentimentality—has prevented us from seeing the rich innovations she enacts within and through the lyric.

In the mid-century American academy, gender and aesthetics, femininity and form, tend to function as mutually exclusive discourses. A poet is either a formalist or a
feminist—an innovator or an embroiderer—but rarely, if ever, both. This is why Bogan emerges, in Roethke’s portrait, as a veritable sadist: he wants to demonstrate how thoroughly her poetry punishes and purges the ostensible “impurities” of femininity. She is, in Roethke’s estimation, “a master of texture” (94), with a “sharp sense of objects” (95), who writes “out of the severest lyrical tradition in English” (87) and a “Puritan” heritage (92). There is no room for the cahier in Roethke’s conception of Bogan’s poetry—only “caterwauling.” Nevertheless, it is still somewhat tempting to accept Roethke’s categorization of Bogan as “something else.” Roethke and Tate are, after all, attempting to credit Bogan as a major formal innovator. But in accepting Tate’s or Roethke’s vision of Bogan as a “craftsman in the masculine mode,” we would have to sacrifice the better part of her poetics.

Writing at almost the same time as Roethke, Caroline Kizer lashed out at an American academy that saw women poets as either “kittens or bitches” (2.13). In her important poetic genealogy, Pro Femina, Kizer criticizes the conditional form of equality being offered to women poets—freedom “if.” “If we submerge our self-pity in disciplined industry,” Kizer qualifies, “If we regard ourselves formally, respecting our true limitations” (3.42-44). In Bogan’s reception, we see this same imperative toward form, which limited the careers and reputations of a generation of women poets who came of age in the mid-century American academy. To the New Critics, form tended to function as a disciplining mechanism, a means by which the “feminine” could be purged from the poem. Bogan is a formalist, but in her writing there is no divide between the subjective and objective, feminine and masculine, emotional and intellectual portions of the poem. Beginning in the 1960s, women poets, like Kizer, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton,
Adrienne Rich, and Audre Lorde would similarly challenge the New Critics narrow
gender and formal politics. Bogan’s theories of poetic emotion, of femininity and form,
prepared the way for these postmodern feminist poetics.

“A graduate-school poetry”

In March 1932, Bogan reviewed Tate’s recently published *Poems: 1928-1931*, in *The New Republic*. Reading her scathing indictment, one would never suspect that the two were friends. Bogan opens with a mocking characterization of the Fugitive group:

The Fugitives’ program was never stated boldly; they stood, so far as one could see from their own work and the work of contributors admitted to print under their auspices, for a return to formalism in poetic expression, as opposed to Imagism whose program crystallized before the War and disintegrated thereafter. *Vers libre* was banished into outer darkness. A vaguely philosophic and disturbed tone disguised much expression that was Romantic, much that derived straight from Eliot, or from the Symbolists through Eliot, and very little pure form or formal feeling. (“Allen Tate’s New Poems” 186)

The “isolation” of the Fugitive group, Bogan complains, had given rise to a “sterile,” overly intellectualized form of poetry: “Ambition, never a real part of a poet’s gear, grows hardly in such an air; virtuosity and intellectual sleight-of-hand are likely to spring up, where intimations of true style and genuine apperception should be given room” (186). While Bogan admits that Tate has a “genuine poetic talent,” she believes that his natural propensity is being “lamed” by a “determined incoherence” and “sterile” diction (186). 26
Tate was understandably angry when the review appeared, and dismissed Bogan’s criticisms as mere “personal bias.” In response, Bogan writes to Tate on April 1, 1932, defending her stance:

I had feared my review would distress you. I am sorry that you thought it full of personal bias, and even venom. I can only say that I was not estimating you as a person or as a friend. I was reviewing a book of poetry which aroused in me respect and irritation in about equal measure. If you objected to the tone of my review, I objected, straight down to a core beyond detachment, to the tone of some of the poems. (*PP* 116)

Bogan’s letter was not intended to mollify Tate’s anger, but to strengthen her own position. She continues,

The first thing that annoyed me [about* Poems: 1928-1931*] was the slightly pontifical air of the foreword. But perhaps this is stupid of me; I thought: Allen is merely serious, and that is commendable. When I sat down to the book, [parts of it] disturbed me to such an extent that I simply did not know what to do. “Here,” I said to myself, “is cold legerdemain, metaphysical arrogance…deliberately conceived, put down without a qualm, managed to the last degree. The poems are sterile: Allen should not do this thing, and having done it, he should be brought to book therefor.” As you know, Allen, in a poem, not only can the feeling be in excess to the matter, but devices, crotchets, and all skilled traps for the unwary, can exceed. In short, these poems struck me as elaborate ruse, poetic sophistry. (*PP* 117)

Surprisingly, Tate and Bogan’s friendship survived this fundamental intellectual
disagreement. Reviewing the letter, in 1972, Tate said “that there was personal animosity, but that the review would probably have been much the same had there not been.” “My poems were never Louise’s dish of tea,” he concluded (*WTWL* 64).

But Tate underestimates the significance of Bogan’s departure from his emerging brand of New Critical formalism. In her review, Bogan had begun to articulate a powerful distinction between her own formalism and Tate’s. Although Bogan, like the Fugitives, had moved beyond Imagism and “banished” *vers libre* in the decade following World War I, she was rejecting Tate’s “sterile,” academic theory of poetic form in equal measure. At the heart of Bogan’s critique is the keen insight that what Tate is calling “intellect” might be mere “legerdemain.” “You were being a little schoolmaster, weren’t you?” Bogan asks at the close of her letter.

In a review of John Crowe Ransom’s *The New Criticism*, Bogan’s institutional critique of New Critical formalism finds its sharpest expression. Writing to Morton Zabel on June 2, Bogan complained that Ransom’s overly “abstract” thinking was making it difficult to finish the review: “What a true old bore that Ransom is!” (*PP* 165) In a letter to William Maxwell three weeks later, on June 23, Bogan is still grappling with *The New Criticism*:

That dreadful and truly vicious and insolent book by John Crowe Ransom is still to be finally reviewed. It is so awful that I did it in a snappish and counter-insolent way; but you can’t do that. So I am spending some time cooling off, before I attack it again. *The New Criticism*, indeed! It’s plain Neo-Classicism over again. (*PP* 166)

Her revised review, which appeared in *The Nation* on July 12, 1941, channels these
visceral reactions into a productive critique of Ransom’s academic method. Despite its veneer of “complete objectivity,” Bogan argues, the “New Criticism” represents little more than “new snobbery” (37). Bogan writes, “It was Mr. Ransom who, in The World’s Body, took down Shakespeare a button or two for being an amateur as opposed to a professional poet, disciplined at a university” (37). But if Bogan’s review seems, at its outset, to be anti-academic, she soon clarifies that it is the American academy, in particular, and not the academy as a whole, to which she objects. Against the rising tide of the New Criticism—emblematized, for Bogan, in the work of Ransom, as well as Yvor Winters and William Empson—Bogan champions the theories of British academics I.A. Richards and Stephen Potter, “whose devastatingly irreverent study of the history and development of ‘English studies,’ ‘The Muse in Chains,’” Bogan writes, “should long since have appeared in an American edition” (37). But Bogan commends Richards, in particular, for bucking the trend toward “efficiency” and “objectivity,” and holding on to a language of feeling. “Richards believes that emotion has something to do with poetry,” and to the New Critics, Bogan complains, “that is a heresy” (37).

Perhaps because of this intimate alliance with the British academy, Alan Pryce-Jones, editor of The Times Literary Supplement, commissioned Bogan to write an article assessing the contemporary situation in American poetry, for a special issue of TLS, devoted exclusively to American literature, which would appear in September 1954. Bogan was thrilled. She brags to May Sarton on June 18, 1954, “Isn’t that fantastic? […] Not bad for the little Irish girl from Roxbury, I say to myself…I know you will be surprised and pleased, for although the thing will be anonymous, I may be able to utter a few basic truths” (WTWL 289).
Bogan titled her essay, “Poetic Background: A Period of Consolidation,” and in it she characterizes the decades between World War I and World War II as a slow but steady march toward the university:

For a poet to hold either permanent or temporary tenure as a member of an academic faculty has become usual since [World War II]. Opinion is at present divided, both in academic and literary circles, as to the final use and importance of this new development. Teachers who adhere to the older, historic methods of ordering and presenting information have been known to resent intruders armed with “the new criticism”; and fears have been expressed concerning the drying up of individual talents confined to the limits of this campus or that. Can poetry be taught, in any case? (ii)

Through much of the essay, Bogan maintains the passive, neutral position of a seasoned journalist—“fears have been expressed,” and “Can poetry be taught?” She weighs the positive and negative aspects of poetry’s relocation within the academy carefully. She praises, for instance, the creation of “mass education” programs, such as the G.I. Bill, which were providing “a large proportion of post-war youth—including the veterans who proved to be the most serious and diligent of students” with the “opportunity of observing living poets in the midst of working careers” (ii). But toward the end of the essay “a few basic truths” begin to emerge. Bogan writes,

To-day young poets writing in English are fully equipped to write about anything, in a variety of manners; the experiment and exploration of their elders have extended both technical flexibility and range of subject. Few poets of the newest generation, however, have been able to grasp and utilize this freedom. There is no
doubt that the stiffening mark of writing learned by rule even by the best modern rule—has begun to show up in the work of young men and women who, in the United States, have passed through English Departments. A kind of graduate-school poetry has come into being; well written, beautifully organized and nicely centred at some ‘norm’ of excellence, but, at the same time, dead, dry and without a spark either of feeling or originality. (ii)

Bogan’s “graduate-school poetry” is virtually identical to the “sterile” formalism she maligned in Tate’s verse two decades earlier. It is a poetry that is formally or objectively flawless, “well written” and “beautifully organized,” but “dead,” “dry,” and “without a spark either of feeling or originality.” By the 1950s, “graduate-school poetry” had come to represent, in Bogan’s estimation, an aesthetic as well as political crisis for the field of American poetry. Along with a “stiffening” of poetic form, she notes the corresponding “fading out, in the post-war generation, of the spirit of controversy, and the becalming of political and social opinion” (ii).

Bogan cites Roethke as an important exception to this trend toward “standardization.” Roethke, she says, dares “to express the vulgarity and violence usual in modern life” (ii). Earlier in their relationship, Bogan had been far more critical of Roethke’s poetry. In 1935, during the brief period when the two were lovers, the older Bogan—she was thirty-eight—had counseled the younger poet—he was twenty-six—to get more “suffering” into his poetry. On August 23, 1935, she tells Roethke, “The difficulty with you now, as I see it, is that you are afraid to suffer, or to feel in any way, and that is what you’ll have to get over, lamb pie, before you can toss off the masterpieces” (PP 130). Couched in terms of endearment, “lamb pie,” “lovey,” and “boy-
o,” Bogan’s leveling criticism was, perhaps, easier for Roethke to accept than it had been for Tate. A poem “cannot be written by technique alone,” she advises, “It is carved out of agony, just as a statue is carved out of marble” (130). She encourages him to let out a “lyric cry,” one that would be “heart-rendering” (131).

Two decades later, Bogan hails Roethke’s poetry for its sincerity and intensity of emotion, but she still considers the mainstream of American poetry to be sadly unfeeling. She concludes, in TLS,

The present period, in the field of the arts as a whole, is one of stasis. Owing to the fact that the modern “style” has become the official style, analysis, and even codification of kind and quality, is a natural undertaking at the moment. It is a time of repetition, of reformulation, of absorption, of (perhaps excessive) discrimination—a kind of period, which, historically, usually follows a highly creative era and precedes a revolt against too firmly established patterns. There is, it is true, little evidence just now of a movement away from current clichés, in art and literature, but that such a movement will come is certain. (ii)

From our contemporary vantage, we know that the “revolt” that Bogan predicted was already underway at Black Mountain College in North Carolina, and just beginning to foment in the streets of San Francisco. Poets like Allen Ginsberg, Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, and Denise Levertov were constructing poems and crafting manifestoes—all similarly in search of a “new” formalism—in Olson’s words, “a change beyond, and larger than, the technical” (613). Their poetics, like Bogan’s, would be formally innovative, but decidedly non-modernist—at least, not “modernist” in the way that the New Critics were currently defining it. There are echoes in Bogan’s work of each of these
poets. Her “writing with the ear,” for instance—“Keep your ear on your nouns and verbs!” she said (PP 174)—aligns her with the Black Mountain poets’ close attention to breath and to the syllable (lessons, which Ginsberg took to heart, as well). And, like these later poets, Bogan sought to remedy a deeply entrenched divide between form and content, which, she believed, continued to limit American poetry and poetics. These ideas, which arose in conversation with and criticism of her high modernist and avant-garde contemporaries, continued to evolve in her poetry and prose across mid-century. In the second half of this chapter, I analyze Bogan’s distinct poetics as it emerges in her poetry, as well as her critical prose. If Bogan’s theories regarding emotion and poetic form are not entirely “modernist,” they are certainly not “sentimental” either.

“Beyond the will”

Coupled with an abiding commitment to the lyric form, Bogan systematically privileges emotion over intellect, the “heart” over the “head.” On the point of emotional expression, Bogan departs significantly from the dominant poetic theories of her high modernist and avant-garde contemporaries. Her poem, “The Alchemist,” from Body of This Death, outlines this affective critique of high modernism:

I burned my life, that I might find
A passion wholly of the mind,
Thought divorced from eye and bone,
Ecstasy come to breath alone.
I broke my life, to seek relief
From the flawed light of love and grief.

With mounting beat the utter fire
Charred existence and desire.
It died low, ceased its sudden thresh.
I had found unmysterious flesh—
Not the mind’s avid substance—still
Passionate beyond the will. (19)

Bogan is neither the first nor the most famous modern poet to have dabbled in the magical science of emotional alchemy. As Diane Middlebrook observes, “The Alchemist” tropes a long line of modern poetic speakers who embarked on similar quests for spiritual and aesthetic purity, including Shelley’s Alastor, Byron’s Manfred, Arnold’s Scholar Gypsy, and, in a modernist context, William Butler Yeats’ speaker in “Sailing to Byzantium” (Middlebrook 176). “Sick with desire,” Yeats’ speaker craves the purifying influence of “God’s holy fire.” “Consume my heart away,” he begs, “and gather me / into the artifice of eternity” (lines 17-24). Byzantium thus serves as a metaphor for the spirit’s transcendence of the body—that “dying animal” which impedes the speaker’s communion with eternity (line 22). “An aged man is but a paltry thing,” Yeats writes, “A tattered coat upon a stick” (lines 9-10).

Yeats’ spiritual yearning—to transcend a decaying body and a heart that refuses to die—finds its aesthetic complement in Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” Here, as in “Sailing to Byzantium,” the “bodily form” is tempered or purified through an alchemic process; for Yeats, it is the spirit that transcends, and, for Eliot, the mind that “transmutes,” a baser, bodily substance. In Eliot’s quasi-scientific language, the poet’s mind functions as a catalyst, digesting and transmuting the raw stuff of emotion into a new, more “perfect” compound. “The more perfect the artist,” Eliot claims, “the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates; the more perfectly will the mind digest and transmute the passions which are its material” (41). Eliot’s “Impersonality” is not, as it is often mistakenly thought to be, a method for creating an “unemotional” form of poetry. It is, however, a method for intellectualizing
the emotions or “passions”—managing them, consciously, through poetic form.

At the outset of “The Alchemist,” Bogan’s poetic speaker seems to have taken Eliot’s advice to heart. “I burned my life,” she begins, proudly documenting the lengths to which she was willing to go in pursuit of an Impersonal poetics, “a passion wholly of the mind.” Yet, rather than a new compound—“the mind’s avid substance”—Bogan’s alchemy has produced only “unmysterious flesh.” By attempting to separate her intellect from her body, to transmute the base material of emotion into a finer substance, the speaker has not only destroyed her life, but, ironically, discovered that emotion is fundamentally more pure than intellect: “still / Passionate beyond the will.”

There is no transcendence to be found in Bogan’s poem, only the keen insight that emotions and the body cannot be managed fully by the conscious mind. Notice, for instance, the rhythmic breaks that disrupt the poem’s meter in the second stanza. From the heavily stressed tetrameter of lines 7 and 8—a “mounting beat” created by the use of iambs and trochees—the poem moves into the less regular rhythms of “unmysterious” and “passionate,” both of which contain dactyls that fundamentally alter the meter of those lines. In this rhythmic shift, Bogan models the unruliness of emotion—a trace of affective or bodily agency that has exceeded the subject’s best attempts at formal discipline. In contrast to both Eliot and Yeats, Bogan’s alchemy eschews a Western, masculine ideal of the mind, in favor of an embodied poetics. As the mind cannot be abstracted from the body—“eye” and “bone”—so, too, is it futile to attempt to escape one’s feelings.

In her first prose publication, “The Springs of Poetry,” which appeared in *The New Republic* in December 1923, simultaneous to the publication of *Body of This Death,*
Bogan meditates explicitly on the relationship between emotion and poetic form. She begins,

When he sets out to resolve, as rationally as he may, the tight irrational knot of his emotion, the poet hesitates for a moment. Unless the compulsion be absolute, as is rarely the case, the excitement of the resolution sets in only after this pause, filled with doubt and terror. (9)

Bogan envisions poetry as a collision between the irrational and the rational—a “pause” somewhere between subject and object. However, as she goes on to explain, the chief danger confronting the poet, circa 1920, is not a surfeit of personal emotion, but, rather, its complete lack. Bogan cites, as a cautionary tale, the example of the contemporary poet Determined to take a holiday from any emotion at all, being certain that to hear, see, smell and touch, merely, is enough. His hand has become chilled, from being held too long against the ground to feel how it is cold; his mind flinches at cutting down once again into the dark with the knife of irony or analysis. (9)

Like “The Alchemist,” “The Springs of Poetry” is both conversing with and critiquing an Impersonal poetics. Following Eliot, Bogan seeks to de-subjectivize poetic emotion—to move beyond the “instinctive cry of the heart.” Yet, at the same time, she wants to reserve poetry’s emotional essence:

Even though at its best a poem cannot come straight out of the heart, but must break away in some oblique fashion from the body of sorrow or joy—be the mask, not the incredible face—yet the synthetic poem can never be more than a veil dropped before a void. It may sound, to change the images, in ears uninitiated
We have become so accustomed to our impoverished landscape of modernist poetics that it is difficult to appreciate the subtlety of Bogan’s poetic theories. She borrows heavily from the emotional language of the nineteenth century—as well as an ancient tradition of the lyric—to criticize the “new” poetries being forged in the twentieth; and yet, this is not a conventional “sentimentality,” nor is it recognizably Romantic, Symbolist, Impersonal, or Imagist. Bogan aligns herself with a post-Romantic trend away from expressivity, which began with the Symbolists and which continues through Eliot. However, she also rejects high modernism’s new vogue for the “synthetic poem.” A “synthetic poem” is a kind of chemically induced objectivity, an artificial method for creating (or destroying) emotion within the poem—the poem as lab experiment.

In reforming the classic lyric, Bogan seeks a more organic solution. She advocates, instead, on behalf of “reticence,” a formal strategy that she likens to the silence of the Old Testament prophets, who spoke infrequently, but when they did, spoke with tongues of fire. This is a poetics like a “maenad cry,” “in which passion is made to achieve its own form, definite and singular,” “as though the very mind had a tongue,” and “in which the hazy adverbial quality has no place, built of sentences reduced to the bones of nouns, verb, and preposition” (9). “This is the further, the test simplicity,” Bogan concludes, “the passion of which every poet will always be afraid, but to which he should vow himself forever” (9). Emotion, she repeatedly insists, represents an irreducible, organic facet of poetic form. “Expression is molded by feeling,” she writes in
Achievement in American Poetry, “as the liquid in a glass is shaped by the glass itself” (25).

Two of Bogan’s later essays, “Modernism in American Literature” and “The Heart and the Lyre,” further document this reconceptualization of poetic emotion and modernist form. The essays function as companion pieces: each reconstructs a rough genealogy of American modernism, but from the differing vantage points of male and female writers, respectively. The essays were both produced at mid-century, as Bogan reflected back on modernism and competed with the New Critics to solidify its canon. As such, they form the culmination of a poetic project that began in the early 1920s, which was now being superceded by other, more influential modernist narratives. Bogan writes,

The great importance of keeping the emotional channels of a literature open has frequently been overlooked. The need of the refreshment and the restitution of feeling, in all its warmth and depth, has never been more apparent than it is today, when cruelty and fright often seem about to overwhelm man and his world. For women to abandon their contact with, and their expression of, deep and powerful emotional streams, because of contemporary pressures or mistaken self-consciousness, would result in an impoverishment not only of their own inner resources but of mankind’s at large. Certainly it is not a regression to romanticism to remember that women are capable of perfect and poignant song. (“Heart” 341)

By “keeping the emotional channels” open, Bogan challenges traditional modernist conceptions of poetic form by foregrounding the centrality and inescapability of individual feeling. In stark contrast to the mechanistic, Impersonal and Imagist experiments of the modernist avant-garde, Bogan proclaims, “The world, already
imaginatively dissolved, anatomized, and reconstituted, must now be felt through experience, and experienced through feeling” (“Modernism” 20, emphasis original).

Bogan’s emphasis on feeling as a recuperative practice resonates with Friederich Schiller’s late eighteenth-century definition of sentimentality as a “striving to recapture” the lost affinity humans once felt with nature (331). For Schiller, the sentimental thus represents the quintessential modern form. Whereas the ancient poets “felt naturally,” modern writers, he suggests, can only “feel the natural” (323). Schiller characterizes the sentimental poet as one who is acutely aware of this subtle transformation in the relationship between man and nature. Because the sentimental poet has been exiled from a previous state of connectedness with nature, his longing for nature is comparable to “the feeling of the sick for health” (323). It is this essential, formal and affective drive to repair a broken modern world that constitutes the “sentimental” impulse within Bogan’s poetry. By terming it “sentimental,” I do not mean to conflate Bogan’s poetry with an earlier tradition. Like Millay and Teasdale, Bogan appropriates the conventions of the past in order to craft a new poetics. But Schiller’s classic sentimental form provides Bogan with a primary means for moving between one’s personal, “inner resources” and “mankind’s at large.” Poetic emotion signals for Bogan a strategic intervention into the scene of the modern, which builds importantly upon an earlier, Enlightenment tradition of sentimentality.

Rather than an uncritical or unthinking deployment of emotion, then, Bogan believes that poetic feeling can rectify a conceptual limitation within high modern aesthetics:
Without abolishing a continued “openness” toward experiment, writers must not insist upon a stubborn avant-gardism when no real need for a further restless forward movement any longer exists. To move forward is not always a crucial need. The moment comes for a consolidation of resources and for a canvassing of the ground already gained. (“Modernism” 18)

Earlier in this essay Bogan concurs with Eliot’s assessment that a history of technological “progress” has resulted in a “tragic” “split between thought and feeling” (17). Yet, unlike Eliot, Bogan doubts that a modernist form can rectify this modern problematic. She advocates a return to the historical terrain of Romanticism, not as a retreat from literary modernism, nor as a simplistic “regression,” but in order to locate an alternative vision of modernity. “Interpretation, rather than exploration, is the task of the moment,” she writes, “Man has surrounded himself with objects which are to him emotionally opaque: which he cannot love” (18). For Bogan, a “new” poetic form alone cannot resolve the relational schism that alienates the reader from the poem. If the reader cannot “feel,” then how exactly can an Impersonal art jolt her from her stasis? While she shares with Eliot a fundamental concern for the emotional content of modern life and art, Bogan departs significantly on this related temporal and historical conundrum. “Further restless forward movement” seems pointless to Bogan, since it is the modern subject’s ability to feel art—and not art itself—that has altered fundamentally in the twentieth century.

Although Bogan’s critique of high modernism becomes much sharper and clearly articulated within these later essays, she was already “canvassing the ground gained” throughout the 1920s. In December 1924, for example, Bogan joined forces with Elinor Wylie, Léonie Adams, and Genevieve Taggard when she became the acting editor of the
poetry journal, *Measure*. Within the dominant school of modernist poetry, *Measure* professed only a small tolerance for Amy Lowell and, sometimes, Carl Sandburg (Anderson 23). In the wake of Eliot’s 1922 publication of *The Waste Land*, *Measure* makes only the following notice, couched humorously within a review of the last poems of A.E. Housman:

> Through this small year with T.S. Eliot, laboriously obsequious to obscurity, and e.e. cummings, the next recipient of *The Dial* prize, [Housman] comes like a clean and eternal wind to rid our nostrils of the fumes of this esoteric offal.

> And spell it any way you wish it is awful. But I am writing of Housman and not of those who unsuccessfully set strange traps to catch the muse. (Alling 15)

Reading *Measure*, one realizes not merely that a lyric tradition competed alongside high modernism in America, but that this alternative group of poets maintained a fierce allegiance to an entirely disparate poetic legacy extending from the nineteenth century through to the 1920s. It is not at all surprising that Bogan should have chosen to align herself with *Measure*, since its artistic philosophies read much like the ones she would herself espouse as her criticism grew more frequent in the 1930s, 40s, and 50s. Her tenure at the journal also indicates that there was a much broader community of writers and publishing professionals who shared Bogan’s fundamental distrust of the dominant modernist poetics.

Despite its humorous dismissals of avant-garde modernism, *Measure* was not simply a throwback to genteel, nineteenth-century verse. In one of her first issues as acting editor, Bogan devoted almost an entire journal to the work of the young student poet, Countee Cullen, whose lyrical innovations and intricately woven political critique
perfectly embodied the spirit of *Measure.* Although it foregrounded seemingly antiquated values like emotion and lyrical expressivity, *Measure* was not a reactionary or utopic retreat from modernism or modernity. Rather, the journal attempts to reconstruct modernity as a scene of continual exchange with the past: not a radical rupture with the staid conventions of Victorian gentility, but a gradual and persistent reworking of previous traditions. As Bogan elsewhere insists, “Yeats and Pound *achieved* modernity” (“Modernism” 17, emphasis added). Her implication is that the notoriety of objective, modernist experiments had come to obscure the myriad connections modernist poets share with the romantic, lyrical practitioners of the late nineteenth century. Bogan’s poetic vision restores this sense of historical and formal proximity between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—American modernism and its often-elided predecessors. In *Achievement in American Poetry,* for instance, Bogan does not begin with Walt Whitman or Emily Dickinson and then leap to Eliot and Pound. She gives detailed attention to the supposedly minor field of aesthetes, symbolists, and bohemians who defined American poetry in the 1890s, as well as to the sentimental poets of the late nineteenth century who slowly shed antebellum conventions in favor of heightened realism and emotional sincerity. Early modernist practitioners like Louise Imogen Guiney, Stephen Crane, and Trumbull Stickney look forward to the confessional modes of Robert Lowell, Elizabeth Bishop, and Richard Wilbur. Rather than occupying a privileged place in the history of modern poetry, *Blast* and *The Waste Land* retreat to the margins, pushed aside by an overwhelmingly lyrical impulse that preceded and survived the assault of avant-garde modernism.
“Possessed by time”

What would it mean to take Bogan’s emotional aesthetics seriously as a reflective, foundational indictment of the alliance between modernism and avant-gardism?28

Critiques of the avant-garde can all too easily be dismissed as advertisements for the status quo: against action, merely reaction, against revolution, merely bourgeois convention. The much-vaunted “negativity,” which defines the avant-garde’s relationship to culture, has no true antithesis. Within a critical Marxist tradition incited by Theodor Adorno, works of literature either dispel the inherent falseness of ideology or they are complicit within its production and circulation. Avant-garde modernism is, in this sense, a zero-sum game. It is constitutively grounded upon the supposed failure of non-avant-garde literature to engage productively with its cultural moment. Nowhere is this valuation more apparent than in the case of sentimental literature. As Lauren Berlant argues,

Sentimentality, unlike other revolutionary rhetorics, is after all the only vehicle for social change that neither produces more pain nor requires much courage...The very emphasis on feeling that radicalizes sentimental critique also muffles the solutions it often imagines or distorts or displaces them from the places toward which they ought to be directed. (664)

Berlant captures, here, the most central of the sentimental’s myriad crimes and its fundamental distinction from “revolutionary” literary modes. Despite, perhaps, a kernel of legitimacy, its social critique inevitably fails because it is distorted, displaced, and misdirected. The small woman shaking her fist at God, when her oppression has a very material and immediate explanation. An entertainment industry built upon fictions of
romance that give us a feeling for utopia, but ultimately serve to distract us from our
dystopic social conditions. Whereas the avant-garde meets literary, cultural, and political
institutions head on, the sentimental operates, ostensibly, by evasions, circumlocutions,
and outright fantasies. In “striving to recapture” the world’s lost heart, sentimentality
purportedly demands a turning against the material present, which thrusts the subject
back toward an ever elusive, utopic past. How, then, could one even begin to imagine that
this escapist, nostalgic form could be reformed into a viable critique of the modernist
avant-garde?

My reading of *Body of This Death* rethinks the problematic nature of this
temporal and spatial retreat, which is considered to be constitutive of the sentimental.
Sentimental poetry frequently engages in the public literary practice of evading the
modern public; but as we saw in the case of Millay’s poetry, these supposed flights, into
nature or a natural world, for instance, can often be mobilized in the service of a
productive modern politics. By homogenizing modernist sentimental poetry’s
preoccupations with the past, and simplifying its evasions of the present, critics have
elided the productive capacity of this literary form of historical reimagining. Against the
perpetual forward thrust of avant-garde progress, Bogan posits a conservative
“canvassing” over a nostalgic, pre-modern terrain. I use the term “conservative,” here, in
its most general sense—meaning that she desires to conserve rather than to change, to
restore rather than to rebuild. Although critics like Berlant are right in noting the
sentimental’s profound displacement, I will argue for a more nuanced reading of this
simultaneously political and aesthetic gesture. Bogan’s poetics points toward a key
temporal disjunction at the heart of modernist sentimental literature, which yields important—albeit ambivalent—insights into our conceptions of the modern.

Definitions of modernity—no matter how broadly conceived—presuppose some temporal investment in the “new” or the “now.” Matei Calinescu writes, “The idea of modernity could be conceived only within the framework of a specific time awareness, namely, that of historical time, linear and irreversible, flowing irresistibly onwards” (13). Ronald Schleifer similarly notes the “almost mystical hopefulness”—a faith that time’s passage promises an endless future—which is a foundational tenet not only of modernity but also of classic liberalism (1). This optimistic, Enlightenment portrait of social modernity, inherited through such thinkers as Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, and John Stuart Mill, arguably reaches a state of crisis when it collides with the historical period of literary modernism. As Marshall Berman discusses, these earlier critics of modernity could “imagine an open future” even from within “a wretched present” (27). Twentieth-century modernists, however, frequently foreground the horror and vacuity of modern life and register a profound sense of skepticism in regard to the future (27-28). Eliot’s The Waste Land, for instance, can be read as a modernist polemic against modernity, a haunted poem, which reveals “that the present is inferior to the past” (Cowley Exiles 113). Nonetheless, even when modernists issue invectives against modernity, they are perceived to be engaged deeply with their immediate, modern moment. Despite extensively varied and often conflicting theorizations of modernity, history, and temporality among such modernist writers as Eliot, Pound, James Joyce, and Virginia Woolf, they share a foundational insight regarding the individual’s relationship to modernity: love it or hate it, one cannot simply evade the modern, nor turn one’s back on
the progress of historical time. To do so is not merely naïve, but fundamentally unmodern.

Yet, an overwhelming impulse toward escapism represents one of the most consistent thematics displayed throughout *Body of This Death*. Bogan continually invokes the time and place of an earlier historical imaginary; as a result, the volume’s pronounced modernist texture is uncannily disrupted by the strange presence of antiquated markers. For instance, the poem “My Voice Not Being Proud,” contains a cryptic, antebellum allusion: “Whatever is wasted or wanted / In this country of glass and flint / Some garden will use, once planted” (11-13). Bogan’s “country of glass and flint” indirectly references the antebellum production of “flint glass.” With the onset of the Civil War, this lead glass became scarce, since the rising cost of lead made it too expensive to produce (Henderson). “This country of glass and flint,” then, evokes a disappearing and forgotten America, one rendered unsustainable by the Civil War. Her choice of imagery is not accidental, as the entire collection transports the reader into a nostalgic world where the past remains readily available within the present. More than memories, the small towns, family farms, wagons, dust, and barns culminate in a distinctly atavistic vision, which seeks to restore the strength and certainty of feeling that has been lost to the modern.

The collection’s opening poem, “A Tale,” announces Bogan’s proclivity for retreat:

This youth too long has heard the break
Of waters in a land of change.
He goes to see what suns can make
From soil more indurate and strange.

He cuts what holds his days together
And shuts him in, as lock on lock:
The arrowed vane announcing weather,
The tripping racket of a clock (lines 1-8)

Lee Upton notes that the poem longs for a “permanent form of order” and seeks to evade the continual ruptures of the modern world (32). Upton, following Suzanne Clark, reads this escapist impulse biographically, with the “soil more indurate and strange” representing Panama, where Bogan and her new husband, Curt Alexander, moved for a brief time during World War I (Upton 33; Clark 109). Gloria Bowles, similarly interested in the poem’s personal significance, interprets it as a reflection on the poet’s tempestuous childhood, surmising that “Children bred in chaos long for order” (9). While these biographical cadences are certainly present within the poem, Bogan’s use of a male persona strategically distances the poem from the poet. Rather than a transparent reflection upon her own life and experience, “A Tale” offers the generic figure of “this youth” as a vehicle for a broader social and poetic commentary. Moreover, while initially published in Body of This Death, Bogan reprinted “A Tale” as the introductory poem in her final three collections. In this sense, the poem served as her “recurrent beginning” throughout her poetic career (Upton 33).

“A Tale” occupies this central place within her larger corpus not for biographical reasons, but because it captures so fully the temporal preoccupation that guides her poetics. From the poem’s opening stanza, it becomes clear that the entire collection will thrust the reader backward, away from this “land of change.” When the youth “cuts what holds his days together” he extricates himself from the linear, developmental trajectory of modernity. He abandons all trappings of historical time: “the arrowed vane announcing weather” and the “tripping racket of a clock.” If, as Calinescu suggests, the modern
condition represents an acute awareness of time’s forward passage, “A Tale” invites the reader into an imaginary space that is liberated from that burden. Fleeing the perpetual movement of the tide, the youth sets out to find “soil more indurate and strange.” Bogan’s use of the word “indurate,” here, seems pointed, in that it evokes a simultaneously physical and emotional state. The world that the youth seeks is physically hardened and fixed by the sun, in contrast to the ever-changing topography of the sea. But, more importantly, this retreat affords the impossible promise of emotional stasis, a place in which everything is hardened, unfeeling, and, thus, enduring. This unrealistic and even slightly perverse desire to enter a world that is devoid of feeling, movement, and time is obviously untenable. Yet, despite its fictional qualities, “A Tale” underscores the intensity of this escapist impulse, which will recur repeatedly throughout the remainder of the collection. Once the youth “cuts what holds his days together,” Body of This Death likewise dispenses with developmental time and operates, instead, as a series of constant and continual beginnings.

The lyric tradition lends itself readily to these temporal experiments incited at the collection’s outset. The lyric poem, by definition, strives not for coherence and consistency over a duration of time, but to crystallize an emotion or idea that arises in a single, passing instant. In fact, the lyric distinguishes itself from other literary forms, because of this unique relationship to time and space. While plays and novels string together isolated moments and embed them within a social frame, the traditional lyric voice imagines itself as asocial, and, in a sense, out of time (Cameron 22-23). Many of Bogan’s frozen visions conjure this classic lyric tradition; there are echoes of Keats, in particular, throughout the collection, as in the exquisitely posed lines, “lovers with their
mouths press out their grief. / The bird fans wide his striped regality” (“Decoration” lines 11-12). Tableaux like these also continually exploit an ever available pun on “Romantic,” in which Bogan seems more than willing to indulge. Her “Epitaph For a Romantic Woman” and “The Romantic” each fuse high-minded, “Romantic” literary conventions with the debased sentimental, yearnings of a “romantic” woman. Bogan enjoys teetering on the border of these traditions: playfully discovering what separates Keats’ urn from Stowe’s Little Eva. Moreover, lines like “A crystal tree lets fall a crystal leaf” (“Decoration” line 14) demonstrate the manner in which her method engages with Imagism and its intensification of the lyric’s static, brittle visions. Theodore Roethke even chides Bogan for such indulgences, calling them “clichés of the twenties” (89). “Even in her earliest work,” he writes, “she seems to be seeking a moment when things are caught, fixed, frozen, seen, for an instant, under the eye of eternity” (88). Yet, as Roethke also acknowledges, neither the Romantic nor the Imagistic experiments with lyric time seem to capture the explicit reworking of modern temporality that Bogan is attempting.

Roethke cites Bogan’s 1929 poem, “Come, Break With Time,” from her second collection, Dark Summer, as the culmination of her more implicit temporal concerns in Body of This Death:

Come, break with time,
You who were lorded
By a clock’s chime
So ill afforded.
If time is allayed
Be not afraid.

I shall break, if I will.
Break, since you must.
Time has its fill,
Sated with dust.
Long the clock’s hand
Burned like a brand.

Take the rock’s speed
And earth’s heavy measure.
Let buried seed
Drain out time’s pleasure.
Take time’s decrees.
Come, cruel ease. (60)

Roethke provides only a cursory reading of this “reticent” poem, in which he can locate no “final answer” (91). Nonetheless, his tentative comments point toward the centrality of the poem and its vision of time within Bogan’s corpus. The poem’s significance has little to do with a classic, lyrical moment of stasis. Despite the resonance of its final line with Keats’ “easeful Death” in “Ode to a Nightingale” (line 52), the poem’s violent, bodily confrontation with time conjures a distinct vision of modernity. Bogan’s images of time, first, as a hungry devouring figure “sated with dust” and then as a “clock’s hand” that “burned like a brand,” both call attention to an embodied sense of time and temporality. The final, striking invective, “Let buried seed / Drain out time’s pleasure,” successfully counters time’s cycle of consumption and destruction through recourse to female reproduction. The palpable fear that was registered earlier in the poem has disappeared. Of all “time’s decrees,” the speaker has “taken” the most fundamental: its imperative to reproduce. Rather than giving birth to a future, this “buried seed” consumes time itself. The poem’s final line, “Come, cruel ease,” does not invite individual death, merely, but ushers in an apocalyptic vision with the power to destroy any hope of futurity, any semblance of progress. The natural cycle of birth and renewal has been powerfully reversed; this seed incites a backward process of destruction. While on the surface the
poem may appear cryptic, when read in the context of Bogan’s myriad poems and essays concerning time and temporality, its critique of modernism and modernity manifests.

By foregrounding the manner in which women’s reproductive bodies are oriented inevitably toward the future, Bogan provides an important, gendered intervention into discussions of modernist temporality. Avant-garde manifestoes frequently foreclose their connection to a debased, feminized past and concomitantly project liberation onto an idealized future moment. Janet Lyon outlines, for example, the manner in which F.T. Marinetti’s manifestoes construct the feminine as an “intensely pejorative field of meaning” that is conflated with “cultural stasis,” “decay,” and “lechery.” In fact, the feminine constitutes the very point of departure for futurism’s “masculinist program” (100). “Come, Let Us Break With Time” subversively channels the power of this destructive feminine element in the service of liberating women from their boundedness to historical time. Considering the substantial barriers that often prevented women from participating in modernism’s avant-garde projects, Bogan’s explicit concern with women’s bodies may, in this sense, represent a gendered counter-statement to dominant avant-garde discourse. Though its fantastic resolution is undoubtedly distorted, the poem is no more bombastic in tone or idealistic in substance than other avant-garde critiques.29

An attention to discourses of futurity and their relation to women’s bodies can also help to illuminate the collection’s most infamous poem, “Women.” Over the last twenty years, the poem has had a decidedly mixed reception as both an emblem of antifeminism and, more generously, a tragic portrait of one woman’s self-loathing:

Women have no wilderness in them,
They are provident instead,
Content in the tight hot cell of their hearts
To eat dusty bread.
They do not see cattle cropping red winter grass,
They do not hear
Snow water going down under culverts
Shallow and clear.

They wait, when they should turn to journeys,
They stiffen, when they should bend.
They use against themselves that benevolence
To which no man is friend.

They cannot think of so many crops to a field
Or of clean wood cleft by an axe.
Their love is an eager meaninglessness
Too tense, or too lax.

They hear in every whisper that speaks to them
A shout and a cry.
As like as not, when they take life over their door-sills
They should let it go by. (23)

On the surface, the poem appears to be a sure-footed deployment of accumulated
stereotypes about women—a vision of gender that falls closely in line with Eliot’s
“Portrait of a Lady” (1911) or Pound’s “Portrait d’une Femme” (1912). Deborah Pope
suggests the poem’s overwhelming tone of bitterness and disgust can be difficult to
swallow:

“Women” internalizes the enemy and turns on her own feminine self. The “body
of this death” becomes identified as her own female body. The poem’s unrelieved
bitterness toward gender epitomizes the worst kind of isolation, extending to
encompass both the outward and inward worlds. Women are excoriated as
stunted, constricted creatures, senselessly paralyzed and paralyzing. […]
Everything they do evokes suffocation; life itself is a mistake for these eternally
blundering women. Unable to build or create, they only destroy. Worse, they
cannot even mother. (33)
Although bleak, Pope’s reading is consistent with the dark vision of modernity espoused throughout Bogan’s poetry and is, moreover, supported by biographical precedent. Gloria Bowles, for instance, thoroughly documents Bogan’s ambivalent feminist politics, as outlined in her letters, speeches, and essays. Bowles suggests that Bogan maintained a staunchly “individualistic” view of gender relations and frequently sought to distance herself from the “general situation of women” (40). In contrast to Millay, an ardent suffragist who consciously nurtured the careers of other women writers—including Bogan herself—Bogan, Bowles claims, felt little personal or public responsibility to other women and, especially, women poets (46).

Bowles recounts, for instance, the story of Millay’s community-minded response to Bogan’s writing, the first time she encountered it. In 1923, when Edmund Wilson introduced Millay to Bogan’s writing, Millay responded, “I did read the poems you left and like them very much. Who is this person? I never even heard of her. I was quite thrilled by some of the poems. Isn’t it wonderful how the lady poets are coming along? ‘Votes for women’ is what I sez!” (Millay Letters 173). Bogan, according to Bowles, shared little of Millay’s feminism and routinely denounced women poets in print, including Millay herself (47-49). Read in the context of these vexed personal connections, the poem’s repetition of the third-person pronoun, “they,” seems to operate as a crucial mode of distancing the individual poet from a broader social collectivity.

Understandably, critics have sought to recuperate the poem and, by extension, to defend Bogan from these accusations of antifeminism. Emphasizing the performative space that is created by Bogan’s distancing mechanisms, Cary Nelson suggests,

The poem’s subject is more properly understood not as ‘women’ themselves but
rather as masculinist discourses about women, the declarations about women that our culture habitually makes. Those discourses, the poem shows, inevitably contradict and disqualify themselves. (“Fate of Gender” 335)

Nelson’s reparative reading destabilizes the poetic text and simultaneously lends sophistication to Bogan’s understanding of gender identity and modern gender politics. Lee Upton’s reading of “Women” reaches a conclusion similar to Nelson’s. He argues that “Women” represents an “overt critique of women’s acculturated behavior” (45).

Rather than a knee-jerk, reactionary assault on femininity, Nelson and Upton suggest that the poem functions as a reflective cultural critique. My reading of “Women” will build upon these insights; however, I also want to credit the poem’s vitriol—its dark, hopeless forecast for the modern woman and her future emotional and political prospects. The poem’s regressive tendencies are, in fact, consistent with Bogan’s broader formal vision of modernity.

Consider, for instance, the antiquated language through which the poem stages its critique. Against the thoroughly modern, urban imaginary of the New Woman, the poem retreats into an atavistic, rural space: a lonely place of “cattle cropping red winter grass” and “snow water going down under culverts.” The women in Bogan’s poem are being judged against the values of another time, another era: “They cannot think of so many crops to a field / Or of clean wood cleft by an axe.” The poem strategically displaces contemporary debates over gender, preferring a vaguely mapped, pre-industrialized world to the specific urban sites where gender is more typically contested. The key opposition established within the poem is not between women and men, but between modern, “new” women and a fantasy of their “old,” pre-modern selves.
Read in this light, the poem’s opening insult comes into sharper focus:

Women have no wilderness in them,
They are provident instead,
Content in the tight hot cell of their hearts
To eat dusty bread.

This initial judgment that women lack “wilderness” and are “provident instead” instantiates an uneasy, slanted opposition. The true opposite of “wilderness” would more properly be civilization or even domesticity—and, surely, those echoes of a discourse of nationhood continue to inform the poem. While “provident” maintains these tamed connotations, it breaks with the spatial metaphor and invokes a sense of contingency or boundedness that is grounded more pointedly in temporality. To be “provident” is to plan: to measure fundamentally one’s own existence with an eye toward the future. In her use of the term, Bogan suggests that women are biologically limited, urged through their reproductive capacities to orient themselves perpetually forward. Taken alongside her reference to “buried seed” in “Come, Let Us Break With Time,” “Women” could thus be seen to account similarly for a gendered understanding of historical time. That they are “content” “To eat dusty bread” signals a profound bodily disjunction between women and the modern. They look backward and are compelled forward, but are fundamentally unable to engage with their immediate, modern moment.

Elsewhere, throughout *Body of This Death*, the trope of women’s reproductive bodies recurs as a key symbol of women’s temporal alienation. In “Betrothed,” Bogan punctuates a poem ostensibly celebrating love’s beginning with a bitter remonstrance of childbirth: “My mother remembers the agony of her womb / And long years that seemed to promise more than this” (lines 6-7). Then, in “Ad Castitatem” the speaker’s “blackened heart” longingly invokes the mythical, elusive respite of chastity: “I call upon
you without echo. / Hear me, infertile, / Beautiful futility” (lines 21-23). And Bogan’s stunning and sparse, “Portrait,” cuts to the very heart of this sexual and temporal dilemma: “She is possessed by time, who once / Was loved by men” (11-12). The lines are imbued with a classic, Shakespearean sense of disillusionment: the demise of love has ostensibly thrust the speaker back into the cold world of mortality. However, embedded within the collection’s larger critique of sex and reproduction, the poem also lends itself to a more blunt reading: the speaker is mourning the fact that she is pregnant. Nonetheless, one need not arrive at this sexual interpretation to understand fully the pathos of the speaker’s “possession.” Body of This Death desires above all else to liberate its female speakers from the shackles of a distinctly gendered temporal confinement. It offers no material solutions or recommendations for this condition, merely a sentimental record of its impossible contradictions. The poems imagine an impossible retreat outside the reaches of the modern; a fantastic regression to a time before the modern fall; and a perverse rendering of the female body to make it impenetrable to modernity’s touch. Its sentimental yearning registers a distinctly gendered feeling—within the speaker’s very “eyes,” “bones,” and “heart”—that modernity itself is fundamentally flawed.

In one, crucial sense, then, Bogan seems to have taken Eliot at his word. In “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” Eliot recommends that the modern artist develop a “historical sense”: an index of “his place in time” as well as “his contemporaneity.” As he famously quips, “No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone” (38). Like Eliot, Bogan uses her poetry as a point of historical departure. Fundamentally concerned with the interplay between emotion and form, Bogan’s poetry reconnects modernism to an expressive, lyrical past—what she terms in Achievement in American
Poetry the “line of feeling” in modern poetry. Whereas Eliot assembles a particular European tradition that paved the way for his poetry, Bogan similarly conjures the sentimental predecessors who enabled her own, unique version of modernism. As Gloria Bowles notes, Bogan “was the only modern woman poet to inquire about her foremothers” (35). In line with this genealogical impulse, Bogan likewise endorses a distinct, contemporary tradition of modernist writers, notably “the cluster of women lyric poets that appeared on the American scene just before and after 1918” (“Heart” 341). She argues that this group of poets, which includes Teasdale, Wylie, Millay, and Adams, “Restored genuine and frank feeling to a literary situation which had become genteel, artificial, and dry” (“Heart” 341). For Bogan, these so-called “nightingale” poets index a unique formal and historical revision of the modern. Their poetry resonates with a much longer women’s tradition and simultaneously fills an emotional void within the field of WWI poetry. Similar to Eliot, Bogan’s self-conscious advocacy of women’s lyrical poetry represents a competing historicization and periodization of literary modernism. As she looks nostalgically to the past, Bogan is also engaged critically with the literary present.
Chapter 3

“The Miss America of 1920”:
Edna St. Vincent Millay and the Poetics of Mass Culture

It is easy to be beautiful; it is difficult to appear so.

—Frank O’Hara (39)

In 1917, Edna St. Vincent Millay arrived in Greenwich Village. Over the next decade, she would transform herself from literary ingénue into the most famous poet in America. With the publication of A Few Figs from Thistles in 1920, followed swiftly by Second April in 1921 and The Harp-Weaver and Other Poems in 1923, Millay became a full-fledged mass-media darling, a poet whose celebrity coexisted, and perhaps even competed, with the stars of stage and screen. She was, to borrow Elizabeth Atkins’ famous description, “the unrivaled embodiment of sex appeal, the It-girl of the hour, the Miss America of 1920” (70).

Millay moved to New York intending to pursue a career as an actress. While at Vassar College, she had performed in a variety of amateur productions, and she used her connections to secure auditions at theaters across the city. However, despite hard work and an impressive catalog of introductions, nothing was materializing. “The theatrical business is not yet booming,” Millay glumly reported in a letter to her mother and sister in October 1917 (Letters 80). But while waiting for her big break, Millay was invited by one of her wealthy patrons—a member of the same influential coterie of women who had financed her college education—to give a poetry reading in her home. To her astonishment, Millay soon found that these poetry readings were not only more forthcoming than work in the theater, but also more lucrative than print publications. “If I can get readings to give,” she told her family, “I would quite as soon wait a bit [on the
acting career” (Letters 80).

The first of Millay’s professional readings was in the home of Mrs. Blanche Hooker—“a very wealthy woman”—in September 1917. Hooker did not pay Millay for this first reading, but assured her that additional paid engagements would soon follow. As Millay happily reports, Hooker liked the reading “very much” (Letters 76, emphasis original). It was at these early readings—and because of Mrs. Hooker—that Millay began to cultivate the poetic persona, which would catapult her to celebrity in the early 1920s. On the night of her first reading, Millay claims to have had nothing to wear; but Mrs. Hooker came to her rescue:

[Mrs. Hooker] dressed me up in something of hers, a gown with three rainbow colored scarfs. And, family, I discover that I have nothing to give readings in, I must have long dresses, trailing ones. The short ones won’t do. If Norma hasn’t yet done anything to the greenish chiffon & rose scarf then that dress ought to be made up very long & drapy—more like a negligée than a dress, really—very graceful & floaty.—If she’s cut that up short I’ll have to get me some scarfs & make me one. (Letters 76)

These were no mere decorative details. Through her poetry readings, Millay had found a way to incorporate her love for the stage into her poetic practice. In subsequent years, the intricate choreography of Millay’s readings—wardrobe, hair, make-up, movement, scenery, lighting, and voice—would help to transform the very nature of the poetry reading. As Lesley Wheeler explains, in the 1920s, poetry readings as an institution were on the verge of an important transformation. Rather than a nineteenth-century elocutionary model, which emphasized an author’s recitation skills, twentieth-century
audiences were beginning to demand a more dynamic engagement with the poet (44). Millay, Wheeler writes, combined the best of these two models: “Millay, both an expert performer with nineteenth-century training and a celebrity with twentieth-century star power, worked right at the edge of this cultural shift, pioneering a new kind of literary spectacle” (44).

Throughout the 1920s, Millay’s poetry readings played a crucial role in consolidating her mass-cultural celebrity. From 1924 to 1925, Millay embarked on her first nation-wide reading tour. She visited twenty cities—from Charleston, West Virginia to Cheyenne, Wyoming—and gave more than thirty readings. The schedule was exhausting, but the performances were extremely profitable. Her biographer Daniel Mark Epstein notes that Millay netted more than two thousand dollars from the tour—money she used to renovate Steepletop, the seven-hundred acre berry farm nestled in the Berkshires, which the poet would call home until her death in 1950 (183-187).

Perhaps the most celebrated of these readings occurred at Bowdoin College in 1925, where Millay appeared alongside Robert Frost, Carl Sandburg, Irving Babbitt, and Willa Cather, as part of the school’s centennial celebration. In their reviews, critics focused almost exclusively on Millay’s physical appearance, which apparently had a tremendous impact on her audience. At the beginning of the evening, The Christian Science Monitor reports, the students in the audience had seemed “bewildered” by the “intricate pattern” of Millay’s complex poems. But they were soon transfixed. The reviewer describes how the stage lights “caught at the ruddy lights in [Millay’s] cropped hair” as she trailed up the steps to the stage wearing “a robe of gold and bronze and green.” The effect, by all accounts, was hypnotic:
Back and forth she moved, slender, by turn gay and grave, pompous and flippant. Her robe, because it was traced with gold threads woven into its pattern whispered and chimed faintly against the floor. If Miss Millay had not been a poet she could easily have been an actress. (*The Christian Science Monitor*)

A reviewer from the *Lewiston Evening Journal* happily reports, “She does not in the least bit in the world resemble Amy Lowell in appearance…Miss Millay is flower-like—a tiny, slender Bunthorne lily” (59). He continues,

> Miss Millay has a sort of post-Titian hair, a complementary color to her gown, last evening. Her neck is like Annie Laurie’s. Her hair is bobbed—by the way. Her face—I am getting beyond my proper limitations, I fear—is child-like, yet very wise. Her voice is altogether too musical for reading. She should sing her poems and be done with it. But she was lovely and a Poem. (59)

When the performance concluded, “The audience uprose and applauded Miss Millay with such a fierce abandon as to indicate an emotional climax” (60). “Honestly,” the reviewer adds, “I was breathless” (60). Although the Bowdoin reading would be the only time that Millay and Frost would ever share a stage, the press showed absolutely no interest in comparing the work of the two poets (Milford 272). They preferred, instead, to stand mesmerized at the spectacle of Millay.

Indeed, throughout the 1920s, it might be fair to say that Millay was watched, as much as, if not more, than her poetry was read. Critics and readers alike were star-struck by the beautiful young poet. They looked to Millay herself—her body, as well as her iconic image—to guarantee the meaning of her poetry. This process of reading—or “not reading,” as the case may be—is closer to the strategies of mass culture than the methods
of modernist poetry. In the age of Eliot, the poetic text famously began to acquire new depths of meaning, new layers of complexity—formal and linguistic subtleties that were so finely wrought they required a “new” class of professional critic to unearth their mysteries. No such “close reading” seemed to be demanded by Millay’s poems. Looking away from the text, toward her radiant body—a modern woman who smoked in public, slept with whomever she chose, and protested for the rights of the dispossessed—this was apparently the proper way to read Millay’s poetry. As the reviewer from the Lewiston Evening Journal puts it, Millay was the poem.

Fixated on Millay’s beauty and body, this modernist-era criticism has created considerable problems for some feminist scholars. Cheryl Walker, for instance, argues that these star-struck reviews are symptomatic of the early twentieth century’s rising scopophilia. Drawing on Luce Irigaray’s This Sex Which Is Not One, Walker argues that Millay’s sexualization within her critical corpus represents a prime example of “women’s continuing commodification as bodies ‘on the market’” (136). Irigaray’s foundational study challenges the limited social and sexual roles prescribed to women—mother, virgin, and prostitute—through which feminine sexuality and female identity have been constituted solely as “a mirror of value of and for man” (177). “Men make commerce of [women],” Irigaray writes, “but they do not enter into any exchanges with them” (172, emphasis original). Irigaray has in mind the silent, passive bodies of women—what she terms an “unknown infrastructure”—supporting the economic and cultural exchanges of men (171). It is this phallocratic or androcentric order, engendering the structural passivity of women’s bodies, which Irigaray seeks to subvert. “What if these
‘commodities’ refused to go to ‘market’?” Irigaray asks, “What if they maintained ‘another’ kind of commerce, among themselves?” (196).

In her reading of Millay-as-commodity, Walker takes from Irigaray all of the female body’s passivity and silence, but none of its potential for subversion or pleasure. Although Walker acknowledges that Millay did attempt through her performances and her poetry to manipulate the spectacle of the female body—she “thought of herself as a fighter and a feminist,” Walker admits (139)—in the end, she believes that Millay failed to achieve her artistic and political goals:

In truth, Millay was not really subversive. She never worked out a large conception of women’s place in American culture, women’s oppression under patriarchy, or even the dynamics of male-female relationships. H.D. was much more analytical about these issues, but even Louise Bogan was more consistent in her evaluation of the relative merits of the sexes. Therefore, we are likely to be disappointed in Millay if we want from consciously feminist poetry more than the beginnings of feminist consciousness, if we want subtlety and range of application capable of revising our categories. (164)

At stake in Walker’s reading is the foundational issue that I have argued continues to trouble Millay’s critical reputation: Walker is insisting, like so many critics before her, that Millay lacks a “consciously” theorized poetic method. By recuperating Millay as a sentimental—or, as Walker prefers, “nightingale”—poet, she has left intact many of the most destructive presumptions advanced by the New Critics. We see here not the restoration of Millay to her stature in the modernist era, but, rather, a consolidation of Millay’s new reputation as a “minor” poet. In Walker’s conception, Millay is a
thoughtless poet, un-analytical, and lacking in both “subtlety” and “range.” Perhaps most 
damning, Millay’s feminism, and, in particular, her experiments with the body, are 
considered to have been wholly unconscious—almost, in fact, accidental.

An attention to Millay’s performances has the potential to unsettle this deeply 
entrenched belief in her status as a “minor” poet. For instance, in her study of Millay’s 
live performances and radio broadcasts, Lesley Wheeler ranks among an exceedingly 
small number of critics since the 1920s to credit Millay as an innovator. Wheeler argues 
that Millay “interrogates the status of the lyric poem,” through her manipulations of body 
and voice, as well as her ongoing experiments with varying modes of poetic transmission 
(59). These innovations, Wheeler writes, “suggest that the best insights about modernity 
do not necessarily emanate from the avant-garde, and that poetry can use new media to 
deliver on old promises” (48).

Derek Furr, in a recent study of the extant recordings of Millay’s poetry readings, 
credits Millay with a similarly self-conscious performative method, evinced within the 
intense power she exerted over her listening audiences. For instance, in the winter of 
1932-1933, on Sunday evenings, Millay delivered eight readings, which were broadcast 
live on NBC. Afterward, both she and the radio program were “inundated with letters 
from enchanted listeners” (Furr 100).31 Furr documents some of these remarkable letters, 
which are culled from Millay’s archives as well as NBC’s, and which testify to an 
overwhelming feeling of intimacy that readers experienced in response to hearing Millay. 
They wrote to her as if she were their closest friend, and many, in fact, felt compelled to 
share the intimate details of their own lives, in exchange for what Millay had seemingly 
given to them. Furr, like Wheeler, suggests that this unusually intense intimacy was the
result of Millay’s strategic supplementation of her printed texts: the added material
texture of body and voice, as well as the new media of transmission, helped Millay to
create a powerful illusion of full presence within her performances, broadcasts, and
recordings. Listeners felt as if Millay were really there, inside their living rooms,
speaking directly to them. While Furr rightly cautions against a conflation of the myriad
ways that Millay’s audiences might have listened to her poetry—in person, on record,
and on the radio—he nonetheless admits that all of her listeners seem to have been
similarly “enchanted” by Millay. “What is remarkable,” Furr writes, “is the consistency
of response that one finds across these very different scenes of listening” (102).

This enchantment that both Furr and Wheeler identify as a constitutive function of
Millay’s performances occurred when audiences encountered her books of poetry as well.
At one of the first stops on her national poetry tour, in Evanston, Illinois, in January
1924, Millay met an “awfully nice & clever & amusing man” who claimed that he knew
all of her books of poetry “by heart” and bragged that his seventeen-year-old daughter did
too (Letters 181). Millay’s performance that night had merely confirmed—or, perhaps,
intensified—an intimate connection that had already been forged within and through the
pages of A Few Figs from Thistles, Second April, and The Harp-Weaver. As Horace
Gregory similarly recounts in a 1935 retrospective on Millay’s career, in the early 1920s,
when a young woman, in particular, read Millay’s poetry, “it was as though she had been
reading a letter from a friend” (3). The connection between writer and reader was so
strong, in fact—so deceptively real—that Millay’s audience frequently attempted to write
back. In response to Millay’s poetic missives, Gregory notes, “hundreds of women were
stirred to writing verse, to say again what Edna Millay had said the year before” (3).
Wheeler notes that there is a complex entanglement between Millay’s physical performances and printed texts. “Millay encodes performance insistently within printed poetry,” she writes, “and dramatically performs poems that represent sound in visual terms” (59). Moreover, Wheeler observes, Millay “refuses to prioritize one medium over another” (40). However, in focusing exclusively on Millay’s poetry readings as the source of her poetic authority, both Wheeler and Furr risk ossifying the conventional status of Millay’s printed poetry. Sounding dangerously close to Cheryl Walker, Wheeler at one point concedes that Millay “was hardly an avatar of the new”:

Although she promoted and embodied women’s increasing social and sexual freedoms, in her readings, printed poems, and other publicity she could perform the stereotypes of bohemian femme fatale and poetess with zeal. She was, in many ways, a conventional figure, and not only because she often wrote in forms and imagery that any nineteenth-century reader would recognize as poetic. (46)

Despite their undeniable advantages over previous portraits, which cast Millay as a stereotypical “poetess,” these recent interpretations thus fail to resolve a fundamental problematic inhering within Millay’s status as a “sentimental” poet. In suggesting that Millay’s method of poetic innovation resides solely within her performances, these readings unwittingly fuel the New Critical fiction that the texts themselves lack formal innovations.

In contrast, this chapter will argue that Millay’s dynamic poetic method is equally present within her performances and printed poetry. As is the case with her performances, Millay’s printed poems rely upon a logic of articulation to achieve their intimate effects. Photographs, newspaper articles, beauty, and bobbed hair—all are necessary to Millay’s
poetics. This strategy is laid bare in the palpable theatricality of her performances and recordings. But critics have had trouble seeing these intricate mechanics at work within her printed poems. Rather than a simple misrecognition, the public’s fixation on Millay’s body, our propensity to watch rather than to read, is a cultivated position that Millay actively fosters within her poetic texts. Millay is teaching her modernist audience a new mass-cultural method for reading; she is reinventing the static lyric text as a dynamic social and cultural field. In so doing, Millay forged a powerfully new poetics, one which lies between “sentimentality” and “modernism,” subjective and objective poetries.

This reading is thus designed to correct a structural blindness that inheres within the New Criticism, and, equally, within more recent revisionary scholarship, which has similarly de-materialized the form of Millay’s poetry. Critics, both sympathetic and otherwise, have displayed a virtually unshakable faith in the personal, quasi-Romantic, and expressive nature of Millay’s poetry. In a modernist vernacular, this has meant that the form of the poetry itself, in all its objective substance, has been virtually consumed by an overwhelming focus on “person” and “personality.”

Moreover, as the following discussion demonstrates, Millay’s sophisticated insights, regarding the objective substance of affect and the body—and its potential for formal manipulation—were the source of an important debate among feminist poets and critics such as Genevieve Taggard and Amy Lowell. I begin with Taggard’s innovative reading of Millay’s embodied poetics, which belongs to a very small canon of criticism that has credited Millay as a formal innovator. I then turn to Millay’s experiments with the body and affect, as evidenced, particularly, within her wildly popular collection, _A Few Figs From Thistles_. These readings will challenge Millay’s status as a purely
subjective poet and continue the process of reclaiming her objective poetic method, which I began in Chapter 1. Indeed, by closing the distance between Millay’s ostensibly “personal” lyrics and Eliot’s purportedly “Impersonal” experiments, I hope to unsettle the foundational opposition between subjective and objective poetries, which has been so central to our conceptions of the field of poetic modernism for nearly a century.

“Vehicle of me”

In 1925, Genevieve Taggard published a review of Millay in the feminist periodical Equal Rights. In it, she hails Millay as “the first woman poet to take herself seriously as an artist.” “Even Emily Dickinson,” Taggard goes on, “for all her strength and self-knowledge, refused to do that, except at midnight, when alone, like a burglar or a miser, she gloated over her riches” (137). If we can forgive Taggard’s historical shortsightedness—surely, Millay was not the first such woman poet—her case for the “seriousness” of Millay’s poetry proves to be remarkably sophisticated. Taggard begins by noting an ambivalent entanglement between women’s bodies and their poetry:

Women have borne poets and evoked poetry, but how few of them have written it! And for the simplest possible reason. We are coming to know that you cannot separate the creative fibre. All the nervous vitality that flows into a great poem begins in physical fertility, just where in the past it has almost always ended. In short, the creative woman before our time usually had twelve children; she seldom wrote poetry. (137)

Taggard had addressed the theme of women’s “creative fibre” before, notably in her poem “With Child,” which appeared in The Liberator in December 1921, and then in her collection For Eager Lovers in 1922:
Now I am slow and placid, fond of sun,
Like a sleek beast, or a worn one,
No slim and languid girl – not glad
With the windy trip I once had,
But velvet-footed, musing of my own,
Torpid, mellow, stupid as a stone.

You cleft me with your beauty’s pulse, and now
Your pulse has taken body. Care not how
The old grace goes, how heavy I am grown,
Big with this loneliness, how you alone
Ponder our love. Touch my feet and feel
How earth tingles, teeming at my heel!
Earth’s urge, not mine, – my little death, not hers;
And the pure beauty yearns and stirs. (lines 1-14)

Taggard’s speaker is profoundly divided by her pregnancy: “You cleft me with your
beauty’s pulse, and now / Your pulse has taken body” (lines 7-8). She is at once
compelled toward this new “beauty,” and, at the same time, haunted by the “old grace”
that has been “taken” from her (line 9). She refers to the pregnancy as “Earth’s urge, not
mine,” a testament to the complexity of her desires, which are not entirely her own (line
13). Moreover, the poem persistently conflates the unborn child and
“beauty”—reproduction and aesthetic production. The use of the objective pronoun “it,”
in the poem’s final stanza makes this ambiguity complete:

It does not heed our ecstasies, it turns
With secrets of its own, its own concerns,
Toward a windy world of its own, toward stark
And solitary places. In the dark,
Defiant even now, it tugs and moans
To be untangled from these mother’s bones. (lines 15-20)

“With Child” is a remarkable poem, written on the eve of women’s suffrage, and, yet,
marked still by the ambivalences of freedom—or, at least, by its incompleteness. Read
literally, the poem documents the experience of pregnancy from the viewpoint of a
decidedly modern woman. A woman, that is, like Taggard herself—a feminist, suffragist,
and “free love” advocate—confronted, suddenly, with the necessity of ceding control of her body. Or, perhaps, what is so haunting about the poem is that the speaker seems to realize that that control was always already ceded. Read figuratively, as a meta-poem reflecting on the creative process, these complexities redouble. This is no one’s muse, but a woman artist, “musing of my own” (line 5). At the same time, she is “cleft” by text—her “own” agency interrupted by the secret life of an artistic object, struggling to be born. Truly, in Taggard’s estimation, the body of the woman poet is not her own.34

In her reading of Millay’s poetry, Taggard identifies a similar entanglement of women’s bodies and creative labors, as in this stanza that she cites from Millay’s poem “The Poet and His Book,” which appeared in her 1921 collection Second April:

Women at your toil,
Women at your leisure
Till the kettle boil,
Snatch of me your pleasure,
Where the broom straw marks the leaf;
Women quiet with your weeping
Lest you wake a workman sleeping,
Mix me with your grief! (lines 89-96)

Although Taggard does not acknowledge it explicitly, the stanza confirms the two poets’ shared investment in the corporealization of women’s writing. When Millay commands her female audience to “Mix me with your grief!” there is no distance separating the poem from the poet’s body—“it” from “me”—just as with Taggard’s “defiant” beauty, coming “untangled from these mother’s bones.”

As a whole, “The Poet and His Book” addresses the proto-Shakespearean question of poetic immortality. Faced with her “personal death,” the decaying of her mortal body, Millay’s speaker wants to live on in the pages of her books: “From the dust of ages / Lift this little book, / Turn the tattered pages, / Read me, do not let me die!”
The poem is undoubtedly playful—“Down, you mongrel, Death! / Back into your kennel!” (line 1)—but humor is not the only modern update that Millay makes to this classic poetic game. As the poem progresses, her imperative, “Read me,” takes on a decidedly sexual charge:

Bear me to the light,
Flat upon your bellies
By the webby window lie,
Where the little flies are crawling,
Read me, margin me with scrawling,
Do not let me die! (lines 107-112)

Millay’s use of the verb “margin” forges an explicit intimacy between the physical body and the physical text. “Margin me with scrawling” evokes a sexual fantasy of “scrawling” on the female poet’s body, while also conjuring the expressive myth of having a real-life poet living in the margins of the page. This is not Shakespeare’s metonymic immortality—where language safely stands in for the poet’s body. Millay is attempting to reconceive poetic form as an even more intimately embodied form—what she refers to as “a vehicle of me” (line 88).

Ironically, Walker also cites “The Poet and His Book”—not as evidence of Millay’s seriousness as an artist, but as proof of her complicity in the mass-cultural commodification of her body. Walker likens “The Poet and His Book” to the final stanza of “Burial,” also published in Second April, in which the speaker envisions

…terrible fishes to seize my flesh,
Such as a living man might fear,
And eat me while I am firm and fresh,—
Not wait till I’ve been dead for a year! (lines 5-8)

Walker argues that this “feeding off the flesh of the woman writer” represents a dangerous bargain that modernist women poets were forced to strike with their ever-
hungrier mass-cultural audiences (142). “Millay wanted her readers to get the juice out of her poetry,” Walker writes, “to consume it (and her) in order to keep her spirit ‘in circulation’” (143). Walker is right to be concerned about the commodification of women’s bodies, and, in particular, the ease with which readers tend to consume women’s poetries. As Susan Gubar observes, the devouring of the woman’s body has often been mixed up with the reading of her poetry. Gubar cites, as a cautionary tale, Dorothea Brooke, in *Middlemarch*, who aspires to be a poet; instead of a career, Will Ladislaw offers her the assurance that “You are a poem” (qtd. in Gubar 245). This strategic conflation between bodies and texts has often functioned to limit women’s creative opportunities: they are always the objects, but never the subjects of art.

However, as Gubar also notes, the power dynamics of this metonymy alter dramatically in the modernist era. H.D. provides the illustrative case of a woman poet seizing hold of the mechanics of objectification in order to create a new poetic method. In Eileen Gregory’s reading, H.D.’s tropical landscape in *Sea Garden*, dominated by rocks and bitter salt, emblematizes the poet’s attempt to strengthen the affective substance of her “poetess” heritage—to reshape it into a more “durable matter” (535). H.D.’s objective rendering of the female body and emotions is not a willing commodification of her interior life; it is, rather, the “self-conscious crafting” of a newly embodied art (537). Alone among critics, Taggard identifies a similarly “self-conscious” aesthetic at work in Millay’s poetry. Rather than a forced or willing commodification, Taggard considers Millay’s rendering of her self to be the basis of a new poetics.

To appreciate fully the significance of Taggard’s interpretation, it is necessary to place her essay alongside Amy Lowell’s “Two Generations in American Poetry,” which
had appeared in the *New Republic* in December 1923, as part of a special issue dedicated to “American Poetry.” (This noteworthy issue also included Elinor Wylie’s provocative essay, “Jewelled Bindings,” and Louise Bogan’s first prose publication, “The Springs of Poetry,” which I discussed in Chapter 2). Taggard claims that her review of Millay is designed to correct Lowell’s false presumptions regarding women’s lyric poetry (139). In her essay, Lowell characterizes modernist American poetry in a manner that will be quite familiar to contemporary scholars. She divides the field, much as we do now, into two discrete traditions: one, experimental, and the other, purely, conventionally, lyrical. Lowell terms these competing camps, rather inelegantly, the “Secessionists” and the “Lyrists”—“It is not a very good name,” she admits, “for all poets write lyrics” (3).

However, in Lowell’s struggle to define an emerging canon of modernist poetry, we can identify the beginnings of a formal logic that would crystallize over the next two decades. Of the Secessionists she writes, “Their object is science rather than art; or perhaps it is fairer to say that to them art is akin to mathematics. They are much intrigued by structure, in a sense quite other than that in which it is usually employed in poetry” (3). This “structure, in a sense quite other” is the objective poetics said to be practiced by avant-garde and high modernist poets alike—a diverse tradition, certainly, but one that is considered to be united through its shared investment in form and formal innovation. In contrast, Lowell positions the younger generation, the Lyrists, as a counter-tradition, similarly united, but through a purported disinvestment in poetry’s new trend toward “structure”:

Where the older generation aimed at a major expression, these younger poets are directly forcing themselves to adhere to a minor one. The terms major and minor
in poetry have nothing to do with good and bad; a minor poet is often meticulously careful and exceedingly fine. Major and minor refer to outlook, and it is a fact that the younger group deliberately seeks the narrow, personal note. (3)

Notice that Lowell, like the New Critics to follow, carefully skirts evaluation; “minor” poetry, she would have us believe, is just as good as “major” poetry—only different. “Their expertness is really amazing,” she compliments (3). But as her essay progresses it becomes increasingly clear that this new ontology of modernist poetry is decidedly hierarchical. The Lyrists, according to Lowell, focus exclusively on a “narrow, personal note,” they “proclaim no tenets,” and advance no theories or philosophies of their own. They are, simply put, unthinking poets:

Where emotion is the chief stock in trade, we should not expect a high degree of intellectual content. […] For, while the older movement was innately masculine, the new one is all feminine. It is indeed a feminine movement, and remains such even in the work of its men. (3)

Lowell’s “feminine movement” is virtually indistinguishable from the “sentimental modernism” that critics rely on today to make sense of the field of modernist women’s poetry. The contours are the same: in both cases, women’s lyric poetry is considered to be a personal, emotional, technically accomplished endeavor, utterly lacking in “masculine” formal innovations. A half-century later, in recuperating the poetry of Millay, Teasdale, Wylie, Bogan, and even Taggard herself, critics would appropriate Lowell’s vision of the field almost in its entirety.

Taggard, however, rejects Lowell’s logic; she identifies within it a categorical devaluation of women’s poetic productions:
Because in the English lady’s past her poetry was often like her embroidery, we have an audience now that minimizes this lyricism. In an article a year ago in the *New Republic* Miss Amy Lowell lamented that the new school of poetry, of which Miss Millay is the chief figure, was essentially a feminine and minor affair, claiming for her own the adjectives major and masculine. Subjective poetry for Miss Lowell is, according to the article, always, or usually, minor. (139)

A poetry like embroidery—intricate, neatly confined—an exquisite art, for its kind. But Taggard was right to be suspicious. More than a half-century later, these profoundly gendered limitations continue to trouble Millay’s critical reputation. In a 1992 essay, also published in *The New Republic*, the poet Amy Clampitt sounds virtually indistinguishable from Lowell when she likens Millay’s poetry to “the art of the cameo” (46). Unlike her high modernist contemporaries, Millay, Clampitt argues, is a miniaturist:

> The effects produced by [Millay’s poetry] are limited. The bewilderments clutched at and grappled with by [William Carlos] Williams are beyond the ordering of anything so brittle. There is hardly room for ambiguity of thought or feeling—for anything that critical analysis might take hold of or take apart. Yet, as I say, it appears to be for these very reasons that the poems of Millay continue to be read, presumably by those who find incomprehensible the work of those moderns who were her contemporaries. (46)

There are a series of related oppositions structuring both Clampitt’s and Lowell’s assessments of the field of modernist poetry: major/minor, innovative/traditional, elite/popular, difficult/simple, intellectual/emotional, masculine/feminine. But, as Taggard recognizes, the basis for this logic—the foundation upon which the entire
architecture of modernist forms resides—has to do with the purported distinction between objective and subjective poetries.

Taggard does not claim, as some revisionary scholars have, that subjective poetry is just as good as objective poetry; she does not attempt, in other words, like Walker or Suzanne Clark, to revalue a “sentimental,” countervailing modernist tradition. Taggard argues, instead, that the new lyric turn in American poetry isn’t subjective at all. In her critique of Lowell, Taggard suggests that the constitution and subsequent consolidation of a “feminine movement” in modern American poetry is a means of diminishing the substance of this lyric poetry. She thus accuses Lowell of misrecognizing “the driving force behind the whole lyric impulse”:

An eternal feud between centripetal and centrifugal forces sunders and reunites all magical expression. There is one impulse for control and its antagonistic impulse for abandon, one pressing inward, the other exploding at the center. This battle holds the little atom of creative intensity almost quiet because of its balance. If either gain the upper hand entirely, the moment of creation is destroyed. To despise lyric poetry or call it personal—and this, I think, is what many people are doing when they say subjective—is to miss the point of its being uttered at all…A sharp lyric cry may sum up all the slow-moving objective meanings and purposes.

(139)

In appropriating the “masculine” discourse of science, Taggard forges a new metaphor for a new lyric tradition emerging in the 1920s. This is not Romanticism redux, but a new formalism held in the balance between a nineteenth-century subjective tradition (“centripetal forces”) and the objective poetics of Imagism and Impersonality arising in
the World War I era (“centrifugal forces”). (The word “atom” is, in fact, derived from an ancient Greek word meaning “indivisible” or “incapable of further division”). The new lyric poetry thus represents the essence of both subjective and objective poetries. To call this poetry “personal” or “subjective,” Taggard claims, “is to miss the point of its being uttered at all”—to elide everything that is new about it.

The remainder of this chapter—and, indeed, the whole of this dissertation—reclaims the new formalism that Taggard rightly feared was being lost. We have known since at least the 1980s that women poets as a class were structurally excluded from the canon of modernist poetry as it emerged at mid-century. This is the foundational lesson of a generation of feminist scholarship dedicated to recovering modernist women’s poetry. But we have yet to realize how fully our theories of modernist poetic form—indeed, the very fiber of modernist poetry—have been contaminated by this gendered ideology. Beauty and body are not the purely subjective stuff that modernist critics have long believed; in Millay’s poetry, they are transformed into an objective method.

“Why do you follow me?”

Published first in 1920 and in an expanded edition in 1922, A Few Figs from Thistles ranks among the most popular American poetry collections of the twentieth century. Reading accounts of its cultural influence in the 1920s brings to mind a narrow class of poems that have competed successfully with other, more dominant cultural forms—poems that have trumped pop songs, poets who have triumphed over film stars. Indeed, after winning the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1923—she was the first woman to
do so—Millay’s life became the stuff of tabloids: “Edna Millay, Poet, Married Secretly—Operation Hastens Match,” read The New York Times on July 19, 1923 (15), and a day later, “Edna Millay Operated On—Poet Bride of F.E. Boissevain Under Knife for Appendicitis” (18). These sensational articles were pitched to a general readership—not relegated to the “literary” or “books” section of the newspaper. This is the moment when Millay’s audience began to expand significantly. Her reach was no longer confined to the traditionally literary-minded, but was broadening into a new, mass-cultural terrain. Millay thus belongs to a small class of “celebrity poets”—a seeming oxymoron—which also includes later twentieth-century figures like Allen Ginsberg, Sylvia Plath, and Anne Sexton.

A Few Figs from Thistles catalyzed her celebrity. Before publishing this landmark volume, Millay was already known to New York’s literary elite. Her poem “Renascence” had brought her to the attention of critics like Harriet Monroe and Louis Untermeyer, when it appeared in The Lyric Year anthology of 1912. The Lyric Year was the result of a competition designed to identify the best in American poetry. Arthur Davison Ficke and Witter Bynner, the judges who encountered “Renascence” among a field of blind submissions, admired the poem tremendously—so much, in fact, that they presumed it to be the work of an established, male poet. They were shocked when they discovered that its author was an unknown, nineteen-year-old girl from Maine. “Gentlemen,” Millay wrote to them after learning of their confusion, “I must convince you of your error; my reputation is at stake. 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!” Her coquettish letter also included, as evidence of her “femininity,” a recent picture (Letters 20). But
despite the publicity and enviable connections Millay earned from The Lyric Year contest, her early fame was limited to a coterie of readers. Even when “Renascence” was reissued by Mitchell Kennerley as Renascence and Other Poems in 1917, it failed to gain much popular attention. As Kennerley explains, the volume sold “very slightly” in both its first (1917) and second editions (1919). “It was not until 1922-23,” Kennerley notes, with the appearance of A Few Figs from Thistles in a nationally circulated, expanded edition, “that people began to talk about Edna Millay and buy her books” (qtd. in Milford 518, n. 18).

A Few Figs from Thistles created a veritable frenzy in the early twenties, as Elizabeth Atkins famously recounts, in her 1936 study Edna St. Vincent Millay and Her Times:

To say that it became popular conveys but a faint idea of the truth. […] It seemed there was hardly a literate young person in all the English-speaking world who was not soon repeating, ad nauseum:

My candle burns at both ends,  
It will not last the night;  
But ah my foes, and oh, my friends,  
It gives a lovely light! (70-71)

A Few Figs from Thistles opens with the infinitely memorable “First Fig” and its less well-remembered companion “Second Fig”:

Safe upon the solid rock the ugly houses stand:  
Come and see my shining palace built upon the sand!

The two proems have rightly been hailed as emblems of the bohemian ethos that dominated Greenwich Village in the teens and early twenties. As Carl Van Doren claims in a 1924 review, “No one so well as Miss Millay has spoken with the accents credited to
the village” (313). Undoubtedly, the context of Greenwich Village bohemia enriches Millay’s early poetry significantly. In “First Fig” and “Second Fig,” the dazzling images of a consuming candle and a dissolving palace both serve to emphasize one of bohemia’s fundamental tenets: to live in the moment. As Malcolm Cowley explains in his foundational history of bohemia, *An Exile’s Return*, bohemians believe “it is better to seize the moment as it comes, to dwell in it intensely, even at the cost of future suffering” (60). Unburdened by the past and unconcerned with the future, the bohemian dwells in a utopic, a-temporal space—a single, impossible instant in which beauty, pleasure, and freedom reign supreme. Throughout *A Few Figs from Thistles*, Millay provides a virtual template of this and other guiding principles that Cowley, one of the pre-eminent chroniclers of bohemia, considers essential to its “system of ideas” (60).37

Millay had arrived in Greenwich Village at a crucial moment in bohemia’s history. As Cowley explains, prior to America’s entry into WWI, Greenwich Village had enjoyed a promiscuous intermingling of two distinct forms of revolt against the American middle-class: “bohemianism,” which focused primarily on individual freedom and gave rise to a predominantly aesthetic sensibility, and “radicalism,” which emphasized collective transformation and produced a fundamentally social or political ethos (66). According to Cowley, before 1918, “those two currents were hard to distinguish”:

Bohemians read Marx and all the radicals had a touch of the bohemian: it seemed that both types were fighting in the same cause. Socialism, free love, anarchism, syndicalism, free verse—all these creeds were lumped together by the public, and all were physically dangerous to practice. Bill Haywood, the one-eyed man-mountain, the Cyclops of the IWW, appeared regularly at Mabel Dodge’s
Wednesday nights, in a crowd of assorted poets and Cubist painters…During the bread riots of 1915 the Wobblies made their headquarters in Mary Vorse’s studio on Tenth Street; and Villagers might get their heads broken in Union Square by the police before appearing at the Liberal Club to recite Swinburne in bloody bandages. The Liberal Club was the social center of the Village, just as *The Masses*, which also represented both tendencies, was its intellectual center. (66)

With America’s entry into WWI, the distinction between “bohemians” and “radicals” manifested forcefully. Public opposition to the war was high, and the U.S. government inaugurated an aggressive campaign to quash political disaffection. The “radicals” populating Greenwich Village were among the government’s most highly publicized targets. It was the beginning of the Red Scare.38

In November 1917, the editors of the radical magazine *The Masses*—the “intellectual center” of Greenwich Village—were indicted under the Espionage Act for conspiracy to obstruct military enlistment. If convicted, Max Eastman, Art Young, Josephine Bell, Merrill Rogers, and Floyd Dell, the magazine’s managing editor, faced twenty years imprisonment. Upon arriving in Greenwich Village, Millay became intimately involved in these unfolding events. She met Dell in December 1917, while auditioning for his play *The Angel Intrudes* with the Provincetown Players. In *Love in Greenwich Village*, Dell claims to have been so captivated by Millay’s performance that he cast her on the spot, without even asking her name:

She left her name and address as she was departing, and when she was gone we read the name and were puzzled, for it was “Edna Millay.” We wondered if she could possibly be Edna St. Vincent Millay, the author of that beautiful and
astonishing poem, “Renascence.”

And indeed it was she. Having just been graduated from Vassar, she had come to New York to seek fame not as a poet, but as an actress: for who could expect to make a living at writing poetry? (32)

Dell and Millay became involved in a sexual affair almost immediately. Their relationship coincided directly with the sensational trial of The Masses.

When the trial began, in April 1918, Millay accompanied Dell into the courtroom each morning. It was a bold display of support. While much of New York watched, Millay silently proclaimed her opposition to the government’s policies of political repression, and, moreover, broadcasted her sexual liberation. As Dell explains, one morning, he and Millay overslept and had to rush hastily into the already assembled courtroom:

The courtroom was silent as I walked down the aisle with the girl at my side. The room was filled with the Socialist, liberal, and radical intelligentsia of New York; they all looked at the girl and me, and I felt that they all knew why I was late. She, walking demurely by my side, slipped into an empty seat, and I hurried to take my place at the defendants’ table. The judge in his black gown looked stern, but he did not rebuke me. Edna afterwards said to me: ‘It really does not matter if everyone knew that we were in bed together.’

Nancy Milford, in discussing Millay’s letters from this period, notes their a-politicality: “one would barely know, from her letters, that there was a war in Europe or that women were marching for suffrage in New York” (132). But, as Milford herself admits, much of Millay’s correspondence from this time passed through the hands of government censors.
When her close friend and lover Arthur Davison Ficke was sent to fight in France, he told her to write to him “like a good child.” The letters he sent to her, which were filled with romantic sonnets, had been stamped across the envelope “PASSED AS CENSORED” (qtd. in Milford 164). Immediately after the war ended, in 1919, Millay published the anti-war verse drama, *Aria di Capo*, which appeared to great critical acclaim when it was performed by the Provincetown Players. But during WWI, America’s culture of political repression and censorship effectively silenced Millay—at least, in print. A newly intense form of state-sanctioned scrutiny, which fell dangerously close to Millay, arose almost simultaneously with her arrival in Greenwich Village. Although all of the defendants in *The Masses* trial were ultimately acquitted, it must have seemed to the young poet and aspiring actress that the whole world was watching their every move.

If 1917 signaled the death of radicalism in the Village, as Cowley claims and the trial of *The Masses* testifies, it also represented an important new beginning for bohemianism in mainstream America. While Communists, Socialists, union organizers, and pacifists were being effectively purged from the Village, middle-class Americans were becoming increasingly aware of and fascinated by Village life. As Dell wistfully recounts, “Greenwich Village could not remain forever islanded amid the roaring tides of commerce” (*Love in Greenwich Village* 296). The government campaign against radicals like Dell had destroyed the sense of “magic isolation” that Villagers had previously experienced (296). But it had also alerted a national audience to a newly alluring way of life being practiced in the Village. For Dell, Greenwich Village would morph unrecognizably: “It was to become a side-show for tourists, a peep-show for vulgarians, a commercial exhibit of tawdry Bohemianism” (296). Indeed, as Dell accurately recounts,
interest in Greenwich Village bohemia soon became so keen, that businesses started to offer sightseeing tours. In Dell’s account, middle class tourists began to descend on Greenwich Village, “with their pockets full of money and their hearts full of a pathetic eagerness to participate in the celebrated joys of Bohemian life” (297).

Evidence of their newly spectacular status surrounded bohemians at every turn, notably in the *Saturday Evening Post*. Within their very public pages, the *Post* launched what Cowley terms a “private war” on bohemia, charging that “the Village was the haunt of affectation; that it was inhabited by fools and fakers” (62). While Villagers had long defined themselves in opposition to the bourgeois mainstream, they now began to see their self-image reflected mockingly back at them in the pages of magazines and newspapers, and in the “eager” eyes of middle-class tourists. James L. Ford, writing in *Vanity Fair* in 1920, thus considers the halcyon days of New York’s “true” bohemia to be long gone:

Straightaway there appeared on the scene fake bohemians who performed for the benefit of the visitors, earning for themselves an occasional drink or cigar or meal. In the face of this infliction those who were able to pay for the meals that they preferred to eat unobserved scattered and became a nomad race, while a survival of the unfittest led in due time to the colonization of Greenwich Village and Washington Square. As practiced here to-day, bohemianism is no longer a profession but a business which draws its trade chiefly from the suburbs and upper west side of the town. (108)

Under the weight of increasing mass-media surveillance—what Ford terms “the advent of the sight-seers”—bohemia had become increasingly oriented toward a national, mass-
cultural audience (108). To Ford, Dell, and Cowley, this signaled the death of
bohemia—the triumph of the standardizing, de-individuating, de-politicizing, colonizing,
and fundamentally impure influence of mass culture. The Red Scare was real, and it had
altered the fabric of Greenwich Village life fundamentally. But in the romanticized
portraits of bohemia’s most influential chroniclers, it is the contaminating influence of
mass culture that poses the greatest threat to bohemia’s authentic existence.40

In a rich study of women in early twentieth-century Greenwich Village, Nina
Miller rightly observes that our histories of bohemia have been narrated almost
exclusively by men (18). As a result, women artists and activists like Millay are typically
positioned as muses—lovers standing by at the trial—but rarely credited as the
progenitors of the artistic, philosophical, or political movement. For instance, in Dell’s
largely autobiographical Love in Greenwich Village, Millay is represented as the fictional
“Grace,” whom he hails as bohemia’s “true presiding spirit, its inspirer and guide and
stimulus” (24). The “truth” and spiritual purity of Millay’s bohemianism is crucial to
Dell’s positioning. As Miller writes, “Millay came into her status as the icon of bohemia
just at the point when the Village took on a pronounced sense of self-consciousness as a
subculture, with a concomitant loss of ‘innocence’” (18). Mourning the demise of their
uncontaminated subculture, Dell and Cowley seem to have needed Millay—not to be an
emblem of bohemia—these images were already saturating the media—but to serve as its
“anchor”—bohemia’s “assurance of itself as a definable entity essentially different from
the bourgeois mainstream it opposed” (Miller 17). As A Few Figs from Thistles
catapulted Millay to national celebrity, she was thus being marketed contradictorily as
bohemia’s purest product—ostensibly untouched by the pernicious influence of a mass
culture she was circulating within promiscuously. It is in the context of this collision between bohemia and mass culture that Millay’s poetry acquires its definitional status as an authentically intimate form: a purely expressive vehicle for bohemia’s quasi-Romantic ideologies of “free love,” freedom of expression, and unfettered individuality. If we are to believe Dell and Cowley—and, indeed, at times, even Millay herself—celebrity is something that happened to Millay—not something that she or her poetry made happen.

But *A Few Figs* is not simply a mouthpiece for bohemian dogma—and Millay was nobody’s muse. While Dell and Cowley considered the heyday of Greenwich Village to be drawing to a close, Millay opened bohemia like never before through the form of the lyric. In *A Few Figs*, Millay is not simply documenting an inaccessible, alternative way of life, reserved for a handful of Villagers. What we see from the collection’s opening page, in “First Fig” and “Second Fig,” is that Millay is inviting us, her readers, to travel into this bohemian space and to become bohemians too. At first glance, the poems seem to offer little in the way of poetic innovation, particularly modernist innovation. Indeed, they are more like advertisements than poems: simple, clear, and catchy. But the poems’ veneer of linguistic simplicity soon gives way to a more sophisticated meta-poetic statement. As Dorothy Parker once quipped, “Millay did a great deal of harm with her double-burning candles,” making “poetry seem so easy that we could all do it but, of course, we couldn’t” (qtd. in Miller 122).

As we are dazzled by that brilliant, double-burning candle—a powerful metonym for the body of the beautiful and daring Millay herself—the speaker addresses us directly, “Ah, my foes, and oh, my friends,” and commands us to watch, “It gives a lovely light!” In “Second Fig,” the speaker’s instructions become even more explicit: “Come and see
my shining palace built upon the sand.” Again, we are invited to watch and follow. It is
not merely the ideals of bohemia that Millay has in mind, then, but a formal re-
articulation of bohemia as a visual spectacle. In Millay’s deft hands, bohemia can be
witnessed and experienced by all. From the outset of A Few Figs, Millay consciously
positions her eager readers as voyeurs, who will watch the body of the radiant speaker as
she travels through bohemia. In her poetry, at least, Millay seems to have welcomed the
opportunity to exploit bohemia’s new marketability. Millay is seizing hold not of
bohemian ideology, per se, but of a technology of bohemianism. A Few Figs imagines
bohemia as a transparent cultural site that can be inhabited, vicariously, by a mass-
cultural poetic audience. Like gawkers on a tour bus, we are led through the spectacle of
bohemia. And it is the dazzling Millay herself—that double-burning candle—who lights
the way.

“Daphne,” for instance, arrives about midway through A Few Figs, after we have
traveled a substantial way on our bohemian journey. Like “First Fig” and “Second Fig,”
“Daphne” addresses its readers directly:

Why do you follow me?
Any moment I can be
Nothing but a laurel-tree.

Any moment of the chase
I can leave you in my place
A pink bough for your embrace.

Yet if over hill and hollow
Still it is your will to follow,
I am off;—to heel, Apollo!

Millay’s poem rewrites the tale of Daphne and Apollo from Ovid’s Metamorphoses. In
the classic myth, Daphne flees Apollo’s love, wishing to remain a perpetual virgin. Mid-
flight, she prays that she might somehow escape Apollo’s embrace. In what seems like an answer to her prayers, she is magically transformed into a laurel tree. Yet, ironically, Apollo claims Daphne anyway and worships her newly objectified form as if she were still human. If the mythical Daphne remains powerless against the force of Apollo’s love, Millay’s Daphne wields a distinctly modern, feminist authority. She revels in the pleasure of the chase and flirts mercilessly with poor Apollo, content in the knowledge that she can transform herself at “any moment.” Millay’s “Daphne,” in other words, is a New Woman, who may choose and discard her lovers at will—the author of her own sexual fate.  

But Daphne’s flirtations are directed not only at poor Apollo, but also to A Few Figs’ desirous readers. When Daphne asks, “Why do you follow me?” she is playfully calling attention to Millay’s poetic authority: the magnetism of Millay’s transparently autobiographical speaker keeps readers watching, following, hoping that they might finally connect with the ever-elusive poet. From the opening pages of the collection, the reader is interpellated into the seemingly intimate role of “you”: the object of the poet-speaker’s direct address, but also, her star-struck, helpless lover. The power between the poet and the reader is not only disproportionate—we passively watch while the speaker runs, changes, experiences—but also intensely sexualized. Like Millay’s Apollo, we are powerless, ostensibly mesmerized by Millay’s beauty, willing to accept even a “pink bough,” in substitute for her embrace. Millay’s modernized fable of Daphne and Apollo serves, then, as an important meta-poetic commentary on the poet’s method. Just like the modern Daphne, Millay harnesses the mass-media’s power to objectify the female body, in order to keep her readers suspended in a perpetual state of desire.
This power dynamic, in which a visually arresting speaker holds her enchanted reader captive, is modeled directly on the strategies of the modern advertising industry. Though advertising was certainly not new to the twentieth century, its tactics altered radically in the years surrounding WWI. One crucial change, according to the cultural historian Richard Ohmann, is that advertising acquired a newly visual orientation, one driven by images rather than words. Whereas earlier advertisers had relied on text to persuade consumers, modern advertising learned how to dazzle, to “privilege visual impressions and play down discursive appeals” (180). This visual innovation was accompanied by an important transformation in the tone and voice of modern advertising. As Ohmann reminds us, advertisements are “speech on behalf of a company” that cannot speak for itself (187). Like the author who stands mutely behind her text, an advertisement thus requires that the reader invent an imaginary speaker. “Ad men understood this challenge,” Ohmann writes, “and created styles that would guide the reader in this task. They wanted to preserve the feeling of personal communication” (187). The primary achievement of WWI-era advertising, then, is that it taught consumers to watch, rather than to read, and, in so doing, lulled them into a new sense of intimacy with consumer products. Never before had consumers felt so close to corporations.

Millay’s poetry performs a nearly identical function to that of modern advertising. We are distracted by her radiant beauty—a poetic trick that purposefully sends our gaze off the page and into the dreamscape of mass culture—and duped into believing that Millay herself is speaking directly, intimately with us. Put another way, the ideal reader of *A Few Figs*—a subject who is invoked and trained explicitly within Millay’s poetry—may not be a “reader” at all, but the modern mass-cultural consumer. What Millay seems to
have learned from her time in bohemia is not an authentic, “pure” mode of intimacy, but a formal strategy for evoking the feeling of intimacy, by seizing hold of the new mechanisms of mass culture.

“Just what I am”

Like the omnipresent “First Fig,” a celebration of youthful freedom that resonated strongly with war-weary readers, “The Singing-Woman from the Wood’s Edge” tapped into an American zeitgeist. A large portion of its initial appeal, according to Atkins, came from two notorious lines:

After all’s said and all’s done,
What should I be but a harlot and a nun? (lines 17-18)

That provocative utterance, Atkins writes, sealed the poem’s fate. Readers Jumped in joy or horror, according to their temperament. ‘She says she is a harlot!’ the whisper buzzed from one end of the United States to the other and back again. By the time it reached Nebraska, rumor had fathered two bastard daughters on her. (72)

Atkins considers what happened to “The Singing-Woman from the Wood’s Edge” in the hands of Millay’s national, mass-cultural audience to be an “unsophisticated” mode of reading—“rumor” rather than critical interpretation (72). In these lines, Atkins rightly emphasizes, Millay does not admit to being a “harlot”; and even if she had, it would have been her speaker confessing to such indiscretions, not the actual woman. To arrive at their faulty conclusion, Atkins suggests, readers had to misread or not read the poetic text—to traffic, instead, in the realm of gossip, tabloid, fiction. But was this really a naïve
error on the part of Millay’s mass-cultural audience? Were they really misreading the poem?

Atkins characterizes “First Fig,” as well as Millay’s other “gay and reckless little verses,” as “inverted proverbs” rather than poetry. These are poems stripped of all artifice, Atkins says, there are “no lily languors in velvet breeches,” nothing “synthetic” at all about Millay’s naked utterances (71). Indeed, the sole value she ascribes to A Few Figs is an “inalienable quality of clarity”: a capacity, that is, to deliver unimpeded the “bubbling, irresistible laughter” of the incomparable Millay (71).

On the surface, “The Singing-Woman” does appear to be a simplistic, whimsical poem. It opens,

What should I be but a prophet and a liar,
Whose mother was a leprechaun, whose father was a friar?
Teethed on a crucifix and cradled under water,
What should I be but the fiend’s god-daughter?

And who should be my playmates but the adder and the frog,
That was got beneath a furze-bush and born in a bog?
And what should be my singing, that was christened at an altar,
But Aves and Credos and Psalms out of Psalter? (lines 1-8)

However, despite its fairy-tale veneer—leprechauns, pixie-mothers, and mer-mothers—the poem is filled with sophisticated sexual innuendo and complex religious imagery. Millay’s claim that she was “got beneath a furze-bush” is a classically bawdy pun on female anatomy. And her sexually-minded audience would easily have read between lines like, “And you never have seen and you never will see / Such things as the things that swaddled me!” Moreover, the shocking image of a poet, “teethed on a crucifix,” provocatively upends traditional Christian morality. The poem is written in rhymed quatrains, each composed of four lines, with four stressed syllables within each
line—a form typically referred to as “ballad meter.” A ballad is a story told in song, and the poem’s two couplets, with their “What should I be,” act as refrains. This particular story is one of poetic genesis—Millay shifts continually among scientific, supernatural, and religious discourses—in order to tell the tale of the birth of her poetic identity. Was it sex, magic, faith, or education—all of these contradictory options are present within the poem—which allowed the singing-woman to emerge from the woods and share her song?

Because it focuses on childhood, the poem is a prime example of a class of Millay’s poetry that the New Critics dismissed as her “little-girl things.” In contrast, I would argue that “The Singing-Woman” functions as a kind of poetic bildungsroman: it interrogates the process of female development and charts the emergence of poetic identity through the lyric form. “The Singing-Woman” thus harbors a sophisticated meta-poetic agenda. These complexities are hinted at in the poem’s closing lines,

Oh, the things I haven’t seen and the things I haven’t known,  
What with the hedges and ditches till after I was grown,  
And yanked both ways by my mother and my father,  
With a ‘Which would you better?’ and a ‘Which would you rather?’

With him for a sire and her for a dam,  
What should I be but just what I am? (lines 31-36)

In the preceding portion of the poem, prior to this conclusion, identity is remarkably unstable, tentative, and conditional. The speaker continually interrogates herself and her genealogy, stringing together a loosely bound series of identitarian conjectures, “what ifs” and “what woulds.” In the penultimate line, however—although still posed as a question—Millay consolidates her poetic identity and reigns in the myriad possibilities she has presented throughout. All eventualities lead only to what is already and what
always would have been: regardless of the experiments, “What should I be but just what I am?”

This consolidating gesture represents a crucial facet of Millay’s poetics. In moments like this one, which recur throughout *A Few Figs*, Millay strategically deflects attention away from a textual construct—the speaker—and toward a social and cultural realm where the “real,” autobiographical woman purportedly resides—the ostensibly stable scene of “just what I am.” To be clear, these are equally artificial entities, “the speaker” and “the autobiographical woman,” which Millay deploys. But the autobiographical woman, the site where Millay herself seemingly blurs onto the page, has a residue of the real that the traditional poetic speaker cannot approximate. In their confusion between speaker and woman, hypothetical poetical musings and the lived reality of Millay—a self-proclaimed “harlot and a nun” walking the streets of Greenwich Village—Millay’s audience was not simply misreading the poem. They were making a strategic leap off the page, conflating art and culture, just as the poet and the poem wanted them to do. They were learning, in other words, a new, mass-cultural method for reading poetry.

According to Richard Dyer, this precise disorientation that Millay’s audience displayed is one of the defining effects produced by a “star.” With “characters,” Dyer explains, audiences can readily distinguish between real life and fiction, a filmic representation versus an embodied actor. Stars, however, collapse this distinction: “they serve to disguise the fact that they are just as much produced images, constructed personalities as ‘characters’ are” (20). As “stars,” Cary Grant and Marlene Dietrich are, Dyer says, more “real” to a mass-cultural audience than an unknown actor, and they bring
that authenticity, that sense of a self fully inhabited, with them to every role. In her poetry, Millay creates a similar play of identity and authenticity: she mimics the central conditions and structural effects of mass-cultural stardom, more typically associated with film and popular music.

As I mentioned before, these sophisticated methods of mass-cultural manipulation are only hinted at in the final lines of “The Singing-Woman from the Wood’s Edge,” in A Few Figs from Thistles. But they are made much more explicit in another published version of the poem, which appeared simultaneous to the book’s initial publication, in Vanity Fair in November 1920.

Vanity Fair, one of the most prominent of modernism’s “slick” magazines, played a crucial role in establishing Millay’s national reputation. “Have you noticed how Vanity Fair is featuring me of late? They just can’t seem to go to print without me,” Millay wrote to Allan Ross Macdougall in September 1920 (Letters 100). A month later, she bragged similarly to Witter Bynner,

I am becoming very famous. The current Vanity Fair has a whole page of my poems, and a photograph of me that looks as much like me as it does like Arnold Bennett. And there have been three reviews of something I wrote, in New York newspapers, in the last week alone. I am so incorrigibly ingenuous that these things mean just as much to me as ever. (Letters 102)

The July, August, and September issues of Vanity Fair had each featured one of Millay’s poems, and, in November 1920, she earned a full-page spread, comprised of four lyrics, four sonnets, and a photograph with accompanying biographical text. The magazine advertised at the top of the page, “A new set of lyrics by the most distinguished American
poet of the younger generation”—a premature superlative for the time, but one that would soon prove true, thanks, in large part, to *Vanity Fair*’s unceasing promotion.43

In the *Vanity Fair* layout, Millay’s poems appear in columns down the left and right sides of the page, with two sonnets occupying the bottom portion of the center. This “U”-shaped presentation leaves ample space in the center of the page for a photograph and biography (See Figure 2). In the photograph, Millay is looking away from the reader, toward the left side of the page, and her gaze falls directly on “The Singing-Woman from the Wood’s Edge.” After reading the poem’s final line—“What should I be but just what I am?”—the reader need not speculate abstractly, but can refer to material, visual evidence documenting the poet’s identity. We are told, in the accompanying text, that Millay’s poems display an extraordinary “sincerity of emotion” and a “lyric intensity scarcely to be found in the work of her contemporaries.” Moreover, the biography concludes, her poems “speak with an arresting naturalness and passion of a living human voice.” Combined with the photograph, this prose creates a powerful expressive context for reading the poems. Millay, the autobiographical subject, is profoundly present on the page, looking over the poems and anchoring their meaning. Readers are encouraged to look away from the text—just as she looks toward it—and to supplement the poetic text strategically with other forms of material—photograph, prose, voice, body. There is nothing “natural” or “naïve” about this newly sophisticated mode of expressive reading.44 And it is not surprising at all, given the materials’ disorienting play, that a kind of autobiographical panic might take hold among Millay’s devoted fans.

The inability on the part of most of Millay’s critics to identify and value this formal, supplementary method at work within her poetry is symptomatic of what Hal
Foster terms “the expressive fallacy.” As Foster explains, expressive artists, like Millay, routinely announce their full and immediate presence within the work of art. Poststructuralism and postmodernism—indeed, the bulk of linguistic theories produced in the twentieth century—have told us that such unmediated expressions are a philosophical impossibility. As a result, Foster claims, critics have tended to denigrate and ridicule such baldly self-expressive forms. The artist who clings to the sham of direct expression, who insists that she is fully present within her art, is often labeled naïve, or worse. Foster claims, instead, that it is critics, not artists, who have been taken in by this expressive ruse. In denigrating and ridiculing expressive art, Foster claims, critics have ignored its complex, formal machinations. A work of art’s insistence on its own “formlessness,” he writes, “does not dissolve convention or suspend mediation; as the expressionist trope for feeling, it is a rhetorical form too” (16). Despite their continual refrain to the contrary, expressive works of art bear the traces of their constructedness. Expressionism “speaks a language,” Foster writes, “but a language so obvious we may forget its conventionality and must inquire again how it encodes the natural and simulates the immediate” (60).

Foster’s indictment of the “expressive fallacy” is directed specifically toward poststructuralist criticism; but we can trace this problematic of unmediated expression back to an intricate network of modernist and mid-century scholarship, which similarly grappled with the forms of post-Romantic expressivity. The space for experiment that Foster wants to reserve for expressive, autobiographical art dissolves in the work of T.S. Eliot and the New Critics.45

It is fair to call A Few Figs from Thistles an autobiographical poetry, then, but only if our critical definitions are able to account for the complexity of Millay’s formal,
objective manipulations. For instance, Susan Rosenbaum’s recent study, *Professing Sincerity* (2007), provides a more sophisticated frame for identifying and valuing the formal contours of autobiographical poetry. Like Foster, Rosenbaum challenges the accusations of naïveté and simplicity, so frequently lodged against autobiographical lyrics, particularly in the twentieth century, because this form has been so popular with non-academic readers. Rosenbaum writes,

> What Foucault calls the “author function” is not simply an invention or psychologizing projection of naïve or biographically obsessed readers who seek to unify, explain, and anchor the text, but is a figure that has been complexly mobilized by poets to respond to the contradictions and pressures of writing professionally and to influence the commercial channels through which their poetic texts circulate. (7)

In Rosenbaum’s assessment, autobiographical poets are deft manipulators of readers’ expectations and of the formal codes of authorial sincerity that have evolved within both Romantic and post-Romantic poetic traditions. “Poets were quite savvy about the fact that a transparent, sincere self could not be purely communicated in a marketplace,” Rosenbaum claims, “their poetry engages critically with the impossibility of this ideal” (7). Rosenbaum examines the Confessional Poets in detail, and Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, in particular, as exemplars of this sophisticated, market-savvy aesthetic. However, to contemporary scholars, it is probably not too surprising to see Plath and Sexton hailed as formal innovators. The challenge is learning to read Millay and her “sentimental” contemporaries in a similar way.

As Rosenbaum notes, Plath is often read as a poet divided: “Plath’s challenge was
to merge two seemingly incompatible traditions, that of Eliot’s high modernism with…the tradition of the poetess” (135). In this familiar formulation, Plath is considered to have taken the self-expressive or autobiographical portion of her poetry from her “poetess” predecessors, namely Millay, and then to have tempered that subjective, autobiographical impulse with the objective, Impersonal restraints of high modernism. Indeed, this melding of emotion and form is often invoked as the definitional distinction between “sentimental” and “Confessional” verse. In the poetries of Plath and Sexton, “feminine” emotion is finally thought to have found form. But Rosenbaum’s reading pushes toward a reconciliation of these ostensibly competing traditions—not just in Plath’s work, but within the broader field of modernist women’s poetry that she inherited. Against influential mid-century critics like Wimsatt and Beardsley, whose “intentional” and “affective” fallacies rendered emotional expressions fundamentally unreadable, Rosenbaum identifies and revalues the formal manipulations of self-expressive poetry. Following Rosenbaum, perhaps we might also begin to question the emotional sincerity of Plath’s “poetess” inheritance. Was there really a modernist “feminine” tradition in need of formal disciplining? Or is this belief the result of a critical framework, which renders the female body and emotional expressions formless?

“The structural emotion”

Since her emergence, Millay has been known almost exclusively as a “personal” poet. The thinnest of veils seems to separate the poetic from the personal subject. In the 1920s, audiences yearned for a deeper sense of intimacy with the glamorous, bohemian Millay; in the pages of A Few Figs, they believed they were getting it. Critics praised Millay
effusively for her honesty and directness. Carl Van Doren declared, “[Millay] has put by the mask by which other poets who were women, apparently afraid for the reputation of their sex, have spoken as if they were men” (314). Florence Converse, echoing Van Doren, similarly proclaimed, “Here is no pose, but a clear-eyed, singularly generous acceptance of experience” (15). With the exception of her note that Millay writes sonnets, Converse entirely avoids comment on Millay’s poetry, preferring instead to analyze “Miss Millay’s” “personal passion” (15).

In keeping with the critical consensus of the 1920s, Converse and Van Doren thus presume that Millay’s poetic achievement is fundamentally subjective in nature. They hail her emotional sincerity and autobiographical transparency: traits that consolidate the poetic authority of the first person lyric subject. At the end of her review, Converse asks, “What shall fill [Millay’s] cup of experiences to the brim, who dare say? It is not a shallow cup” (15). This statement, which fully conflates person and poetics, is symptomatic of the subjective paradigm that continues to dominate Millay’s critical reception. For Converse, Van Doren, and the vast majority of critics writing since WWI, Millay’s poetry functions, quite literally, as that empty cup of experience waiting to be filled by her indomitable personality.

Horace Gregory is among a very small number of Millay’s early critics to have cast skepticism on the authenticity of Millay’s intimacy. Rather than taking Millay’s expressive claims at face value, Gregory argues that Millay manufactured a “legend”:

It was as though she had created a character that one might look for in an H.G. Wells novel, an American Ann Veronica who could say with perfect freedom that she had fallen in love or out, who could be as faithless as any man or
as faithful. The gesture was always a bit theatrical, and one always found it
difficult to discern where genuine emotion left off and a pose began, but the
picture was as clear as the imagery contained in her best poems. (3)

In her 1925 essay, Genevieve Taggard had made a similar observation. “[Millay] is
exceedingly dramatic throughout even her most gossamer poetry,” Taggard writes,
“Always it is the gesture, never a static picture” (139). Gregory and Taggard both
emphasize the presence of a formal complex—the so-called “legend” of Millay—which
is simultaneously textual and extra-textual—through which the poet manipulates her
audience’s emotions. These are not typically “sentimental” conceptions of Millay’s
poetry, where “personality” overwhelms the poem and renders it formless. In their
alternative view, Millay’s dynamic engagements with her audience serve as the
foundation for a newly sophisticated expressive form. As we saw in “Justice Denied In
Massachusetts,” Millay radically opens the lyric form.

Millay’s poem “Recuerdo” reveals the complexity of these formal experiments
with emotion and personality:

We were very tired, we were very merry—
We had gone back and forth all night on the ferry.
It was bare and bright, and smelled like a stable—
But we looked into a fire, we leaned across a table,
We lay on a hill-top underneath the moon;
And the whistles kept blowing, and the dawn came soon.
We were very tired, we were very merry—
We had gone back and forth all night on the ferry;
And you ate an apple, and I ate a pear,
From a dozen of each we had bought somewhere;
And the sky went wan, and the wind came cold,
And the sun rose dripping, a bucketful of gold.

We were very tired, we were very merry,
We had gone back and forth all night on the ferry.
We hailed “Good morrow, mother!” to a shawl-covered head,
And bought a morning paper, which neither of us read;  
And she wept, “God bless you!” for the apples and pears,  
And we gave her all our money but our subway fares.

The poem’s continual, circular motion—“back and forth all night on the ferry”—is reminiscent of Millay herself in performance—“Back and forth she moved, slender, by turn gay and grave, pompous and flippant” (Christian Science Monitor). But “Recuerdo” is far less immediate than most of the poems contained within A Few Figs. The use of the plural “we” detracts from the usually clear presence of the self-expressive speaker, and, unlike in “Justice Denied In Massachusetts,” it is obvious that we, the audience, are not being interpellated into the poem’s “we” or “you.” Unlike “Macdougal Street,” the poem’s locations are also strategically nonspecific—“a fire,” “a table,” “a hill-top,” “somewhere”—though they would, perhaps, have been easily identifiable to those fortunate few already initiated into New York bohemian life, already belonging to Millay’s intimate circle. The poem’s constant movement, repetition, and rhythms lull the reader into the dreamlike haze of memory or desire. It is this lulling, in fact, which masks the profound distance that separates us from the poet-speaker.

The poem models an intricate “affective economy,” to borrow Sara Ahmed’s term, which is a juxtaposed uneasily against the circulations of money and goods. The poem’s key economic lesson: that a bohemian transcends his or her material needs. This is, as Nina Miller suggests, the foundation for the bohemians’ conspicuous distinction from the “truly” impoverished: bohemians can afford to buy a newspaper and not even read it (32). Rich in aesthetic beauty—“the sun rose dripping, a bucketful of gold”—they have no need and no desire to accumulate material possessions. They give away everything but their subway fares—just enough, that is, to stay in circulation (Miller
This logic of antiproductivity—make art, not money; be rich, but only in metaphors—appears to be successful within the poem. It is a perfectly circular economy, and a perfectly balanced poem, with no waste and no excess.

Except, that is, for the poem’s stubborn emotional abundance. While it is possible in “Recuerdo” to discharge a surplus of money or goods, emotions keep proliferating. The poem begins in a space of physical exhaustion—“We were very tired”—and, yet, ironically, it is this expenditure that seems to have given rise to their condition of merriment—“We were very merry.” As Miller notes, the sequence of the phrases and the elided conjunction—“but” or “and”—create the impression that the bohemians are merry because they are exhausted (31). Physical, unlike economic, expenditure produces something new; in exhausting your emotional resources, new emotions will arise. This emotional productivity recurs in the poem’s final stanza, when the bohemians encounter a “mother” with “a shawl-covered head.” There is a discursive balance to their exchange with this woman—“Good morrow, mother!” and “God bless you!”—but an emotional imbalance—while they merely “hailed,” she “wept.” After she gives them back this emotion, in exchange for their apples and pears, they give her even more, all of their money, in an attempt to unload the emotional surplus. But the woman’s weeping lingers.

Millay’s speaker in “Recuerdo” is a flâneuse, wandering the urban streets of New York City. While she may be seeking intimacy, it is of a decidedly impersonal, anonymous variety. She will connect with anyone, and, therefore, with no one in particular. So promiscuous is her desire, that she doesn’t even bother to “read” the signs that surround her—she merely consumes them. This affective state, according to Walter Benjamin, distinguishes the modern flâneur from mere street-walkers: “Empathy is the
nature of the intoxication to which the flâneur abandons himself in the crowd” (31). The self is pointedly not present or made available to others as the flâneur circulates. She effaces herself, so that she might take in all of the varied emotions that she encounters in others. It is this logic of empathy—rather than sympathy—that structures “Recuerdo.”

In *The Vehement Passions*, Philip Fisher outlines two distinct strategies that texts rely on to evoke feelings in their readers. The first is sympathy, where “I feel what the other is feeling,” or where the reader feels along with the text. The second is a more complex relationship, in which the reader “volunteers” emotions that the other is not feeling, or that are lacking in the text (142). Sympathy, as Fisher notes, is predicated on a replicative logic. But the second formation—what we might call, after Benjamin, “empathy”—is a distinctly supplementary one. In an empathic economy, the reader must supply emotions that are missing within the text, or which remain unfelt by the text’s narrator or speaker. For instance, a reader might be called upon, as in “Recuerdo,” to “volunteer” emotions that are necessary in order to correct a fundamental emotional imbalance present within the poem.

In “Recuerdo,” the speaker’s exchange with a “mother” with “a shawl-covered head” is not a sympathetic one. The metonym of the veil, in fact, underscores the anonymity and partiality of their connection. Millay’s speaker does not feel what this poor, hungry woman feels: marking the difference between their emotional and material states is part of the poem’s bohemian point. The speaker takes in this woman’s emotions, but she offers none back, and she likewise fails to register any feelings of her own. Crucially, “Recuerdo,” and, I am arguing, the whole of *A Few Figs*, interpellates us, the readers, into the role of this veiled woman. We may want to believe that it is Millay with
whom we are identifying—whose feelings we are making our own. But how could this be possible when the speaker is constantly in motion—burning, transforming, and objectifying herself at will? Like the anonymous “mother,” we volunteer the emotion that is not present or that is not being felt by the Millay-speaker. This is the objective achievement of Millay’s poetry: it presents an emotionally exhausted or objectified speaker, so that the reader might supplement a more perfect intimacy.

In “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” Eliot outlines a formal method capable of producing “new combinations” of feelings, experiences, and impressions within and through the work of art:

The mind of the mature poet differs from that of the immature one not precisely in any valuation of “personality”, not being necessarily interesting, or having “more to say”, but rather by being a more finely perfected medium in which special, or very varied, feelings are at liberty to enter into new combinations. (41)

In this influential shift away from the subjective mind and toward the objective medium, Eliot inaugurates a powerfully new conception of poetic form. Eliot’s “Impersonal” poetry gives rise to what he terms the “structural emotion” (43): these are “floating feelings” (43), which have “life in the poem and not in the history of the poet” (44), and which derive, therefore, from no individual subject. However, in crafting this new theory of poetic emotion, Eliot relies on a reductive opposition between “personal” and “Impersonal” poetries. The inverse of “Impersonality,” a poetry of “personality” is pure subjectivity, a virtual transference of a self already made; it is not a making or re-making of emotion, but the mimetic re-presentation of un-formed feelings and experiences. It is only through Eliot’s Impersonal method that a self may be staked—that is, formed or re-
formed—within or through the poem. This is, according to Sharon Cameron, one of the
dangerous limitations inhering within Eliot’s influential brand of impersonality:
“Personality and impersonality do not stand in binary relation,” Cameron insists (ix). In
contrast to Eliot, Millay’s poetry suggests that the field of modernist poetry offers a
plurality of formal methods for facing and effacing subjectivity. Rather than an
opposition between “Impersonal” and “personal” pogeries, we might, as Taggard
suggested, begin to see the field of modernist poetry as a continuum. Millay’s poetry may
not be “Impersonal,” in the particular manner that Eliot countenanced, but it is similarly
invested in creating new emotions, in modeling new forms of engagement, between poem
and reader.
FIGURES

Figure 2. Photograph and biography accompanying Millay’s poems in Vanity Fair magazine in November 1920.

EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY
Edna St. Vincent Millay is one of the very few first-rate figures in modern American poetry. Her work, by the extraordinary vigor of its language and the sincerity of its emotion, achieves a lyric intensity scarcely to be found in the work of her contemporaries. Her best poems—and those printed here for the first time are some of her very best—have much more than the felicity of the artist contriving a literary form; they speak with the arresting naturalness and passion of a living human voice.
Chapter 4

‘How autocratic our country is becoming’: The Sentimental Poetess at War

Undoubtedly I am prejudiced in favor of a more experimental approach. There is so little time, why repeat the forms of the past?

—William Carlos Williams (188)

When it appeared in 1911, Sara Teasdale’s “Union Square” seemed to brand the rising young poet a “New Woman.” A bold portrait of female desire, “Union Square” forms the powerful denouement to a sequence of love lyrics staged on the streets of New York City. Within these six poems, Teasdale’s speaker assumes the role of a tourist, traveling from the quiet warmth of her hotel room on “A Winter Night” through some of the city’s signature destinations, including “The Metropolitan Tower,” “Gramercy Park,” and “Central Park At Dusk.” All the while, her male companion remains oblivious to her love. By “Union Square,” their unrequited affair has drawn to its disappointing close:

And on we walked and on we walked Past the fiery lights of the picture shows— Where the girls with thirsty eyes go by On the errand each man knows.

And on we walked and on we walked, At the door at last we said good-bye; I knew by his smile he had not heard My heart’s unuttered cry.

With the man I love who loves me not I walked in the street-lamps flare— But oh, the girls who ask for love In the lights of Union Square. (lines 9-20)

The poem derives its shocking newness from the uneasy identification forged in its final lines: Teasdale’s speaker sympathizes with, envies even, the prostitutes working in Union
Square. Throughout her urban trek, the speaker had waited patiently, demurely, for her companion to declare himself, since she lacked the courage to “ask for love” outright. Ironically, he never “heard” her “unuttered cry.” Like Edna St. Vincent Millay a decade later, Teasdale was writing directly to a female audience about the failures and frustrations of conventional femininity. “Union Square” does not merely mourn love’s failure; it challenges women to articulate their own desires, and, in so doing, to alter fundamentally the course of modern love. “But oh,” the poem yearns, how different love could be in a “new” sexual and gender economy.

According to her biographer William Drake, Teasdale was “seized with misgivings” about this “daring” poem, and spent months consulting her friends as to whether or not she should include it in Helen of Troy and Other Poems (Drake, Sara Teasdale 69). In a letter to Teasdale, the critic Louis Untermeyer plainly declared his distaste. “Of course you know what the girls in Union Square ask for is very different from love,” he cautioned Teasdale, “And so is what they get—!” (qtd. in Sara Teasdale 86). The poet John Myers O’Hara, though more tempered in his criticism, similarly counseled restraint: “Perhaps it is better, after all, to pursue the lovelier side of existence, and only give expression to what is unmarred in the realm of beauty” (qtd. in Sara Teasdale 86). On the advice of Jessie Rittenhouse, however, Teasdale agreed to make her poem public. “But for your assuring me that it wasn’t so wicked after all,” she wrote to Rittenhouse a month after the poem appeared, “I should have let it stay in the seclusion of my tiny red note-book” (qtd. in Sara Teasdale 70). The threat of suppression, it seems, was quite real. Publishing “Union Square,” Teasdale knew, would signal her allegiance to the radical politics of the “New Woman.” Confronted with this bold choice, the poet
balked. Although she had authored a fearless poem, her feelings toward the modern—in particular, modern gender politics—remained tentative. Actually, despite publishing “Union Square,” Teasdale never explicitly endorsed its progressive sentiments. “If the idea at the end of ‘Union Square’ had not been an accident suggested by rhyme,” she told O’Hara, “I should never have said what I said” (qtd. in Sara Teasdale 72).

This chapter seeks to understand more fully Teasdale’s ambivalent relation to the modern. For, despite her demure protestations, “Union Square” was no “accident.” Throughout her career, Teasdale ventured repeatedly into “new” aesthetic and political territory, but then, inexplicably, doubled back. Traces of this radicalism run throughout her poetic corpus, yet she routinely disavowed her political ambitions. In fact, as I will show, Teasdale succeeded in suppressing many of her most controversial political poems—a fate that “Union Square” nearly shared. The record of this anxious struggle with modern politics and aesthetics has been largely effaced within Teasdale’s critical legacy. Over the last half-century, we have reduced Teasdale to a caricature of her previous self. Rather than a complex, divided figure, she has been remembered as a stereotypical “poetess”: timid, genteel, and decidedly “un-modern.”

“I might have sung of the world”

In recent years, “[I might have sung of the world]” has emerged as Teasdale’s signature poem:

I might have sung of the world
And said what I heard them say
Of the vast and passing dream
Of today and yesterday.

But I chose to tell of myself,
For that was all I knew—
I have made a chart of a small sea,
But the chart I made is true.

Dated 1919, this previously unpublished fragment first appeared as the epigraph to William Drake’s 1984 anthology *Mirror of the Heart: Poems of Sara Teasdale*. Other than a gift book issued by Hallmark, Inc. in 1969, Drake’s marked the first new collection of Teasdale’s poetry to appear since the 1930s. Following Drake’s recuperation, the poem was also re-printed in the foundational feminist anthology, *No More Masks!* Considering how sparsely Teasdale’s poetry has been represented in the last century, these appearances make “[I might have sung of the world]” one of her most widely available and influential poems.

As a meta-poetic statement, “[I might have sung of the world]” seems to flaunt Teasdale’s status as a traditional “poetess.” With its neat stanzic divide between the “vast” world and the “small” female self, it conjures that “empire of agoraphobia” that profoundly limited women’s literary pursuits in the nineteenth century (Brown). Demurely feminine, “[I might have sung of the world]” appears to revel in the familiar conventions and constraints of domestic discourse. It evokes, in particular, the formation that Gillian Brown terms “domestic individualism”: a nineteenth-century mode of self-definition that “locate[s] the individual in his or her interiority” (3). In line with its nineteenth-century predecessors, the poem positions the self as the only “true” source of knowledge (“For that was all I knew”) and dismisses the exterior “world” like a rumor (“what I heard them say”). Content to “chart” the “small” but “true” territory of the feminine self, Teasdale ostensibly turns her back on the modern and retreats into a nineteenth-century domestic fantasy.
Since her emergence, this strange habituation to the nineteenth century has consistently troubled Teasdale’s reputation. Horace Gregory and Marya Zaturenska, for instance, note that Teasdale had always seemed “a little old for her age.” “One thinks of her,” they continue, “as one of the ‘singers’ who might well have lightened Clarence Stedman’s ‘twilight interval’ with a note of fresh, authentic song” (98). At first glance, this attempt to reconnect Teasdale with her sentimental predecessors seems like a generous act. Because Teasdale’s lyric poetry feels alien in the modern, Gregory and Zaturenska transport it to a more familiar, less hostile clime. However, despite its well-meaning intent, this retrospective re-periodization has the unfortunate effect of de-radicalizing Teasdale’s verse, because it strips it of any social or historical specificity. By emphasizing, exclusively, the backward character of her poetry, critics have displaced the complex demands it makes on its contemporary, modernist world.

Indeed, Teasdale’s atavistic tenor has been consistently simplified in this manner. Critics routinely note her nineteenth-century attributes, but rarely attach these forms or feelings to any material context within the modern. This is a crucial misreading: it not only elides Teasdale’s potentially modernist engagements, but also, simultaneously, dismisses her political and aesthetic claims as neurotic symptoms of historical lag. Despite her dubious historicity, Teasdale was a modernist poet, albeit one who harbored an extraordinary affinity for the nineteenth century. She published in the most prestigious modernist magazines, including *Poetry*, *The Dial*, and even the notoriously snobbish *The Little Review*, and traveled within an influential modernist circle, comprised of poets and critics such as Amy Lowell, Vachel Lindsay, and Harriet Monroe. It is these comparisons, as well as her much-vaunted similarities to Christina Rossetti and Elizabeth...
Barrett Browning, which demand critical attention.

Consider what we have lost by ceding Teasdale to an imaginary nineteenth-century economy: by presuming that her propensity for regression speaks not at all to her literary and cultural present. “I might have sung of the world,” Teasdale insists, “But I chose to tell of myself.” When contextualized within the early twentieth century, these articulations yield a sophisticated and troubling reflection on the nature of modern aesthetic and political freedom. “[I might have sung of the world]” was written in the age of Gertrude Stein, Mina Loy, and Genevieve Taggard, and it carries with it the “new” optimism of that moment: a time when the field of women’s poetry was ostensibly freer than ever before. It was written, moreover, on the eve of women’s achievement of the franchise in America, and it is marked, simultaneously, by this “new” sense of political hope. The poem, in fact, registers these distinctly modern possibilities. Teasdale’s speaker does not suggest that her ambitions have been thwarted—she freely admits that she “might have sung of the world,” “might” have opened her poetry into the social and political realm—but has “chosen” not to pursue these “worldly” possibilities.

This ambivalent renunciation resonates with the poet’s similarly vexing a-politicality in regard to “Union Square.” In each case, Teasdale tempts her reader with the possibility of direct modern engagement, but then, ultimately, retreats. This is not a knee-jerk conservatism, nor is it a simplistic, sentimental retreat from the modern. Here, and throughout her poetry, Teasdale registers a full and reflective awareness of the “new” possibilities afforded by her modernist world. Yet, she nonetheless rejects them: as if modernity itself might be fundamentally impoverished, or as if the past might somehow provide a richer mode of aesthetic and political being. I am proposing that we think
seriously about this aversion to the modern, and, simultaneously, that we look more
carefully at the historical residue that clouds Teasdale’s modernist work. What is it about
the modern that sends Teasdale reeling backward? And what is it within the past that she
can’t let go?

“[I might have sung of the world]” points, obliquely, toward an answer to these
difficult historical and political questions. When read in the context of its twentieth-
century production, it becomes clear that the poem is not only historically out of sync, but
also notably insincere—perhaps, even dissimulative. Put bluntly, Teasdale did “sing of
the world,” repeatedly and consistently, especially in the late teens, the period from
which this fragment survives. In fact, in the years surrounding World War I, Teasdale
produced more than twenty, overtly political poems in response to the war—many of
which remain in the “seclusion” of her “tiny red note-book.” Approximately half of these
“worldly” poems appeared in popular magazines, including Harper’s Monthly Magazine,
The Century, Everybody’s Magazine, and The Nation, between 1915 and 1918. Yet, for
reasons about which I can only speculate, Teasdale suppressed the majority of these
remarkable poems, leaving them either uncollected or unpublished.

Drake, who is the only critic to mention the existence of Teasdale’s war poems,
labels them “weaker than her usual work,” and thus concludes that they have been rightly
neglected (Sara Teasdale 169). Following suit, he excludes almost all of her war poems
from Mirror of the Heart, even though this anthology is explicitly dedicated to recovering
her previously unpublished and uncollected poetry. According to Margaret Conklin,
Teasdale’s close friend and literary executor, Teasdale intentionally withheld more than
fifty poems, because she feared that they were “too revealing” to be published in her
lifetime (qtd. in Drake, *Mirror of the Heart* xvii). After studying this archival material, which prompted Teasdale’s strong reservations, Drake nonetheless concludes that the unpublished poems “do not contain any startling revelations or new information” (*Mirror of the Heart* xviii). Though he identifies a number of noteworthy poems—such as “[I might have sung of the world]”—he insists that Teasdale’s war poems hold little critical interest.

In what follows, I analyze this long-neglected archive of war poetry, as well as a series of correspondence in which the poet similarly documents her radical sentiments concerning WWI. In restoring this record of Teasdale’s engagement with the war, I will argue that these poems deserve a primary place in Teasdale’s poetic corpus, as well as the broader canon of WWI poetry. They document her intimate involvement with modern politics and aesthetics and contrast violently with the set of traditionally feminized values that Teasdale’s “poetess” poetry supposedly advertises. This new selection of texts, I hope, will help to refute the wide-spread critical presumption—fueled, at times, by Teasdale herself—that she was a cloistered, quaint, or self-centered poet.

A final note before I turn to this archive: these are deeply affective, perhaps even “sentimental” poems—a categorization that I will pressure throughout my readings. As a result, I suspect that they are particularly vulnerable artifacts. Sentimentality, in common parlance, signals a kind of futility—a diffuse failure to enact material change within the social—a moment when feeling slips inward onto itself rather than propelling outward into the world. My intent is not merely to survey these poems, but also to reconsider these familiar objections, lodged so frequently against predominantly or excessively affective poetry. In the later part of this chapter, I will argue that Teasdale’s grief-stricken
expressions provide us with a crucial opportunity to rethink the value of affective poetry in a time of trauma. An attention to affect may even help to account for Teasdale’s seemingly inexplicable acts of self-censorship throughout her career. A poet who has long been criticized for her indifference to the modern actually harbored a much more complex set of feelings about the political developments underway within her country and her world.

“Loveliness to sell”

In the years surrounding WWI, Teasdale ascended to fame as America’s foremost practitioner of the love lyric. Two early collections—*Helen of Troy and Other Poems* (1911) and *Rivers to the Sea* (1915)—brought her to the attention of New York’s literary elite. But with the publication of *Love Songs* (1917), Teasdale’s career reached new heights. In 1918, *Love Songs* was awarded the Columbia Prize for Poetry, the precursor to the Pulitzer Prize and the field’s highest honor. Though the war had “practically stopped book-buying,” at least according to Teasdale, *Love Songs* reportedly sold more than two-thousand copies in its first six-months. Over the next two years, the collection went through five editions; over the next decade, it was re-printed an additional fifteen times. In their glowing reviews, critics unanimously praised *Love Songs*’ simple, unadorned “loveliness” (*The Dial* 457). Arriving as it did at the height of WWI, amid tremendous political and aesthetic anxiety, Teasdale’s intimate, affective poetry was hailed as a welcome refuge from the myriad uncertainties of the modern. “Since the invasion of vers libre,” *The New York Times* maligned, modern poetry had been too “difficult.” In *Love Songs*, these world-weary reviewers claimed to recapture the
“lightness,” “joy,” and “beauty” they had been sorely missing. “To chance upon a book by Sara Teasdale,” they explained, “is to feel the thrill of one who, pushing through the heavy branches in a wood, stops suddenly to hear the song of a bird” (The New York Times 51).


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Life has loveliness to sell,
All beautiful and splendid things,
Blue waves whitened on a cliff,
Soaring fire that sways and sings,
And children’s faces looking up
Holding wonder like a cup. (lines 1-6)
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Critics seized exclusively upon the “loveliness” evoked in the first line; none apparently noticed that that “loveliness” is for sale. Yet, “Barter”—and, arguably, the whole of *Love Songs*—hinges upon that single word, and whether one chooses to credit Teasdale with a darker insight into the nature of modernity. By shifting the emphasis in this opening line, all of life’s “beautiful and splendid things,” the natural, naïve pleasures of a previous time, transform—almost imperceptibly—into commodities. A manuscript version of “Barter” lends support to this politicized reading. The poem originally bore the title, “Buying Loveliness,” and the opening line initially read, “Life will not give, but she will sell” (qtd. in Drake, *Sara Teasdale* 160). Edna St. Vincent Millay, who counted Teasdale among her most important influences, greatly admired the poet’s penchant for subtle innovation. “You think her poems are going to be like something else you’ve read,” Millay writes, “but they never are” (qtd. in Milford 92). “Barter” epitomizes this defamiliarizing gesture. In isolation, the poem’s potentially subversive connotations—staked on a single word—are all too easy to overlook or dismiss. When
read alongside her war poems, however, these radical traces materialize, and, ultimately, destabilize, *Love Songs*’ genteel façade.

Despite its reputation for a-politicality, *Love Songs* hints at Teasdale’s primary preoccupation with the war at the time of its production. The poem “Dusk in War Time” arrives innocuously at the end of the collection:

A half-hour more and you will lean
To gather me close in the old sweet way—
But oh, to the woman over the sea
Who will come at the close of day?

A half-hour more and I will hear
The key in the latch and the strong, quick tread—
But oh, the woman over the sea
Waiting at dusk for one who is dead!

*Love Songs* includes both new and selected poetry, and “Dusk in War Time” is among its many re-prints. In Teasdale’s notebooks, the poem originally dates to January 30, 1915—making it her earliest poetic response to WWI. Indeed, by September 1917, when *Love Songs* appeared, the poem’s message was already significantly outdated. For “Dusk in War Time” was written at a moment when the costs of war were still incalculable to many Americans. The poem forges a sympathetic identification with—or, at least, reaches toward—an impossibly remote world of violence across the Atlantic. Unlike her European counterparts, Teasdale’s American speaker suffers only a crisis of conscience. The routines of her everyday life remain as yet untouched by this foreign war. As in “Union Square,” the expression, “But oh,” signals the speaker’s desire to transcend her individual self, and to engage more fully in the collective, political experience of the war. Although “Dusk in War Time” thus provides an important, sentimental response to the war, it is not an especially “daring” poem, particularly for
1917.

By the time the poem appeared in *Love Songs*, America had already entered WWI. The poem’s oblique critique of American policy—its attempt to shame Americans for their peaceful privilege—had been rendered obsolete by the recent declaration of war. These are at least some of the reasons, I would suggest, that “Dusk in War Time” managed to slip into *Love Songs*. Its mild political critique and swooning sentimentality do not disrupt, too forcefully, the public’s expectations for “poetess” poetry; and, furthermore, its potentially critical reference to American isolationism would have, by that later date, appeared quaint. By September 1917, it was no longer necessary for Americans to imagine the losses of war. Their earlier sympathy had been transformed into empathy, since the war was now their own. I mention “Dusk in War Time,” then, mainly as a point of contrast—for this comparatively tame, collected poem proves a poor ambassador for Teasdale’s broader corpus of war poetry.

Less than three weeks after completing “Dusk in War Time,” on February 18, 1915, Teasdale produced another, far more subversive response to WWI, “Spring in the Naugatuck Valley.” The poem appeared in the progressive periodical *The Survey* in April 1915, almost immediately after its production. That Teasdale selected this particular venue for publication is significant. A social welfare journal founded by Paul Kellogg, *The Survey* was an offshoot of the fin de siècle charity magazines, *Charities Review*, *Charities*, and *Charities and the Commons*. But, by the early teens, *The Survey* had come to represent an independent voice in progressive politics. It routinely featured pieces on labor reform, immigration, race politics, suffrage, and even birth control. In the twenties, *The Survey* would change its name to *Survey Graphic* (Finnegan). By publishing the
poem in this explicitly progressive, political journal, Teasdale seems to have been reaching out to a new audience and to have begun abandoning, at least provisionally, her pretense of a-politicality. However, after this initial publication, “Spring in the Naugatuck Valley” was subsequently omitted from all of Teasdale’s popular books of poetry. As a result, this radical and incisive poem has been completely forgotten.

In stark contrast to “Dusk in War Time,” which casts WWI as comfortably remote and foreign, “Spring in the Naugatuck Valley” brings the violence home:

\[\text{News item: “Brass, copper and wire mills in the Naugatuck Valley are shipping nearly a thousand tons of war material daily. One mill is turning out 200 tons a day of shrapnel ‘fillers’ of lead and other metals.”}\]

Spring comes back to the winding valley,  
The dogwood over the hill is white,  
The meadow-lark from the ground is piping  
His notes like tinkling bells of light;  
Peace, clear peace in the pearly evening,  
Peace on field and sheltered town—  
But why is the sky so wild and lurid  
Long, long after the sun goes down?

They are making ammunition,  
Blow on blow and spark on spark,  
With their blasting and their casting  
In the holy April dark.  
They have fed their hungry furnaces  
Again and yet again,  
They are shaping brass and bullets  
That will kill their fellow-men;  
Forging in the April midnight  
Shrapnel fillers, shot and shell,  
And the murderers go scathless  
Though they do the work of Hell.

With its emphasis upon domestic arms manufacturing, the poem exposes the hypocrisy of America’s official, isolationist stance. It is profit—not peace—that reigns in this valley.

The poem thus provides an ironic counterpoint to “Dusk in War Time.” Both poems are
concerned with America’s national boundaries, but “Spring in the Naugatuck Valley” dispels the sentimental illusion that Americans are as yet uninvolved in WWI. Even within this “sheltered town,” tucked away in the heart of New England, blood is being spilled.

“Spring in the Naugatuck Valley” thus marks a significant departure from the genteel style of poetry that Teasdale purportedly favored. If Love Songs was dominated, as virtually all critics believed, by a single-minded pursuit of “loveliness,” then “Spring in the Naugatuck Valley” serves as the antithesis of its cloistered aestheticism. The genteel tropes scattered throughout the poem’s first stanza—“tinkling bells of light” and “pearly evening”—are undercut sharply by the clandestine operations that occur “long, long after the sun goes down.” These genteel epithets are ultimately exposed as a kind of idyllic front masking the mills’ murderous business. Rather than a genteel poem, “Spring in the Naugatuck Valley” belongs to a vital tradition of popular anti-war poetry, which collectively radicalized the conventions of the so-called “genteel” lyric in response to WWI.53

In this early war-time response, Teasdale begins to realize the new aesthetic and political possibilities nascent within the genteel form. The poem’s newspaper epigraph, for instance, lends a concrete urgency to her outrage. “Spring in the Naugatuck Valley” exposes—rather than imagines—the mechanisms of modern warfare. At the height of America’s involvement in the war, in 1918, Teasdale would admit that the war had significantly altered her reading habits: “You know, I never used to read a newspaper, but for the past year and a half, I have been a regular newspaper fiend” (Letters, 1 March 1918). “Spring in the Naugatuck Valley” confirms this new form of political citizenship,
and inaugurates a powerful transformation in her poetry and poetic method.

Drake, who provides what is perhaps the only critical reference to “Spring in the Naugatuck Valley” since its publication, concludes that Teasdale withheld the poem from both Rivers to the Sea and Love Songs, as well as her subsequent collections, because “she disliked poems that suggested a message” (Sara Teasdale 147). This explanation belies the prolific and persistent nature of Teasdale’s response to the war. In his brief survey of Teasdale’s war poetry, Drake implies not only that it is a limited and limiting corpus, but also that Teasdale’s interest in the war peaked in its early years. This is a crucial misrepresentation on Drake’s part. The anti-military, anti-war sentiments expressed within “Spring in the Naugatuck Valley” are no aberration; the poem is merely the first in an ongoing political project that intensified significantly in subsequent years. Indeed, Teasdale’s letters and notebooks suggest that 1917 and 1918 represented her most productive period for political poetry. This is somewhat surprising, of course, since these are the precise years that Teasdale became exclusively associated with her signature brand of “love songs.” But her letters and notebooks from this time are dominated by a growing preoccupation with the war. The aesthetic and political themes Teasdale explored in early anti-war experiments like “Spring in the Naugatuck Valley” ultimately transform into a powerful critique of American nationalism and a scathing indictment of America’s growing militarization.

“I suppose she prayed”

Well into 1917, Teasdale maintained a strict adherence to pacifism, opposing war in any guise on moral grounds. “Both Ernst and I hope war can be avoided,” she writes on March 1, 1917, on the eve of America’s involvement, “but the feeling here is very high
and it looks doubtful” (Letters). Eventually, Teasdale would admit the necessity of America’s intervention into WWI:

I suppose if the United States had not entered the war, Germany would have been almost without a doubt, the victor, since Russia has crumpled up. But, although, taking this view of it, I feel that we almost had to come into the fight, I simply can’t get up any enthusiasm in the hurrahing sense of the word. It is too terrible to take any way but grimly. (Letters, 13 December 1917)

This was as close to advocacy for the war as Teasdale ever came, and she arrived at this compromise position reluctantly and belatedly. Though she opposed “autocratic Prussianism,” she found the nationalistic fervor—the “hurrahing”—that was sweeping America to be equally terrifying (Letters, 14 March 1918). “New York is all agog,” she observed bitterly on February 5, 1917, and a few weeks later, “Flags are flying everywhere and ‘The Star Spangled Banner’ is played at all times. Everybody is expected to stand up when this is done and of course all this inflames public opinion” (Letters, 1 March 1917). Teasdale was particularly appalled by a jingoistic display she witnessed at one of Isadora Duncan’s performances. In the last act, the dancer stripped on stage, revealing her body draped in an American flag. Duncan was greeted with “storms of applause and strains of the ‘Star Spangled Banner.’” “The whole audience stood and sang,” Teasdale reports, “It was one of the many hectic symptoms of war-madness that one sees every place” (Letters, 11 March 1917).

The poem “Sons” is a product of this uneasy time, when Teasdale fearfully observed the growing hegemony of a modern military “machine” that seemed to her to be painfully at odds with American democracy:
Men in brown with marching feet,
Like a great machine moved down the street,
And the shrieking of a fife
Led the river of that young life,
Soldiers bearing kits and guns,
Mothers’ sons—mothers’ sons.

Out of the crowd a woman pressed
Forward a little from the rest.
“That’s him,” she said, “the third one there,
The third one with the light brown hair!”
She caught my arm and then she swayed
And whispered—I suppose she prayed.
And still they passed with kits and guns,
Mothers’ sons.

“Sons” appeared in *Everybody’s Magazine* in January 1918, but, as was the case with
“Spring in the Naugatuck Valley,” it was never collected in any of Teasdale’s volumes of
poetry. Like *The Survey*, *Everybody’s Magazine* was a progressive periodical, devoted
primarily to social reform, especially in its early years (it was published from 1899 to
1929). Because of their explicit concern with politics, these journals may seem like
unusual venues for Teasdale’s work; however, this is only because we have forgotten
how actively and broadly she published. Drake notes, for instance, that Teasdale
“published extensively in the little magazines” (*Sara Teasdale* 84). However, he goes on,
“she never relied on them to carry her reputation. In fact, she rather enjoyed making
money from her work and the sense of independence as a woman it gave her. She was an
entrepreneur of the arts, not a bohemian” (84). Drake’s point is valuable, because it
reminds us that Teasdale’s choice to publish in popular magazines—rather than
exclusively within “little” ones—was not a result of her “failure” as a modernist poet. An
astute “entrepreneur,” Teasdale chose her venues strategically, in order to market her
poetry successfully and to maintain financial independence. For many women poets,
general magazines—and the wide readerships they attracted—proved far more alluring than the coterie audiences of “little” magazines.

In her notebooks, “Sons” is dated September 1917, and that same summer, according to Teasdale, America’s nationalist campaign reached a fever-pitch. “The feeling is so rabid here,” she warns on June 11, 1917,

It makes me heart-sick to see how autocratic our country is becoming and how avidly people are going into war—not as though from necessity, but with a certain fanaticism and ferocity which makes me feel that the world has almost gone into lunacy. (Letters)

“Sons” provides a spectator’s snapshot of these “autocratic” developments in war-time America. Ironically, the poem highlights the terrifying fact that American military power was being used not only to subdue its foreign enemies, but also to transform its democratic subjects from individuated “mothers’ sons” into a nearly indecipherable mass of “feet,” “kits,” and “guns.” Teasdale may have feared “autocratic Prussianism,” but she was equally terrified of the casual militarization of everyday life occurring within America.

Nonetheless, despite its anti-military sentiments, “Sons” does not concern itself exclusively or even primarily with the fate of the soldiers it represents. Marching forward down the street, machines now rather than boys, they are already beyond the poem’s reach. Instead, “Sons” focuses its gaze on the female spectators, the mothers, whose primary affective attachments—indeed, whose very identities—are being similarly morphed and molded by the modern military. The poem’s climactic moment occurs in the second stanza, when a single mother emerges “out of the crowd” and attempts to
distinguish her son from the mass. The woman speaks not to her son, however, but to the
other women on the sidelines of the parade: “‘That’s him,’ she said, ‘the third one there, /
The third one with the light brown hair!’” Like this mother, the poem harbors no
delusions about its capacity to hail the soldiers, to halt their inevitable forward march, or
to restore the individuality that has been stripped from them. The woman is not trying to
save her son from his inevitable fate, but to save herself—to distinguish herself “a little
from the rest,” however briefly.

By hailing the women on the side—those at the parade, as well as the ones at
home reading the poem—“Sons” offers an important, gendered statement concerning the
war. In a 2005 study, Janis Stout notes that women’s civilian perspectives remain
conspicuously absent in contemporary canons of war poetry. There is, Stout claims, a
troubling persistence of gender bias within the field, which makes it necessary to
continue to argue for the inclusion of women’s war writing (59). As Stout explains, this
prejudice results from a narrow definition of war-time experience. Even critics who
attempt to recuperate women’s war writing have turned almost exclusively to women’s
first-hand, battlefield accounts. Though these writings by nurses and other volunteers in
active combat zones are, of course, invaluable, Stout argues for the necessity of a
broader, more inclusive conception of war-time involvement:

War is a total and totalizing social experience. Anyone who has lived through any
of its effects—loss of loved ones, a feeling for others’ losses, economic
disruption, political repression, horror and more revulsion at the spectacle of
cruelty—has experienced some aspect of the total experience of war. (64)
Following Stout, a gendered perspective on the war would have the potential not only to account for women’s direct contributions to the war effort, but also to expand significantly the boundaries of war. This revised paradigm proves extremely relevant to Teasdale’s war poetry.

“Sons’” parade setting, for instance, serves as a self-conscious reflection on the gendered position of the war-time civilian: it highlights the perceived powerlessness of women who are called upon to celebrate war’s “spectacle of cruelty” even as it engulfs their most intimate attachments. Amy Lowell, one of Teasdale’s close friends, likewise took up the alienating experience of the military parade in her WWI poem, “In a Stadium.” She writes,

This is war:
Boys flung into a breach
Like shovelled earth;
And old men,
Broken,
Driving rapidly before crowds of people
In a glitter of silly decorations. (lines 36-42)

This is the essence of the civilian’s encounter with war: she was called upon contradictorily to reconcile war’s inconceivable traumas with a “glitter of silly decorations.” These newly ambivalent acts of citizenship in an increasingly nationalistic, repressive state represent a crucial portion of WWI’s complex political inheritance.

Poems like “Sons” and “In a Stadium” help us to understand more fully the price women paid for their complicity in this jingoistic spectacle, and, simultaneously, to witness the subtle forms of protest that remained possible within an increasingly “autocratic” America.
Within the rich tradition of women’s civilian poetry, few tropes are as familiar or as controversial as the figure of the grieving mother. In the war’s early years, the mother emerged as the quintessential emblem of prominent pacifist organizations like the Woman’s Peace Party (WPP). Chaired by Jane Addams, the WPP arose initially out of the suffrage movement, and subsequently redeployed that political capital in the service of pacifism. However, as Mark Van Wienen explains, progressive feminism and mainstream pacifism soon found themselves at odds. The modern feminist movement in America had campaigned vigorously throughout the early twentieth century to achieve gender and sexual equality; the pacifist movement, conversely, relied on an antiquated notion of innate, feminine difference in order to lodge its anti-war protest (Van Wienen, *Partisans* 40). In popular parlance, the figure of the grieving mother soon became synonymous with women’s essential peacefulness and submissiveness. She was, in other words, the antithesis of the “New Woman.” The popular pacifist poem, “Battle Cry of the Mothers” by Angela Morgan, epitomizes these essentializing gender politics. The poem rails passionately against a patriarchal system of governors, ministers, emperors, and kings—“the men at arms”—who perpetuate the war:

You have bargained our milk, you have bargained our blood,
Nor counted us more than the forest brute;
By the shameful traffic of motherhood
Have you settled the world’s disputes. (lines 44-47, Van Wienen, *Rendezvous*)

This influential pacifist text and countless others in the same mold occupy a contradictory cultural status. On the one hand, they testify to women’s radical engagement in the anti-war effort and highlight the powerful civilian response to WWI. On the other hand, they perpetuate an outdated stereotype of the figure of the mother as innately peaceful and fundamentally inimical toward war. As Van Wienen observes, this gendered fantasy of
“women’s solidarity” was not true in the limited context of the WPP, “let alone the nation as a whole” (Rendezvous 83).

“Sons” provides a particularly complex statement concerning these foundational issues regarding gender and war-time citizenship. The mother who emerges from the crowd is a classic sentimental character, imported directly from nineteenth-century American literature. She is the prototypical small woman, shaking her fist at God, an individual filled with pain and powerlessness who can do little more than rage against the machine. When she shouts to the other women in the crowd, she is attempting to mark her own and her son’s individuality. In so doing, she registers what Lauren Berlant terms “the sentimental complaint.” As Berlant explains, in the nineteenth-century tradition, the sentimental complaint functions “to build pain alliances” across a community—to suture together the similarly dispossessed in a moment of collective grief (636). This is the much-heralded connective or adhesive facility that lies at the heart of antebellum sentimental literature. Facing an insurmountable obstacle—in this case, the dehumanizing effects of the modern military “machine”—a sentimentalist would try to alleviate, if not eliminate, the burden of individual suffering by connecting, affectively, with others.

What makes “Sons” such a remarkably complex poem is that it invokes this classic nineteenth-century character, but subsequently withholds the sympathy or identification demanded by her sentimental complaint. Although the mother performs her sentimental role perfectly, “Sons” refuses to embrace her in a final, cathartic tableau. At the moment when Teasdale’s speaker ought to identify with the woman, to share the burden of her individual suffering, the poem states only, “She caught my arm and then she swayed / And whispered—I suppose she prayed.” Literally, the speaker cannot
support this woman or her desire for sentimental connection. The flatness of the speaker’s response—“I suppose she prayed”—produces a profoundly different effect (and affect) from nineteenth-century sentimental literature. Rather than connecting with the mother in a cathartic moment of identification, the poem implies that such sentimental gestures are a quaint relic of a gentler time. In the poem’s final lines, it is sentimentality itself that collapses into the unceasing progress of the modern: “And still they passed with kits and guns, / Mothers’ sons.”

“The simple things that were our heritage”

Reticent and unyielding, “Sons” resides at a difficult impasse. The female, civilian speaker seems similarly disillusioned by each of the choices her modernist, war-time culture has to offer: mechanized progress or sentimental regress. Stuck between these two options—a push forward and a pull backward—Teasdale’s speaker merely stares. This state of inaction may not be a forceful protest, but it is an effective means of marking the impossible contingencies of her war-time present. The poem contains an allusion in line 10, which lends additional significance to this conflict. The sentimental woman’s final, futile utterance—“the light brown hair!”—is borrowed directly from T.S. Eliot’s “The Love of J. Alfred Prufrock,” modernism’s premier poetic testament to psychic and social immobility. Unlike Eliot, Teasdale does not direct these words toward a female body, but her speaker nonetheless shares a portion of Prufrock’s profound ambivalence. She is terrified by the homogenization and mechanization of the soldiers’ bodies, which continue to provoke desire, and horrified by the powerlessness of the women standing beside her—a powerlessness she recognizes as her own.
Although “Sons” does not participate explicitly within a pastoral tradition, its deeply conflicted nature hints at Teasdale’s predilection for this classic form. Even in “Sons,” where the pastoral impulse is muted, we can begin to understand the significance of Teasdale’s formal affinity. Structurally speaking, the pastoral stakes the quintessential “middle ground”: it resides always in the spaces “between” the urban and the rural, civilization and nature, the present and the past (Marx 23). According to Harold Toliver, this foundational dialectic represents the single, unifying principle within the pastoral tradition. Although its style and content alter radically in response to historical context, the pastoral invariably posits a fundamental “contrast” between nature and its perceived antithesis—be it mechanization, civilization, industrialization, war, or any number of shifting, culturally specific threats to an organic way of life (3-5). In her later war poems, Teasdale turns repeatedly to the form of the pastoral to model a crisis of aesthetic and political immobility brought on by WWI.

Some of Teasdale’s pastoral poems are relatively conventional and evince a classic, nostalgic longing for the impossible comforts of a natural world. “Spring in War-Time,” for instance, begins

I feel the spring far off, far off,  
The faint far scent of bud and leaf—  
Oh, how can spring take heart to come  
To a world in grief  
Deep grief? (lines 1-5)

And “Spring, 1918” similarly announces

I never longed so hungrily for spring  
Before, nor in the past and peaceful years  
Saw the first robin through a rush of tears,  
And heard his throaty whistle quivering (lines 1-4)
These poems crystallize one portion of the traditional pastoral’s affective project. In essence, they hearken to an idyllic, paradisal state prior to the fall of war. This is the single aspect of the pastoral’s function that critics tend to emphasize, especially within the devalued field of women’s war-time writing. Nosheen Khan, for instance, studying a sample of women’s pastoral poetry that is fundamentally similar to “Spring in War-Time” and “Spring, 1918,” argues that “the pastoral world, by its affirmation of life and its continual ability to renew itself, serves, like religion, as a means whereby comfort and hope can be proffered to the bereaved” (56). Khan’s assessment of women’s pastoral poetry confirms her broader thesis that “en masse” women’s poetry during WWI was “conservative and traditional” (5). Yet, there is a considerable amount of contradiction within the rich tradition of women’s pastoral poetry — indeed, even within Teasdale’s comparatively slim corpus. Poems like “Spring in War-Time” and “Spring, 1918,” though not necessarily “conservative,” do not exploit fully the radical possibilities nascent within the pastoral structure. Following Khan, these are poems that primarily lend solace, or at least hint at the natural world’s abiding store of hope. “Spring,” in other words, remains as yet untouched by the atrocities of war.

However, throughout WWI, the pastoral frequently served a more radical political purpose. Rather than simply providing an imaginative retreat from the war’s atrocities, the pastoral was also deployed as a means of “fully gauging the calamities of the Great War” (Fussell 235). The form’s radical potential lies in this means of contrasting the past and present in a time of war, as Teasdale’s “Nahant 1918” aptly illustrates:

Bowed as an elm under the weight of its beauty,
So earth is bowed, under her weight of splendor,
Molten sea, richness of leaves and the burnished
Bronze of sea-grasses.
Clefts in the cliff shelter the purple sand-peas
And chicory flowers bluer than the ocean
Flinging its foam high, white fire in sunshine,
Jewels of water.

Joyous thunder of blown waves on the ledges,
Make me forget war and the dark war-sorrow—
Against the sky a sentry paces the sea-cliff
Slim in his khaki.\textsuperscript{54}

Teasdale wrote the poem in August 1918 during a visit to the small beach town of
Nahant, Massachusetts. She had vacationed in Nahant before, and this trip highlighted its
stark differences from a pre-war time:

This town is much changed since our entrance into the war and searchlights play
over these waters in all directions. The vantage points in the cliffs are manned
with guns, and a good many soldiers and sailors are quartered here. […] Many of
the fine places here are closed. I suppose their owners, like everybody else, have
had their usual modes of life changed by the war. (Letters, 11 August 1918)

Teasdale expected to find in Nahant the pastoral comforts she remembered from previous
visits. “This is as beautiful a village as I know,” she told her mother-in-law, “and if
anything could make one forget war, the great bending elms and quiet lawns of this town
would do so” (Letters, 9 August 1918). But the escape she remembered and hoped for
was not to be found.

In the poem’s final stanza, the past and present are placed in perfect contradiction:
the beauty of the natural world juxtaposed with the military necessities of the present.
The stanza’s opening lines are, moreover, strategically ambiguous. At first read, they
seem to suggest that the sea has succeeded at helping the speaker to forget. Yet, the final
two lines, with their quasi-Imagist evocation of a soldier, “Slim in his khaki,” reveal that
Teasdale’s “make me forget” is a plea rather than a record of what actually transpired. Despite the landscape’s tantalizing promise of pastoral retreat, the speaker has not forgotten the war for even an instant. “Nahant 1918” radicalizes the conventions of the traditional pastoral by exposing the speaker’s desire for escape to be a naïve relic of a pre-war past. In an earlier draft of “Nahant 1918,” contained within Teasdale’s notebooks, there was an additional line included within the final stanza: “Even here why must war-sorrow haunt me?” This “haunted” feeling represents the essence of Teasdale’s modern pastoral vision.

“Nahant 1918” is written in the distinctive form of the English sapphic stanza. The sapphic is a four-line stanza: the first three lines are hendecasyllabic, comprised of eleven syllables arranged trochee trochee dactyl trochee trochee, and the fourth line, termed an adonic, contains five syllables arranged dactyl trochee. It is also possible to substitute a spondee for the second or fourth trochee—a strategy that lends additional stress to the poem, and which Teasdale uses liberally. A modern imitation of Sappho’s ancient verse, the sapphic stanza was popularized in the nineteenth century by poets such as Tennyson, Swinburne, and Thomas Hardy, all of whom influenced Teasdale importantly. But as Hugh Kenner’s iconic reading reminds us, Sappho also proved to be a rich source of inspiration for many modernist poets—Ezra Pound first among them.55 “Nahant 1918” takes some considerable liberties with the traditional sapphic stanza. A number of lines are not hendecasyllabic and their metrical patterns are irregular. Line 11, for instance, switches to iambics to mark the speaker’s radical shift in perspective. But Teasdale has kept the essence of the form intact. She relies primarily on the falling rhythms of trochees and dactyls to mimic the sapphic’s forceful starts and stops. (“Sons”
uses dactyls and trochees to create a similar rhythmic effect). Moreover, despite these variations, Teasdale’s adonics are perfect.

The first two adonic lines—“Bronze of sea-grasses” and “Jewels of water”—present densely layered natural metaphors. All of these are natural substances, but “bronze” and “jewels,” unlike “sea-grasses” and “water,” are emblems of nature cultivated and reformed—not raw material—and they have acquired considerable economic “weight” through this human processing. The final adonic—“Slim in his khaki”—similarly but more subtly marries these contrasting visions of nature. “Khaki” derives from an Urdu word meaning “dust,” “earth,” or “earthly” (Dictionary). It originally referred to the color of uniforms worn by Sikh regiments in Punjab. The dusty earth of this British colonial territory was used to dye the harsh white fabric of the soldiers’ uniforms, so that they could blend unobtrusively into the landscape. In 1846, Sir Harry Lumsden introduced this specially dyed fabric to the British Army. By WWI, khaki dress was ubiquitous among both British and American soldiers. In fact, this so-called “Multani mitti” or “mud of Multan,” named for the city of its origin, is still prized today for its reputed health benefits. The word “molten,” in line 3, is resonant with this colonial history.  

Teasdale’s sentry, “Slim in his khaki,” is thus adorned by the earth. Notice that in Teasdale’s vision, he carries no gun. The roots of violence in this poem are far more difficult to trace. “Bronze,” “jewels,” and “khaki” are all commodifications of earth’s natural substances—they are each mined and subsequently transformed into profitable products. The weight of the poem’s critique falls upon this act of “unearthing.” Teasdale’s adonic lines place WWI in the context of a much longer historical process of
modernization and colonization. While the soldier is a shock to Nahant’s tranquil landscape, these adonics suggest that his presence is, in fact, the logical consequence of modern development. This is a perfectly poised poem: history balanced against the present; an ancient form deployed in critique of modernity; and civilization brought into brutal contact with nature. This dialectic does not suggest, comfortably, that history or nature might offer a retreat from WWI. Quite the opposite: it implicates WWI in a long and violently unfolding narrative of historical progress.

Another of Teasdale’s poems, written at the same moment, confirms her radical critique of modernization and modernity. “Strange” appears in Teasdale’s notebooks on June 24, 1918, but has never been published:

Strange that we two, who love all quiet things,
Coves by the sea, with waves too small for foam,
Stars seen in water, love too sure for speech,
And eyes that make for other eyes a home;

Strange that we two should choose this harried hour
To leave whatever world we knew before,
For this sick planet, with tired hordes
Locked in the grim futility of war.

Strange that we two, and millions more like us,
Caught like poor beasts, and beaten in a cage,
Send up no curse to God who let us lose
The simple things that were our heritage.

As in “Nahant 1918” the poem contrasts the “quiet,” “simple things” of a pre-war world with this new, “sick planet” “locked in the grim futility of war.” A sympathetic connection between lovers—“eyes that make for other eyes a home”—and the perfect affective symmetry of “love too sure for speech”—are no longer possible in a post-war world. The poem uses this juxtaposition to intensify the speaker’s feelings of alienation, and also to make “strange” the state of supposed innocence that existed before the war.
The poem does not merely mourn the present state of the world, it claims, more foundationally, that the war has destroyed modernity’s natural “heritage.” The progress of the past has been ruptured utterly and its inheritance lost to the present. These “two,” “and millions more” like them, are thus profoundly homeless, “caught like poor beasts, and beaten in a cage.”

The poem’s evocation of choice in the second stanza is particularly crucial to Teasdale’s historical critique. The lines render the speaker complicit in the earth’s destruction—for it is she who has abandoned the “simple” world she once inhabited, in exchange for life on “this sick planet.” This feeling of culpability provides an answer for why these “two,” as well as the world’s “millions,” “Send up no curse to God”: the cages in which they are caught are of their own making. The poem does not indict God or fate, but places the blame for humanity’s impoverished condition on the shoulders of humanity itself. The speaker herself is no solider, nor has she perpetuated any overt acts of violence or destruction. But she, too, feels guilty of abandoning something vital from the past—of allowing herself and her world to arrive at this terrible state.

The poem’s affective claims do not rest on the individual, but slip readily into a collective historical critique. Despite her reputation for sentimental flight, Teasdale channels her individual grief into a productive meditation on her political present. Moreover, Teasdale’s fluid historical frame, which is, admittedly, vague and imprecise, represents a crucial part of her achievement. “Strange,” like “Nahant 1918,” is transhistorical—not a-historical—but concerned fundamentally with the passage of time, with history across place and space, and with the impact of war on her feelings about what has come before. Consumed by the apparent senselessness and dehumanization of
the war, Teasdale reflected repeatedly on the precariousness of modern culture:

It all makes me heart-sick, for it represents such terrible loads of sorrow to be borne later when our men are killed and maimed by thousands. It is staggering when one thinks of the four thousand years of so-called civilization on this planet—that it culminates now in the most brutal and tremendous blood-shed that the world has ever seen. We have worked out a system of courts for settling small disputes—but disputes between peoples are still settled by killing. (Letters, 13 December 1917).

Critics have routinely diagnosed Teasdale’s pervasive “heart-sickness” as a personal rather than cultural or political condition. But her letters and poetry make clear that her feelings of melancholy and grief were directed in the service of a material historical and political critique. The Western “civilization” in which the poet had placed tremendous faith had proven to be the source of unprecedented violence and destruction. Modernity itself, she seems to suggest, had been fundamentally contaminated.

It is important to note that this capacious historical frame, which I am crediting as one of Teasdale’s primary achievements, represents the source of Raymond Williams’ profound ambivalence regarding the pastoral. The pastoral’s “retrospective radicalism,” Williams warns, “is often made to do service as a critique of the capitalism of our own day: to carry humane feelings and yet ordinarily to attach them to a pre-capitalist and therefore irrecoverable world” (Country 36). In contrast, Williams argues that successfully anti-capitalist poetry must offer a concrete historical perspective—not the vague historical “tensions” constitutive of the pastoral. “The great indictments of capitalism, and its long record of misery in factories and towns,” he continues, “have co-
existed within a certain historical scheme” (37). Although it mourns the injustices of modernization, the pastoral’s slippery historical regression, Williams claims, cannot produce any material social change. Instead of the pastoral’s “unresolved division and conflict of impulses,” Williams says, we might do better to identify “the real shape of the underlying crisis” of modernization and to face capitalism “in its own terms” (297).

But what would those terms have been at the height of WWI from Teasdale’s vantage on the sidelines of this terrifying new spectacle? Although it is true that Teasdale’s pastoral poetry fundamentally lacks historical precision and avoids specific economic and political terms, I would argue that these inconsistencies and obfuscations do not undermine its material import. Indeed, I believe that this imprecision was a necessary and strategic part of Teasdale’s poetic response to the war. At a time when the social was radically in process, Teasdale experimented with the pastoral in order to find a new way to respond to a radically unfamiliar world. This “kind of feeling and thinking,” which is tentative, unformed, “embryonic,” may not be “fully articulate”—indeed, we often misrecognize its social claims as “private, idiosyncratic, and even isolating”—but it nonetheless represents a significant means of struggling toward new aesthetic and political forms in a moment of cultural transition (Williams Marxism 131-132). 58

“And not one will know of the war”

The social and political stakes of Teasdale’s pastoral innovations become most apparent in the poem “There Will Come Soft Rains.” Since 1913, Teasdale had been an avid student of Charles Darwin. Following America’s declaration of war, she returned again to his foundational work. 59 She writes to her mother-in-law in August 1918, from Nahant,
Tell Father Filsinger that I am reading with real delight Darwin’s ‘Origin of Species.’ I wonder if he has read it? I have always imagined it a dry deep book, far too learned for me, but to my surprise it is immensely entertaining and opens up vast vistas to me. (Letters, 9 August 1918)

The poem “There Will Come Soft Rains” shows the subtlety and sensitivity of these Darwinian meditations:

There will come soft rains and the smell of the ground, 
And swallows calling with their shimmering sound;

And frogs in the pools singing at night, 
And wild-plum trees in tremulous white; 
Robins will wear their feathery fire 
Whistling their whims on a low fence-wire

And not one will know of the war, not one 
Will care at last when it is done.

Not one would mind, neither bird nor tree, 
If mankind perished utterly;

And Spring herself, when she woke at dawn, 
Would scarcely know that we were gone.69

Unlike the majority of Teasdale’s war poems, “There Will Come Soft Rains” has not been entirely forgotten. Three decades after its initial publication, in the wake of World War II, Ray Bradbury featured the poem as the foundation of a similarly post-apocalyptic short story, also titled “There Will Come Soft Rains,” in The Martian Chronicles. In his re-appropriation, Bradbury portrays a future world that has been destroyed by mankind’s heedless progress: mechanical mice scurry energetically around a house, while a dog, covered in radioactive sores, lies down and dies. His story shares with Teasdale’s poem the terrifying insight that mankind is no longer connected, organically, to the nature. The only species capable of mass, mechanized self-destruction, humans are utterly alone,
detached from a natural world that no longer even notices we are there. Imported into the futuristic world of 2057, Teasdale’s words become bitterly ironic. As early as WWI, Bradbury implies, mankind had been warned.

The poem awakens that old sentimental longing to return to a state of deep connectedness with nature. It even deploys a set of familiar stylistic markers that seem to have been borrowed directly from a nineteenth-century aesthetic economy. The poem’s alliteration—“whistling their whims” and “feathery fire”—and the sing-song rhymes—“ground/sound,” “night/white,” and “fire/wire”—all evoke a sense of comforting gentility. But this veneer of conventional sentimentality merely heightens the profound impact of nature’s heartlessness. The poem’s cloying, saccharine quality and its tranquil, pastoral descriptors are deceiving. Ultimately, all of our sentimental feelings about “frogs” and “wild-plum trees,” as well as the language through which we have constructed those myths of a deep and abiding connection to nature, are tossed, mockingly, back at us—we, who naïvely believe that the “soft rains” will signal our own renewal and that the birds will sing to celebrate our salvation. The poem undercuts those pastoral fantasies with the reality of a natural world dominated by indifference, motivated only by its own survival, and oblivious to the existence or extinction of man. Ironically, however, Teasdale locates a kernel of hope in this harsh vision. Devoted exclusively to its own survival, nature, in Teasdale’s conception, proffers no comfort to mankind, but can, nonetheless, provide the key to our own preservation. Rather than a retreat into an irrecoverable, idyllic past, Teasdale’s Darwinian pastoral presents a cold, cautionary tale: urging her modernist audience to adopt the ways of nature—to focus more whole-heartedly on their own survival.
“There Will Come Soft Rains” first appeared in *Harper’s Monthly Magazine* in July 1918—less than two months after the passage of the Sedition Act. Earlier, in 1914 and 1915, a majority of Americans had been vocal in their opposition to the war. As America prepared to enter the war, this popular opposition remained surprisingly strong. As late as August 1917, four months after America entered WWI, Teasdale reports from her home in New York City, “this is an unpopular war with the masses” (Letters, 13 August 1917). In response to this widespread dissent, the U.S. government embarked on an aggressive campaign of political repression. Two landmark pieces of legislation, the Espionage Act of June 15, 1917 and the Sedition Act of May 16, 1918, spearheaded the state-sponsored efforts to quash political disaffection. The Espionage Act, among its many provisions, made it a crime to cause “insubordination, disloyalty, mutiny or refusal of duty” in the military or to “willfully” obstruct military recruitment and enlistment. A year later, the Sedition Act further strengthened the government’s authority to silence protest, outlawing “virtually all criticism of the war or the government” (Goldstein 107-108). Following the passage of the Sedition Act, anthologies and magazines continued to publish a small number of anti-war poems, but only if these poems were strategically “nonspecific” in their critique and refrained from offering any “substantive political alternative” to the war (Van Wienen, *Rendezvous* 27).

Moreover, these state-sponsored repressions were bolstered by an ambitious grass-roots campaign designed to weed out dissent at the local level. In 1917, a group of private citizens founded the American Protective League (APL), whose sole mission was to eavesdrop on conversations in bars and restaurants, to intercept and open the mail and telegrams of people suspected of disloyalty, and to root out in a general way any evidence
of dissent. By the end of the war, the APL had more than 250,000 members aiding the
government in its campaign of political repression (Brinkley 27-28). This twinned attack,
from above and below, leads Robert Justin Goldstein to conclude that war-time America
was in fact far more repressive than Great Britain, and rivaled the totalitarian regimes in
Germany and Russia (107).

Teasdale was undoubtedly aware of this heightened threat of political
surveillance. She and her husband Ernst were both of German descent, and socialized
frequently with German nationals. In June 1917, when family friends, the Lippmanns
visited, Teasdale made sure to take them “to a quiet restaurant,” so that “Dr. L’s
vociferous espousal of the German cause might not get us into trouble” (Letters, 11 June
1917). Six-months later, in December 1917, she observes, “The feeling here is more and
more acrid all the time and one is actually afraid to entertain anybody with German
sympathies” (Letters). The following summer, Teasdale declined an invitation to visit an
old friend, Harriet Curtis, in Boston, because Curtis had entered into a relationship with a
pro-German sympathizer, and had come to share his political beliefs. “She has suffered a
good deal from losing friends on account of her attitude,” Teasdale writes, “and she lives
all alone in an apartment, doing her own work, and separated from her family, rumor has
gone abroad that she is a spy.” Though Teasdale sympathized with the “tangle” Curtis
was in, she felt that a visit with her friend would be unwise (Letters, 11 August 1918).

With the exceptions of “Dusk in War Time” and “Spring in the Naugatuck
Valley,” all of the poems I have discussed here were published—or pointedly not
published—after the passage of the Espionage and Sedition Acts—even Love Songs.
Given the severe restrictions these laws placed on American freedoms, it is easier to
understand why Teasdale chose not to collect many of her anti-war poems. In November 1917, mere months after Teasdale had complained throughout her letters about the Star Spangled Banner being performed at all public events, Dr. Carl Muck, a German citizen and the conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, caused a national scandal by refusing to play the national anthem at a concert in Providence, Rhode Island. Theodore Roosevelt took up the very public case against Muck in the media, claiming that anyone who refused to play the Star Spangled Banner “in this time of national crisis should be forced to pack up and return to the country he came from” (qtd. in Mock 195). In subsequent months, Muck was deemed a threat to national peace and security, and ultimately sentenced to an internment camp in Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia (Mock 195). In another case, this one in February 1917, a man was sentenced to jail for saying, “I wish Wilson was in hell, and if I had the power, I would put him there.” The judge presiding over the case ruled that President Wilson “could not be in the state called hell until life was terminated,” and thus reasoned that the man’s utterance constituted a threat on the President’s life (Mock 109). The case not only highlights the severe restrictions placed on American freedoms throughout the WWI era, but also helps to account, at least partially, for Teasdale’s reluctance to re-print many of her anti-war and anti-military poems—“Spring in the Naugatuck Valley,” in particular. If this man’s spoken invocation of “hell” warranted a jail term, it is unlikely that the American public would have embraced, in 1917 or 1918, the poem’s final lines: “And the murderers go scathless / Though they do the work of Hell.”

Fear of political repercussions also seems like the only plausible explanation for what happened to “Sons.” Incomprehensibly, given the poem’s harsh portrait of a
dehumanizing military “machine,” as well as Teasdale’s own, well-documented aversion to American nationalism, “Sons” was featured in 1918 in a full-page advertisement for War Savings Stamps (Drake, Sara Teasdale 169). Only the glibbest of readings could credit “Sons” as a pro-war poem; yet, glib readings were the most this “poetess” seemed to warrant. Reading Teasdale’s notebooks and letters, it is impossible not to believe that this act of complicity in the war effort—this “hurrahing” to borrow Teasdale’s phrase—would have cost the poet greatly. However, both “Spring in the Naugatuck Valley” and “Sons,” each of which voices powerful anti-military sentiments, appeared initially in progressive periodicals, then disappeared from Teasdale’s poetic corpus. In the case of “Sons,” its powerful critique of the modern military “machine” was fed into the machine itself.

This climate of censorship casts a different light on the apparent obliqueness of Teasdale’s anti-war pastorals. Rather than a limitation, their rhetorical vagaries and historical imprecision might be precisely what enabled their circulation at the height of WWI. Her a-politicality was so widely assured by the publication and reception of Love Songs that no one seems to have suspected her poetry of harboring any subversive intent, even when the evidence was plainly visible. It is possible, in fact, that Teasdale’s cultivation of a demure, “poetess” persona might have, contradictorily, enabled her to publish anti-war poetry with impunity.

Another poem, “In a Garden: War-Time,” which I have not yet discussed, was significantly de-radicalized by Teasdale from its initial iteration in her notebooks to its ultimate appearance in her 1920 collection Flame and Shadow. The version of the poem that exists in Flame and Shadow is titled “In a Garden,” and, additionally, has had its
most explicit textual references to the war stripped. As a result, “In a Garden” provides a tranquil, comforting portrait of a natural world rebuilding after the war. Its final stanzas read

Into the garden peace comes back with twilight,
Peace that since noon had left the purple phlox,
The heavy-headed asters, the late roses
And swaying hollyhocks.

For at high-noon I heard from this same garden
The far-off murmur as when many come;
Up from the village surged the blind and beating
Red music of a drum;

And the hysterical sharp fife that shattered
The brittle autumn air,
While they came, the young men marching
Past the village square...

Across the calm Connecticut the hills change
To violet, the veils of dusk are deep
Earth takes her children’s many sorrows calmly
And stills herself to sleep. (lines 9-24, Flame and Shadow)

The ellipses at the end of line 12 are no empty stylistic marker. Among the lines cut from the published version of “In a Garden” are the following, which were originally positioned in the space of those ellipses:

This is our gift of life to the world’s battle,
The drafted men, the young and bright-haired sons
Who leave their farms and go with simple courage
To meet the foreign guns.

Here in the garden peace comes back with twilight,
But from how many a home peace stays away—
How many a young girl saw her first love leaving
And found no word to say.

As Teasdale undoubtedly appreciated, these omitted lines change fundamentally the poem’s message regarding nature and war. In its published version, the line, “Earth takes
her children’s many sorrows calmly” has a comforting effect. As if the war and all its horrific environmental destruction can be suddenly forgotten. Alternatively, in its manuscript version, the line is deeply disturbing. Earth’s purported calmness contrasts starkly with the many homes where “peace stays away.” Ultimately, the manuscript version of the poem reinforces humanity’s ongoing estrangement from the natural world. This is, of course, a sentiment far more in keeping with Teasdale’s other war poems.

Michel Foucault argues that for an individual or group to enact resistance “the field of power relations” must be “mobile.” If those power relations are, conversely, “blocked” or “frozen,” if there is no possibility to disrupt the dispersal of power, then society enters a “state of domination.” “In such a state,” Foucault observes, “it is certain that practices of freedom do not exist or exist only unilaterally or are extremely constrained or limited” (283). In 1917 and 1918, the period in which Teasdale produced the majority of her war poems, America arguably entered a “state of domination.” Certainly, Teasdale’s poetry is marked by a profound sense of “immobility” and “frozen” or “blocked” agency. However, while I believe that America’s repressive political culture played some role in Teasdale’s acts of self-censorship, de-radicalization, and obfuscation, it can only ever provide a partial explanation. If Teasdale were simply a thwarted radical, why wouldn’t she have published her political poems later, in the more forgiving peacetime economy? Amy Lowell’s *Pictures of the Floating World*, which contains a number of overtly political critiques of the war, and which serves as an apt companion to Teasdale’s anti-war poetry, appeared safely in 1919. But even at that late date Teasdale continued to censor her own political expressions.

To understand this ongoing political reticence, it is necessary to take Foucault’s
“state of domination” more loosely: to think about how the lines between political repression and affective obstruction blur in the uncertain time of trauma. Teasdale’s grief-stricken poems invariably espouse a sense of hopelessness. In “Sons,” her speaker stands powerless at the spectacle of modernity’s ceaseless military progress. The “machine” passes down the street, but its helpless female audience can do little more than stare. Her pastoral poems index the wholesale contamination not merely of a small beach town in New England, nor even of America, but of the entire planet. And surely a “sick planet” is more easily diagnosed than cured. This stasis is likely what drew Teasdale to the pastoral. For where, after all, does the pastoral leave its displaced reader, but in a state of profound immobility? It is, as Williams suggests, a form divided, conflicted, nearly torn apart by its contradictory tensions.

We prefer political poetry to be stronger, to harbor the capacity to resist, and to affect in no uncertain terms its ambitious agenda for change. But perhaps it is equally important to mark the limits of what is possible in one’s historical present, no matter how negative those political feelings may be. Looking back now on a century of war, Teasdale’s skepticism regarding modern progress, her stubborn refusal to get on with modernity, seems like a fundamentally ethical and potentially productive form of protest. Moreover, her unwillingness to let go of an aesthetic and political time before the war, her utopic dream of a “new” nineteenth century, also deserves attention.

“It is autumn now the whole world over”

In conclusion, I offer one, final poem. In November 1918, William Stanley Braithwaite, Teasdale’s editor and close friend, asked her to contribute a “peace poem” to his
forthcoming anthology. Teasdale responded,

I should love to be represented in your book of peace poems, but I’m afraid that I must forego the idea. In the first place I am far from well, and in the second place, I simply cannot write a good poem by wanting to. And the present peace is so new that I don’t seem to have got it into my heart and soul yet—so that anything I wrote now I should be sure to hate later on. (emphasis original)

Teasdale felt tremendously indebted to Braithwaite. He had helped her to publish Rivers to the Sea in 1915 and had written a glowing review of the volume that helped establish her reputation. Yet, as she admits, “the present peace” wasn’t yet in her “heart and soul.”

Braithwaite’s anthology, which appeared shortly after his letter to Teasdale, was enthusiastically titled Victory! and contained a smugly patriotic introduction by Theodore Roosevelt. One hears ironic echoes of that anthology in the title of Teasdale’s 1933 collection, Strange Victory.

In fact, Teasdale seems never to have authored a true “peace poem.” If she had simply taken up the genre of war poetry opportunistically, as some writers did, or out of the necessity to weigh in on this defining cultural event, she would likely have embraced this final chance for a war-themed publication. But the closest she seems to have come to a “peace poem” in those supposedly optimistic days as the fighting waned is “Autumn Night 1918”:

Let us forget! The night smells fresh,  
The park is quiet, the stars are white—  
They are fighting, the youth of the world are dying—

Let us forget! Kiss me to-night,  
It is autumn now the whole world over,  
Run down this path with me, let us forget!  
Over the sea they are dying—kiss me,
Never mind if my lashes are wet.

In the lamp-light see two scarlet branches!
What is that ghostly thing under the tree?
Only a wild white aster stirring
In a wind blown westward over the sea.

Listen, the wind is moaning in trouble,
It brings what dying soldiers say,
Crying out from the bloody stubble
To women three thousand miles away.

The poem, dated September 13, 1918, is recorded in Teasdale’s notebooks, but was never published. In “Autumn Night 1918” the memories of war have been inscribed indelibly on the landscape. Trees bear traces of blood and the wind continues to carry the terrible moaning of dying soldiers. It is a monument to the profound transformations of war and the impossibility of returning to pre-war life. Despite its continual refrain, “Let us forget!” the speaker cannot let go of the war. She prays only for forgetfulness and dares not hope for change. “It is autumn now the whole world over,” she proclaims, and the war, “that ghostly thing under the tree,” will continue to haunt modernity.
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Notes

1 I am referring here to the so-called “Douglas-Tompkins” debate that largely set the terms for discussion regarding sentimentality until at least the mid-1990s. Laura Wexler provides a useful overview of the debate and outlines the limitations of this polemical mode of scholarship in Tender Violence: Domestic Visions in an Age of U.S. Imperialism (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000). See pages 94-105, in particular.

2 In recent years, many critics have expanded the literary boundaries of sentimental literature to implicate major, canonical figures. As a result, the label of sentimentality no longer functions as a sign of “failed” aesthetic or political ambitions. For example, Mary Louise Kete’s Sentimental Collaborations: Mourning and Middle Class Identity In Nineteenth Century America (Durham: Duke UP, 1999) provides a comprehensive reconceptualization of the sentimental tradition that charts the fluid connections between unknown, occasional writers and major literary figures, like Emerson, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and Mark Twain. In addition, Glenn Hendler’s, Public Sentiments: Structures of Feeling in Nineteenth Century Literature (Chapel Hill, N.C.: U of North Carolina P, 2001) provides an important expansion of sentimentality beyond its typical home in white, middle class women’s fiction. The critical collection Sentimental Men: Masculinity and the Politics of Affect in American Culture, eds. Mary Chapman and Glenn Hendler (Berkley: University of California Press, 1999) is also noteworthy for its expansive conception of sentimentality.

3 I have in mind, here, Michel Foucault’s discussion of continuity at the outset of The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language, tr. A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972). Foucault writes that historical continuity “may not have a very rigorous conceptual structure,” but it has “a very precise function” (21). He goes on to explain that an overriding concern with temporal unity enables critics “to group a succession of dispersed events, to link them to one and the same organizing principle…to discover, already at work in each beginning, a principle of coherence and the outline of a future unity” (21-22). Methodologically, my re-conceptualization of modernist sentimental literature—and my understanding of genre more broadly—is indebted to Foucault, and I will similarly attempt to “question the ready-made syntheses” of sentimental form throughout this dissertation (22). While this study does not examine eighteenth or nineteenth-century sentimental literature in any detail, it is concerned with the inheritance of those critical discourses. In my study of twentieth-century sentimental poetry, I will show that a treatment of modernist sentimentality as a discrete formation among “a population of dispersed events” allows a much richer and complex vision of this political and aesthetic form to emerge.

4 I am indebted here to Aaron Jaffe’s reading of Jameson in Modernism and the Culture of Celebrity (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) 20. Jaffe’s insight that mass culture imprints itself upon the modernist text is particularly crucial to my readings of Millay’s poetry in Chapter 3. This is a key
reformulation of traditional modernist aesthetics, which tends to dematerialize mass culture, rather than to foreground its material presence within the work of art.

5 According to I.A. Richards, “The theory of badness in poetry has never received the study which it deserves, partly on account of its difficulty,” a statement with which I strongly agree. His analysis raises the question of whether or not “bad poetry”—like, for instance, the light verse found in The Golden Treasury—is a category unto itself, with its own distinct methods and forms, or whether it is simply good poetry gone wrong. If it is nothing more than a failed poetry, then “bad poetry” ceases to be poetry at all, and is not worth much contemplation; if, however, it is its own substance, one which calls upon a unique set of poetic values, and makes distinct demands upon its readers, then one must attempt to find a way to understand its effects. For Richards’ brief notes toward a theory, see “Badness in Poetry,” Principles of Literary Criticism (1924; London: Routledge, 2001) 185. More recently, the volume, Bad Modernisms, eds. Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz (Durham: Duke UP, 2006), has explored the myriad forms of “badness” that inhere within our changing critical conceptions of “modernism.” Bad Modernisms tends to define “badness” somewhat differently from Richards, however. The volume is primarily concerned with the types of negativity or oppositionality, which lie at the heart of modernism’s revolutionary ambitions.

6 Gregory and Zaturenska’s foundational study of modernist poetry is noteworthy for the amount of attention it devotes to popular, “sentimental” poets. Indeed, its insistence on the historical importance of women’s lyric poetry would not be matched until the feminist recoveries of the 1980s and 90s. Nelson’s Repression and Recovery, for instance, hails Gregory and Zaturenska for their capacious vision of modernism, rare for their time, and valuable still to contemporary critics (16-19). It is worth noting, however, that, according to her biographer Elizabeth Frank, Louise Bogan detested Gregory and Zaturenska’s study. She complained that it was filled with “paranoid hatred, fears, malice, misinformation, fake erudition, quotations from Sam Johnson, etc., etc.” See Elizabeth Frank, Louise Bogan: A Portrait (New York: Columbia UP, 1985) 343. Bogan’s distaste was undoubtedly due to Gregory and Zaturenska’s installation of Millay at the head of the field of modernist women’s poetry, and, moreover, their harsh evaluation of her own poetry. Bogan had never gotten along with Gregory and Zaturenska, and these personal animosities seem to have clouded their judgment. Gregory and Zaturenska reduce Bogan to a mere caricature of herself, and dismiss her work as largely derivative of Genevieve Taggard’s and Millay’s (277-281). This could not be further from the truth. Chapter 2 of this dissertation explores the complex relationship between Millay and Bogan in greater detail.

7 For background on these debates concerning poetry and critical methodology within the current field of poetry studies, see American Literary History 15.1 (Spring 2003), which includes a special forum on The Cambridge History of American Literature, and brings together essays by Sacvan Bercovitch, Barbara Packer, Robert Von Hallberg, Shira Wolosky, Andrew Dubois, and Alan Filreis. They debate, in particular,
the uneasy relationship between contextual, historicist scholarship and the formalism still prominent among many of poetry’s staunchest advocates, like, for instance, Von Hallberg. See also Bruce R. Smith, “Some Presuppositions,” *PMLA* 120.1 (January 2005) 9-15, part of a special issue “On Poetry.” Smith’s introduction, in particular, underscores the reluctance of many poetry scholars to embrace the field’s changing cultural and theoretical methodologies. Finally, see *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies* 8-9 (Spring and Fall 2006), the “Poetries” issue, which features many examples of cultural studies inflected projects, all of which press the traditional boundaries of “poetry.” Despite this forward-thinking focus, however, the “Poetries” issue does not contain an explicit discussion of method or methodology within the contemporary field, along the lines of *ALH* or *PMLA*. Such reflections are implicitly present, though, in essays by Daniel Tiffany, Cary Nelson, Maria Damon, Edward Brunner, Alan Ramón Clinton, and Susan B.A. Somers-Willett.


Articulation has also been taken up influentially by Richard Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Routledge, 1979); and Lawrence Grossberg, *We Gotta Get Out of This Place: Popular Conservatism and Postmodern Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992). Chapter 2 of Grossberg’s text, “Mapping Popular Culture,” has been particularly important to my work. In this chapter, he brings a concept of articulation to bear on the predominantly affective formations forged by popular culture. These affective linkages provide a useful framework for analyzing the cultural work of modernist sentimental poetry, as will become clear in later chapters of my dissertation. However, on the topic of poetry and its relation to the concept of articulation, Cary Nelson’s *Repression and Recovery: Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Memory*, 1910-1945 remains the most significant study. Nelson elaborates the centrality of articulation and rearticulation to his work in an extended footnote, where he observes, “When a discursive formation begins to lose its hold on a particular population or subculture, the individual verbal components it had managed to hold together may become recognizable again. These discursive elements then potentially become available for rearticulation to other discursive formations…In the period this book covers, “poetry” was such a contested concept” (251, n.2).

9 This was one of Hall’s early warnings concerning the concept of articulation. “Articulation,” he observes, “contains the danger of high formalism.” See “Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms,” *Media, Culture, Society* 2.1 (1980): 69. For an insightful overview of Hall’s concept of articulation, including a substantive analysis of its distinction from traditional modes of formalism, see Jennifer Daryl Slack, “The Theory and Method


11 The psycho-sexual dimensions of Brooks’ critique form the basis of Suzanne Clark’s re-reading of Millay in Chapter 3 of *Sentimental Modernism*. Via the feminist psychoanalysis of Teresa de Lauretis, Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous, and Luce Irigaray, Clark restores to Millay’s texts a play of desire and *jouissance*—a distinctly “grown-up” form of pleasure, grounded in a “mature” female subjectivity.

12 The distinction between “performative” and “constative” utterances comes, of course, from J.L. Austin. See *How to Do Things With Words*, Ed. J.O. Urmson (New York: Oxford UP, 1970). However, my understanding of literature’s performative potential is indebted more directly to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s elaboration of Austin’s foundational work in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke UP, 2003), especially pages 67-91, where she theorizes the concept of “periperformativity.” A version of this work first appeared in *Performativity and Performance*, eds. Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (New York: Routledge, 1995). Following Sedgwick, we can begin to identify a more expansive and diverse field of performative textualities. Periperformatives “cluster around performatives,” Sedgwick says (68). She is particularly attentive to the sophisticated ways that texts deploy an “affective force” in order to bring political communities into being (90). I will argue that Millay’s texts operate in a similar manner. While Sedgwick’s focus on literature’s adhesive facilities is somewhat similar to the sentimental espoused by Jane Tompkins and Suzanne Clark, among others, her methodology distinguishes her work significantly. Sedgwick documents a field of innovative affective structures, which function in myriad complex ways, unlike our current “conventional” conception of the form of modernist sentimentality. Sedgwick’s attention to innovative structures of affect and affective forms has been, therefore, an important influence on my thinking regarding modernist sentimental poetry.

13 See, for instance, David Minter’s analysis of the Sacco-Vanzetti case in *The Cambridge History of American Literature*, Vol. 6, Ed. Sacvan Bercovitch (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002): 125-128. Minter observes that the Sacco-Vanzetti case “almost pulled reformers, writers, artists, and prewar suffragists into a concerted political force” (127, emphasis added). At the height of Sacco and Vanzetti activism, this new American coalition was joined by sympathetic workers abroad, who were also protesting, and, in some cases, even rioting, on behalf of these working-class immigrants. However, as Minter emphasizes, the failure of this broad-based activism to save Sacco and Vanzetti, or to enact judicial reform of any kind, ultimately had the opposite effect: a strong sense of collective disillusionment resulted in “the splintering of reformers into small, ineffective groups” (127).
On “political depression,” see Ann Cvetkovich, “Public Feelings,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 106.3 (Summer 2007): 459-468. The concept, as she explains, comes from Feel Tank Chicago (<http://www.feeltankchicago.net>), a collective dedicated to understanding the role that affect plays in contemporary political life. They define political depression, according Cvetkovich, as “the sense that customary forms of political response, including direct action and critical analysis, are no longer working either to change the world or to make us feel better” (460). Feel Tank’s point, however, is not to wallow in these negative feelings. They believe that negative affects, including apathy, indifference, and despair, can provide a new foundation for community formation and a basis for collective action. There are myriad parallels between the disillusionment Millay and her contemporaries experienced in the late 1920s and the “political depression” affecting many on the Left in post-9/11, George W. Bush-era America. “Justice Denied in Massachusetts,” I will suggest, can help us to understand these powerful political and affective connections.

Nelson likewise attributes this radical potential to “minor” literatures (39-40). He argues that rereading dominant literatures through the values and forms populating the margins can productively unsettle our perceived knowledge of the field and our habitual ways of knowing it. This is why Nelson claims “we should always read what people assure us is no good” (51). Recently, Grant Farred has taken up this and other methodological challenges contained within *Repression and Recovery*, arguing that its lessons remain vital to the contemporary field. See Farred, “‘We Should Always Read What Other People Assure Us Is No Good’: The Good of the No Good,” *Cary Nelson and the Struggle for the University: Poetry, Politics, and the Profession*, eds. Michael Rothberg and Peter K. Garrett (Albany: SUNY P, 2009): 45-58.

On America’s rising conservatism in the wake of WWI, and the consequent appeal of Warren G. Harding’s reactionary a-politicality, see Frederick Lewis Allen’s classic study, *Only Yesterday: An Informal History of the 1920s* (1931; New York: Harper and Row, 1964). Allen notes that in the early 1920s there was a “growing apathy of millions of Americans toward anything which reminded them of the war. They were fast becoming sick and tired of the whole European mess. They wanted to be done with it. They didn’t want to be told of new sacrifices to be made—they had made plenty” (27). Allen also astutely observes that the growth of mass culture, particularly the popularization of radio as a new form of home entertainment, may have contributed to this overwhelming de-politicization and privatization of American public life. He writes, “In the *Reader’s Guide to Periodical Literature* for the years 1919-1921, in which were listed all the magazine articles appearing during those years, there were two columns of references to articles on Radicals and Radicalism and less than a quarter of a column of references to articles on radio. In the *Readers’ Guide* for 1922-24, by contrast, the section on Radicals and Radicalism shrunk to half a column and the section on Radio swelled to nineteen columns. In that change there is an index to something more than periodical literature” (69). For a contemporary theoretical reflection on the inherent dangers of

17 As Nelson notes in *Repression and Recovery*, Rella, who died in 1988 at the age of 81, was both a playwright and a poet. His verse drama *Please Communicate* was produced by the San Francisco Theater Union in 1939, and *Sign of Winter* and *The Place Where We Were Born* were both produced off-Broadway in New York (300, n. 184). The significance of the dramatic to Rella’s poetry can be seen in his collection *The Scenery for a Play and Other Poems* (New York: George Braziller, 1988). As a poet, Rella belongs to an American tradition of proletarian poetry, alongside such figures as Edwin Rolfe, Joseph Kalar, Sol Funaroff, Genevieve Taggard, and Richard Wright. See *Repression and Recovery* (150-154) for a reading of the anthology *We Gather Strength* (New York: Liberal Press, 1933), to which Rella contributed, and where some of his connections to these figures manifest.


20 This accusation that “Justice Denied In Massachusetts” is a “forlorn” poem has been lodged from the Left as well as the Right. Unlike Allen Tate, James Gray, for instance, attacks the poem for not being political enough. He argues that Millay’s “abject despair” gets in the way of real political protest: “a just and honest sentiment is overdramatized” (39). For this interesting condemnation of Millay by an ostensible political ally, see Gray, *Edna St. Vincent Millay, University of Minnesota Pamphlets on American Writers* (1967; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Archive Editions, 2009).
The “field” is also Charles Olson’s preferred metaphor for an organic poetry in “Projective Verse.” I am absolutely suggesting here that Millay’s concern for immigration, and her attention to the nature of affect, pushed her poetry toward Black Mountain poets like Olson, Robert Creeley, and Denise Levertov. These connections, of course, demand further investigation. In Chapter 2, I turn to the “new formalisms” of mid-century America, through the poetry and prose of Louise Bogan.

Frost’s political life, we now know, was certainly not blameless. In his recent biography Robert Frost: A Life (New York: Henry Holt, 1999), Jay Parini notes, “Frost was not, like T.S. Eliot or Ezra Pound, a genuine anti-Semite, but he shared the attitudes of his generation of Yankee populists toward both Jews and blacks. He was also suspicious of nearly all foreigners” (264). These conservative racial and ethnic politics place Frost radically at odds with Millay. Moreover, as Parini explains, Frost “worried that his conservative political ideas would damage his reception as a poet” (263). Thanks in large part to the New Criticism, the precise opposite came to pass. It was progressive activists, like Millay, who suffered critically and institutionally for their political beliefs.


Well before Robert Scholes, Kenneth Burke also challenged the New Critics’ false dichotomy between poetry and rhetoric. See Melissa Girard, “Kenneth Burke and the Claims of a Rhetorical Poetry,” Kenneth Burke and His Circles, eds. Jack Selzer and Robert Wess (West Lafayette, IN: Parlor Press, 2008): 129-148. In this essay, I argue that Burke’s innovative conception of a “rhetorical poetics” offers a provocative rejoinder to Tate, as well as Theodor Adorno, and that it has the potential to trouble our dominant poetic methodologies even today.

This prose epigram, dated 1961, appears in Bogan’s journals, which are excerpted in A Poet’s Prose: Selected Writings of Louise Bogan (2005). This is the most recent edition of Bogan’s short fiction, journals, letters, and criticism. It is preceded by Selected Criticism: Poetry and Prose (1955), A Poet’s Alphabet: Reflections on the Literary Art and Vocation (1970), What the Woman Lived: Selected Letters of Louise Bogan, 1920-1970 (1973), and Journey Around My Room: The Autobiography of Louise Bogan (1980), a “mosaic” text assembled by Bogan’s literary executor and close friend, Ruth Limmer, which includes a rich assortment of prose documents. Each of these volumes contains a distinct selection of—and editorial perspective on—Bogan’s prose. I have therefore drawn upon each of them throughout my research. Whenever possible, however, I have chosen to cite selections within A Poet’s Prose, as this is the only volume of Bogan’s prose which remains in print. A Poet’s Prose is hereafter abbreviated PP; and What the Woman Lived as WTWL.
This and subsequent reviews of the New Critics have not been collected. A Poet’s Alphabet does contain another of Bogan’s reviews of Tate, in which she similarly criticizes his “bitterness” (386). In the Works Cited, I have provided the original publication information for any of Bogan’s reviews that remain uncollected. At this point in my research, I would hesitate to make a claim as to why these particular essays have not been reprinted in any of Bogan’s volumes of collected prose. Bogan produced such a large amount of criticism, that they might simply have been overlooked, in favor of reviews dedicated to major authors, like William Butler Yeats, James Joyce, and Henry James, about whom she wrote frequently. It does seem significant, however, that Bogan’s critiques of Tate and the New Critics, which I will be documenting in detail, have remained largely unavailable to scholars for so long.

Cullen’s connections to the lyrical, “sentimental” poets who epitomized Measure is worth exploring at more length. Measure’s favorite poet, for instance, is Millay. Cullen wrote his undergraduate thesis on Millay’s poetry, as Gerald Early notes in the, “Introduction” to My Soul’s High Song: The Collected Writings of Countee Cullen, 1903-1946 (New York: Doubleday, 1991) 20. Moreover, Alan Schucard claims that Cullen suffered for this appropriation of and connection to sentimental poetry (see Countee Cullen (Boston: Twayne, 1984) 89.

Astradur Eysteinsson provides an excellent overview of the intimate interrelation between the two terms “modernism” and “avant-garde,” as well as their important conceptual and historical distinctions. As he notes, the term avant-garde typically demarcates a sub-genre or formal mode within the wider field of modernism. However, “avant-garde” is simultaneously a broader term since it is not limited to the historical field of modernism. While few critics would fully equate the two terms, they are particularly bound in the modernist era. Eysteinsson writes, “Nothing that is modernist can escape the touch of the avant-garde” (177). It is this easily and widely presumed correlation that I believe Bogan calls into question.

Rita Felski asks, for instance, why women’s nostalgic longings for the past are typically viewed as “a regrettable political weakness,” whereas the avant-garde’s similar idealizations of the present and future are hailed as intellectually and artistically innovative (58). The fundamental gendering of both the sentimental and the avant-garde continues to infect our analysis and concomitant valuation of these modernist works to a substantial degree.

For an alternative reading of Irigaray, which highlights the body’s potential to disrupt its own commodification, see Elizabeth Grosz, Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1989). Grosz explores, in particular, Irigaray’s indebtedness to Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and his concept of “lived experience.” This phenomenology sees the subject as reducible neither to mind nor body, but as having a simultaneously conceptual and corporeal existence (8). According to Grosz, Irigaray’s theorizations of the “flesh,” derived, in large part from Merleau-Ponty, harbor a similar potential to
destabilize subject and object dichotomies and, hence, to subvert women’s objectification “on the market” (103-111). These earlier insights formed the philosophical foundation for Grosz’s paradigmatic work in *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1994). In this later text, Grosz lodges a powerful critique of feminists’ ongoing disinterest in and devaluation of the body. Often aligned with a psychoanalytic method, mainstream feminism, Grosz claims, tends to rely on theories of subjectivity that exclude or diminish the body’s material power. Grosz’ focus on the body as the basis of a de-subjectivized or corporealized agency, fundamentally alters feminist theory—a radical move which helped to inaugurate the field of “Body Studies.” This phenomenology has also played a crucial role in Sara Ahmed’s work, which I discussed in Chapter 1.

31 As Furr explains, there are two existing recordings of Millay’s poetry readings. The first, which was made on January 8, 1933 by Brander Matthews at Columbia University, is a recording of Millay’s radio broadcast from that evening. The second is a studio recording produced for RCA in 1941. This is the only studio recording of Millay reading her own work. The radio broadcast is archived at the Library of Congress in the Brander Matthews Dramatic Museum Collection; and some of the poems from her studio session are readily available in the series *Voices of the Poets* (Random House 2001). The RCA recordings were also re-issued on Caedmon (TC-1123) and can be obtained through a number of libraries (Furr 108, n. 8). For additional background on Millay’s radio broadcasts, as well as the centrality of the medium of radio to modernism more broadly, see *Broadcasting Modernism*, eds. Debra Rae Cohen, Michael Coyle, and Jane Lewty (Gainesville: UP of Florida, 2009).

32 *Equal Rights* was published by the National Woman’s Party (NWP), of which Millay was a member. See J. Stanley Lemons, *The Woman Citizen: Social Feminism in the 1920s* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1973) 183. As Lemons explains, the NWP was among the era’s most radical feminist organizations: “From its inception, the National Woman’s Party attracted women who were impatient with piecemeal, compromise approaches” (183). Founded by Alice Paul, the NWP focused exclusively on suffrage campaigns in its early years. After achieving suffrage, they applied “the same intense energy” to the pursuit of an equal rights amendment (183). Nothing short of complete, constitutionally-sanctioned equality would satisfy the NWP, and, as Lemons documents, this position alienated them significantly from other feminists throughout the 1920s (183-204).

33 Despite the mocking tone, Taggard did take Dickinson’s work very seriously. She continues, “I turn directly to Edna Millay to avoid, perhaps, all the temptation to contrast her with Emily Dickinson—a task so subtle and at the same time so full of pure generic extremes that nothing short of a long essay would suffice” (137). In fact, that “long essay” on Dickinson would appear shortly, in the form of Taggard’s biography *The Life and Mind of Emily Dickinson* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1930).
For extended treatments of Taggard’s complex feminism, see Nina Miller, *Making Love Modern*, which devotes two chapters to Taggard; and Nancy Berke, *Women Poets on the Left: Lola Ridge, Genevieve Taggard, Margaret Walker* (Gainesville: UP of Florida, 2001). Berke, it is worth noting, frequently highlights Taggard’s radical politics as a means of distancing her from “sentimental” poets such as Millay and Teasdale. While it is true that Taggard’s poetry became increasingly political in the 1930s, eliding her connections to the popular female love poets of the early 1920s diminishes the complexity of her (and their) poetics. As my comparatively brief reading here suggests, there are important aesthetic and political connections between Taggard and Millay, in particular.

Precisely dating *A Few Figs from Thistles* is difficult, in part, because of its earlier book edition, issued by Frank Shay, but also due to the wide circulation of Millay’s poetry in periodicals throughout the late teens and early twenties. “First Fig” and “Second Fig,” “Singing-Woman from the Wood’s Edge,” and “Recuerdo,” appeared repeatedly across multiple journals. The first publication of “First Fig,” for instance, is *Poetry* 12.3 (June 1918): 130. These shifting contexts for publication represent a part of my reinterpretation of *A Few Figs*.

My sense of the importance of this shift is indebted to Pierre Bourdieu, especially “The Field of Cultural Production,” *The Field of Cultural Production*, ed. Randal Johnson (New York: Columbia U P, 1993) 29-73. Following Bourdieu, the shift that I am highlighting might be referred to as “position-taking.” In essence, this concept enables me to correlate a change in Millay’s audience (the space of consumption) to her own changing definitions of poetry and the role of the poet (the space of production). As a result, Millay’s production—not just her poetry, but, more importantly, her poetics or poetic method—can be understood in relation to its effects on her audience (and vice versa). Bourdieu’s concept of “position-taking” emphasizes the homology between these seemingly discrete encounters within the literary field, and argues for their simultaneous significance in analyzing the work of art. This foundational insight—and its imperative to think through poetic form as a relation with the audience—will impact my study of Millay significantly.

Cowley outlines eight principles that comprised bohemian doctrine circa 1920 (60-61). They include “salvation by the child,” “self-expression,” “paganism,” “liberty,” “female equality,” “psychological adjustment,” “changing place,” and “living in the moment.” Each of these principles finds ample confirmation in the pages of *A Few Figs From Thistles*, a work which has been widely received as the quintessential poetic product of modernist bohemia.

This climate of political repression in the U.S. between 1917 and 1919 will provide the historical context for my reading of Teasdale’s anti-war poetry in Chapter 4.
Quoted in Milford, 166. The quotation is taken from Dell’s unpublished manuscript, “Not Roses, Roses All the Way: Recollections of Edna St. Vincent Millay.”

For an insightful study of these complex transformations in bohemia, which has influenced my own, see Michael Murphy, “‘One Hundred Per Cent Bohemia’: Pop Decadence and the Aestheticization of Commodity in the Rise of the Slicks,” Marketing Modernisms: Self-Promotion, Canonization, and Re-Reading, ed. Kevin J.H. Dettmar and Stephen Watt (Ann Arbor, MI: The U of Michigan P, 1996) 61-89. Murphy’s title is taken from Ford’s Vanity Fair article, which he also analyzes.

In this sense, “Daphne” provides a provocative rejoinder to Ezra Pound’s poems “The Tree” and “A Girl,” both of which depict scenes that trope the classic myth of Daphne and Apollo. Pound is also, like Millay, explicitly preoccupied with his reader throughout much of his poetry, his early poetry in particular. These formal similarities, and ideological differences, deserve further exploration.

There has been very little critical work on “The Singing-Woman from the Wood’s Edge.” One noteworthy exception is Elizabeth Perlmutter Frank’s, “A Doll’s Heart: The Girl in the Poetry of Edna St. Vincent Millay and Louise Bogan,” Critical Essays on Edna St. Vincent Millay, ed. William B. Theising (New York: G.K. Hall & Co., 1993) 179-199. Frank analyzes the little-girl posturings found throughout Millay’s poetry—seemingly “childish” tropes like frogs and leprechauns, for instance. In Frank’s reading, the “girl” and her trappings are transformed into a critical, gendered persona, rather than an intellectual weakness or sign of “immaturity,” as the New Critics presumed.

Millay appeared frequently throughout Vanity Fair’s pages not only as a poet, but also as a fiction writer, under the nom de plume, Nancy Boyd. For an overview of Millay’s frequent appearances in the pages of Vanity Fair, see Catherine Keyser, “Edna St. Vincent Millay and the Very Clever Woman in Vanity Fair,” American Periodicals 17.1 (2007): 66-96.

For a provocative defense of “naïve” strategies of reading, although in a radically different context, see Jane Bennett, “The Force of Things: Steps Toward an Ecology of Matter,” Political Theory 32.3 (June 2004): 347-372. Bennett advocates a form of “naïve realism” as a corrective to the philosophical negativity of Marxist critical theory. This “naïve” method enables Bennett to value material objects (in this case, a nonhuman ecology of matter) as discrete substances, rather than a pure extension of human subjectivity. Marx and Adorno, Bennett argues, posit that all materiality emanates from humanity. Bennett claims instead that “an element of chanciness resides in the nature of things,” and that “inanimate objects have a life of their own,” independent of humans powers to perceive them (358). She terms this form of objective resistance, “thing-power,” and it is central to her “new materialist” analysis.
For a challenge similar to Foster’s, but specific to the field of twentieth-century poetry, see Claire Wills, “Contemporary Women’s Poetry: Experimentalism and the Expressive Voice,” *Critical Quarterly* 36.3. 34-52. Wills argues, as I am, that a structural denigration of expressive forms has excluded a vast majority of women’s poétiques from being categorized as “experimental.” Wills, however, is advocating on behalf of poets such as Susan Howe and Lyn Hejinian, whose experiments with the self and autobiography, are far more recognizable in their linguistic manipulations. Nonetheless, her insights into the gendered nature of the seemingly neutral category of “experimentation” prove extremely relevant to my discussion here and throughout this dissertation.

This distinction is drawn even more sharply, and problematically, in “Macdougal Street,” where Millay’s bohemian speaker walks through an immigrant neighborhood, and realizes that she does not belong among them: “The women squatting on the stoops were slovenly and fat; / And everywhere I stepped their was a baby or a cat” (lines 5 and 7). She also sees a man lay his hand on a young child and say, “‘Little dirty Latin child, let the lady by!’” (line 4). This sense of alienation from New York’s immigrant communities stands in stark contrast to her activism on behalf of Sacco and Vanzetti later in the 1920s.

Benjamin’s theorization of the *flâneur* arises within his study of Charles Baudelaire. There is much more to be said on the relevance of Benjamin’s reading to Millay. Like Benjamin, Millay was an avid student of Baudelaire. In 1936, Millay she translated *Les Fleurs du Mal*, along with George Dillon (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1936).

A portion of this chapter appeared in *Journal of Modern Literature* 32.2 (Winter 2009): 41-64. It is reprinted with the permission of the copyright holder.

The phrase, “empire of agoraphobia,” is taken from the title of Chapter Six in Brown.

Cheryl Walker was the first to call attention to this critical problematic in *Masks Outrageous and Austere: Culture, Psyche, and Persona in Modern Women Poets* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1991). My work is indebted to Walker’s myriad insights regarding the sophistication of modernist “poetess” poetry. However, my reading departs significantly from Walker’s influential paradigm. Walker categorizes Teasdale as part of the “nightingale tradition”: a sentimental project that extends seamlessly from its roots in the nineteenth century. As my readings make clear, I believe that Teasdale’s poetry complicates and, at times, explicitly critiques many of the dominant aesthetic and political conventions of her nineteenth-century predecessors, particularly their predilection for domestic forms and politics.
Sara Teasdale, letter to Wanda and Irma Filsinger, 11 August 1918. All subsequent references to Teasdale-Filsinger correspondence will be cited as “Letters” and identified by the letter’s date. The Filsingers of St. Louis were the family of Teasdale’s husband, Ernst Filsinger. The letters addressed to Mr. and Mrs. Filsinger refer to Ernst’s parents, and Wanda and Irma Filsinger were his sisters.

Teasdale’s unpublished poetry notebooks include six leather-bound volumes, arranged chronologically, beginning April 1, 1911 through October 1, 1932.

For an in-depth discussion of the radical work of genteel poetry during the war, see Van Wienen, *Partisans and Poets*.

The poem first appeared in *The Nation* in September 1918. It was subsequently reprinted in Teasdale’s *Flame and Shadow*, as well as *The Collected Poems of Sara Teasdale* (New York: Macmillan, 1937). In its collected versions, the text remains the same, but the title is shortened to “Nahant.”


Paul Fussell, too, in his classic study of WWI literature, notes a similar danger inherent in the pastoral. He writes, “Any writer about the war who has recourse to Arcadian contrasts at all runs a terrible risk of fleeing into calendar-art sentiments” (*The Great War and Modern Memory* 235). These accusations of flight—a turn away from the social and political, into a romanticized past or a genteel solipsism—continue to plague the pastoral form.

I am using Williams against himself here. In his thinking about the pastoral, Williams reaches a limit: namely, he cannot find a means to value the affective, inconsistent, and historically imprecise grievances posed by the pastoral. They remain, for him, fundamentally immaterial, a kind of naïve circumlocution, which ultimately misses its political target. However, this is exactly the point he takes up again in his innovative conception of “structures of feeling.” This later thinking, I would argue, provides a provocative addendum to *The Country and the City*.

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The poet, Eunice Tietjens, one of Teasdale’s close friends, claims to have introduced Teasdale to the concept of evolution in 1913. See Tietjens’ *The World at My Shoulder* (New York: Macmillan, 1938). The two were reportedly out for a walk one day, with Darwin’s ideas still fresh in their minds, when they stumbled upon an old animal jawbone. Teasdale was excited by this discovery: “Squatting in the dirt in one of the lovely gray gowns she always wore…she began to speak of the blaze of hope for mankind that the concept of evolution gives when one first grasps it” (28). In fact, Teasdale wanted to take the jawbone home with them. Tietjens, however, thought this was taking things a bit too far: “The picture of the none-too-savory jawbone of a modern donkey in Sara’s dainty boudoir was too much for me” (28). Tietjens admits that she immediately regretted having chastened her friend’s enthusiasm. “The light went out of Sara’s face,” she says, “I never heard her speak of evolution again” (28-29). Though she may never have spoken to Tietjens of the topic, Teasdale was not thwarted so easily in her Darwinian investigations.

Harper’s Monthly Magazine, July 1918, 238. The poem was also subsequently re-printed in *Flame and Shadow* and *The Collected Poems of Sara Teasdale*.

A number of recent critics have taken up such stubbornly negative affects as productive political and aesthetic formations. See, especially, Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2005) and Lauren Berlant, “Cruel Optimism,” *differences* 17.3 (2006): 20-36. Both Ngai and Berlant are attentive to moments in which agency is thwarted or obstructed. Such moments of impasse, they both suggest, provide crucial insights into the process of cultural and psychic transition. As I suggested in my reading of *America Arraigned!* in Chapter 1, I believe that these recent theorizations of affect might help us to value anew the negative sentiments of modernist sentimental poetry.