Modern Women's Poetry 1910—1929

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Abstract

In tracing the publications and publishing initiatives of early twentieth-century women poets in Britain, this thesis reviews their work in the context of a male-dominated literary environment and the cultural shifts relating to the First World War, women’s suffrage and the growth of popular culture.

The first two chapters outline a climate of new rights and opportunities in which women became public poets for the first time. They ran printing presses and bookshops, edited magazines and wrote criticism. They aimed to align themselves with a male tradition which excluded them and insisted upon their difference. Defining themselves antithetically to the mythologised poetess of the nineteenth century and popular verse, they developed strategies for disguising their gender through indeterminate speakers, fictional dramatisations or anti-realist subversions.

Chapter Three explores the ways in which women’s poems of the First World War register the changing ideologies of gender and nationalism. Chapter Four identifies a ‘conservative modernity’ in women who avoided femininity, through universal speakers and the conventional forms of male-associated traditions, but there is also a covert woman’s agenda, particularly in the love lyrics of Vita Sackville-West.

The remaining chapters recognise women’s participation in modernist innovation through radical aesthetics or radical subject matter. In ‘The British Avant-Garde’, the most significant experimentalist is Edith Sitwell, but the less well-known work of Nancy Cunard, Iris Tree and Helen Rootham, is also considered. Chapter Six, ‘The Anglo-American Avant-Garde’, includes American women who lived in Britain or who were indirectly influential through the network of writers in London, Paris and New York: H.D., Amy Lowell, Gertrude Stein, Laura Riding, Marianne Moore and Mina Loy. The final group of ‘Female Modernists’, Charlotte Mew, May Sinclair, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Anna Wickham and Sylvia Townsend Warner, project a feminist consciousness in negotiation with poetic formalism. They indicate women’s progress towards a new self-asserting aesthetic.
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Chronology of Poetry Publications and Enterprises by Women

1910–1929

1910

1911
Anna Wickham (pseudonym 'John Oland'), *Songs*. London.

1912
Lady Margaret Sackville becomes the first President of the Poetry Society in London.

1913

1914
1915

1916

1917
Elizabeth Bridges (Daryush), *Verses*. Oxford.
1918


1919

*The Egoist* becomes Egoist Press. London.

1920

London.
*Time and Tide* started by Lady Margaret Rhondda. London. 1920–76.

1921

Elizabeth Bridges (Daryush) *Sonnets from Hafaz and Other Verses*. London.
1922

1923

1924

1925
Amy Lowell, *What’s O’Clock?* Boston.
Edna St Vincent Millay, *Renascence and other poems*. New York
1926


1927


1928

Laura (Riding) Jackson, *Contemporaries and Snobs*. Frome and London.

1929

1. Introduction

The challenge of mapping modern poetry by women is not in finding but in classifying it. Although most, but by no means all, has been recovered through reprinting, its status in British literary histories is uncertain. Late twentieth-century criticism has reassessed the so-called groups and movements of modern poetry in order to allow for a more inclusive representation of the cultural context at the beginning of the century, but the poetry of women has still not been properly placed. No women are featured in John Lucas' *Modern Poetry: Hardy to Hughes* (1986) or *Hardy to Larkin: seven English poets* by John Whitehead (1995). Modernist poetry especially is still classified as male in accordance with seminal works like Hugh Kenner's *The Pound Era* (1972). In 'Making the 1920s New', however, John Lucas calls for a version of the post-war years which contests the myths that all the best English poets before Auden were killed in action, leaving poetry to the foreigners, Yeats, Pound and Eliot: ‘English poetry in the 1920s was a great deal more various and more accomplished than is usually allowed.'

He discusses the diversity of Thomas Hardy, Robert Graves, Edmund Blunden, Ivor Gurney and Edgell Rickword and then turns to the women: 'If the 1920s sees the emergence of a new generation of women prose writers—Woolf, Rhys, Bowen, for example—it is also remarkable for the number of women poets who begin to publish.’ However, the poets named—Anna Wickham, Charlotte Mew, H.D., Sylvia Townsend Warner, Elizabeth Daryush—are ‘not worth making a fuss over’, except for Laura Riding: ‘a poet of real worth, though the nature of that worth is very difficult to pin down and deserves an essay in itself.’ The difficulty of ‘pinning down’ women’s poetry is one reason why it is dropped from literary records. This thesis, therefore, aims to specify the poets’ work, initially in the terms of orthodox literary histories to prove that there is no reason for women to have been excluded. At the same time, the poetry presses upon the boundaries of these received categories. Rigid frameworks, based on binary oppositions between conservative and progressive or between sentimental and experimental, are found inaccurate and inadequate. Additionally, it will be argued that classifying women’s poems requires a critical vocabulary which can respond to a specifically woman’s aesthetic; in the context of the modern period, it was formulated in reaction to the feminising of a generic ‘women’s poetry’.

The omission of women from histories of literary modernism is particularly invidious because of its elevated status and metonymical ‘intellectuality’. It was tempting,
therefore, to head the thesis with 'modernist' rather than 'modern' poetry in order to rescue women from modernism’s antithetical ground of the ‘popular’ or ‘sentimental’. Since, however, the dominance of high modernist principles partly accounts for the exclusion of much poetry from twentieth-century literary canons, there have to be reservations about endorsing the terms which have undermined women. Feminist histories have also colluded with the exclusivity of the so-called avant-garde and discounted non-experimentalists, partly because they seem old-fashioned and partly because they appear to support patriarchal structures by adopting verse forms associated with a male-dominated tradition. In privileging the formally adventurous, however, feminist critics have often missed women’s negotiations with literary conventions; they have not always recognised the cultural constraints which meant that many women in the early years of the century were writing as men in order to publish at all. Their textual practice was complicated by their uncomfortable relationship with their literary foremothers—the nineteenth century ‘poetesses’, caricatured as imitative and genteel personifications of sentimentality—particularly in this period when both the impersonal poetics of modernism and the emergent social realism of orthodox thirties poetry were exceptionally hostile to the sentimental. Consequently, they disguised their gender, often literally by using pseudonyms or initials or by male speakers and male-associated verse forms and metres. Some used anti-realist strategies to evade gender identification altogether. The ‘avant-garde’ poets, however, subverted the male-associated traditions through innovative syntax or by breaking conventional boundaries of genre. Others were formally cautious but occupied with sex and class politics. Common to all poets was a negotiation with stereotyped femininity, by denial, rejection, avoidance, parody or transgressive representations.

The thesis concentrates on the poetry scene in Britain and includes women’s involvement in the international network of writers which was significant to the production and promotion of modern poetry. Most of the feminist revisionary histories have come from the American academy and have tended to overlook British women and the contribution of American women to poetry in Britain. They have also tended towards prose. Shari Benstock’s *Women of the Left Bank, Paris 1910-1940* (1987) looks at the community of ex-pats such as Djuna Barnes, Gertrude Stein, Natalie Barney and Mina Loy; and these, plus H.D. and Amy Lowell feature in *Writing for their Lives: The Modernist Women 1910-1940* (Hanscombe and Smyers, 1987). Neither survey includes Anna Wickham or other British-born women, Nancy Cunard, Charlotte Mew, May Sinclair, Edith Sitwell or Sylvia Townsend Warner. Suzanne Clark’s *Sentimental Modernism* (1991) deals only with American poets. Bonnie Kime Scott’s anthology, *The Gender of Modernism* (1990), is the most inclusive. Although Amy Lowell, Marianne Moore, Gertrude Stein and H.D. are frequently canonised in the United States, they have yet to be integrated into British anthologies or academic syllabuses of women’s writing. Laura Riding, an American who
lived in Britain on and off during the 1920s, and Mina Loy, who was English but lived in the United States, have not been properly reassessed in relation to Anglo-American, modernist or women’s poetry.

Since, the idea of the ‘modern’ ‘remains one of the most potent in twentieth-century literature,’ it is important that it includes women. In preferring an historical, rather than stylistic, model of modern poetry, an indiscriminate and comprehensive chronology of publication is, however, impractical because women’s poetry was often given posthumous recognition and because the period’s framework is not fixed. Its inauguration is cited variously between 1890 and 1919. W. B. Yeats’ *Oxford Book of Modern Verse* (1936) represents poetry between 1892 and 1935, whereas Michael Roberts uses 1910, an ‘arbitrary date’, from which to chronicle modern poetry in *The Faber Book of Modern Verse* (1936). The year 1910 is, however, a suitable starting point, since the death of Edward VII and accession of George V were marked by the new ‘Georgian’ poetry and the Post-Impressionist exhibition stimulated interest in new modes of formalism in art and writing. For Virginia Woolf, ‘in or about 1910’ heralded the arrival of modernity when ‘human character changed’: ‘All Human relations have shifted—those between masters and servants, husbands and wives, parents and children, and when human relations change there is at the same time a change in religion, conduct, politics, and literature.’ Most of the work discussed here was written or published between 1910 and 1929 and therefore sits between the revisionary studies of women’s poetry of the nineteenth century, culminating in Angela Leighton’s *Victorian Women Poets*, and the work on women’s poetry in the nineteen thirties which has been dealt with elsewhere.

Since the primary aim of this thesis is to place women on the maps of modern poetry, the main topographic tools are those of the literary historian. My source materials were contemporaneous poetry and criticism. Consequently, pre-existing literary classifications were my initial reference points, but adding women’s writing unsettles the stability of these established groupings. Familiar signposts need repositioning or renaming to accommodate the diversity and specificity of women’s poems. As Margaret Dickie and Thomas Travisano observe in *Gendered Modernisms: American Women Poets and Their Readers* (1996), the process of remapping necessarily confronts the intersection of literary history, cultural context and contemporary theories:

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3 The Post-Impressionist exhibition in 1910, organised by Roger Fry, was seen by about twenty five thousand artists and writers. See Peter Stansky. *In or about December 1910: studies in cultural history* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press) 1996.
Placing these writers [Gertrude Stein, H.D. Marianne Moore, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Laura Riding, Muriel Rukeyser and Gwendolyn Brooks] more accurately in literary history is not an easy task. The essays here express something of the uneasiness the contributors have felt in trying to find a way to include everything that must be mentioned when women poets are included in literary history—new sensibilities, new definitions, new genres, new ways of reading. In part, this uneasiness is with literary history itself: in part, too, it stems from the need to break new ground in an already cultivated field.6

The following literary cartography revises received categories of poetic groups and movements and conjunctively addresses the processes of literary history; it interprets the poetry in its context where women, who were antagonistic to the tropes of femininity, were at odds with a male-dominated literary climate which emphasised gender differentiation.

The central revisionary strategy of the thesis is to extend the language-centred model of literary criticism to a more comprehensive cultural representation. David Perkins believes that 'by the 1970s, it seemed as if literary histories of the modern period had been written under the long hegemony of high modernist poetry and criticism'.7 As Alison Light observes of women's interwar fiction, 'we may blame the shadow cast on the period by the looming pressure of literary modernism for narrowing and obscuring our vision.'8 Modernism has not just made a blind spot in Britain; in discussing 'the collapse of poetic modernism as a coherent aesthetic' on recent American poetry, David Kellogg maintains, 'Only recently has the academy begun to rediscover the varieties of poetry produced in the early part of this century, a poetry previously stabilised, and then left for dead, under the normative sign of modernism.'9 Celeste Schenck argues for opening up modernism to 'anything written between 1910 and 1940', judging that the loss of 'a certain stylistic designation' is less than the gain of 'all other modernisms against which a single strain of white male, international modernism has achieved such relief'. Although not going as far as 'anything written', this version of the years 1910 to 1929, is committed to the 'dismantling of a monolithic modernism defined by its iconoclastic irreverence for convention and form'.10 To weaken its hegemony, criticism needs to open up modernism and the quantity

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and diversity of women’s poetry make it fruitless to approach the period with a binary model of ‘modernist or non-modernist art’. A binary model is also inappropriate since literary histories have exaggerated the schism between ‘tradition’ and experiment.

The cross-currents of literary practices which considered themselves ‘modern’ mean that there are no grounds for the exclusion of poetry which was not stylistically radical. For a start, the long shadow of W. B. Yeats casts doubt over any attempt to divide the ‘old’ from the ‘new’ in poets or poetry. T. S. Eliot reckoned that modern poetry was recognisable but unclassifiable: it was ‘perceived by the sensibility, but not defined in words’. The contemporary debate recognised that the sense of modern could not be divorced from a sense of tradition and wrestled with whether ‘modern’ meant a clean break from, a reaction to, or a continuation of the past. If form and metre are used as registers of the difference between the simultaneous tugs of the ‘old’ and ‘new’, most poets variously used the narrative poem or ballad of the English tradition, that is nineteenth-century romanticism, the ignominious vers libre and the short lyric which was both populist and a return to the seventeenth century. The revival of older forms, notably Elizabethan and classical, was an attempt to connect to a more distant past than the previous century. Formalist structure, by itself, therefore, does not signify the measure of modernity in a poem. It is more discernible in the collapse of formal rhetoric and preference for contemporary idioms. Modernity was most palpably registered in a change of subject matter, from the rural to the urban and from romance to desire. It was also registered in psychological alienation and its counterpoint condition of retreat, through myth, fantasy and dream.

In his influential anthology, The Faber Book of Modern Verse (1936), Michael Roberts cited Hart Crane’s dismissal of the myths of a radical modernity: ‘The deliberate program then, of a “break” with the past or tradition seems to me to be a sentimental fallacy.’ He recognised that literary classifications were misleading:

Whereas in the criticism of poetry, we are dealing with something as complex as personalities, any division must be arbitrary. An historical or categorical label never prescribe the ultimate achievements of the poet, it merely tell us where to look for them; and from time to time, if we are to recognise the poets as a mobile force, new categories are needed.

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14 Roberts 33.
Michael Roberts discussed women such as Edith Sitwell, H.D., Marianne Moore and Laura Riding on equal terms with men and did not call them poetesses. In ‘This Modern Poetry’ (1936), Babette Deutsch also concluded that ‘satisfying grouping is difficult’; furthermore, ‘so many of the significant poets writing in English are Americans’.\textsuperscript{15} He paid attention to individual poets including women. Nevertheless, subsequent and continuing debates about the developments in modern poetry tend to centre on the relative importance of the perceived movements—First World War poets, Georgians, Imagists—and on the dominant modernists, T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. The inevitable reductions of literary histories have, however, belied the limitations and shifting demarcations of these delineations.

Positioning women within these categories unsettles the unconscious and misleading rigidities which have hindered the acceptance of women into their histories. At the same time, as Michael Roberts recognised, ‘new categories are needed’. My chapter titles ‘Between Georgian and Bloomsbury’, ‘The Anglo-American Avant-garde’ and ‘Female Modernists’ emerged from the need for cross-classification and new groupings. It is, however, appropriate to recognise male-associated movements as the starting points, because, as Suzanne Juhasz observed, ‘During the first half of the twentieth century, women poets were trying to get into the tradition, not to start their own.’\textsuperscript{16} The frequency of their allusions to Sappho, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Christina Rossetti indicate that they had a concept of a woman’s tradition, but related to it ‘as much by denial as by affirmation, by defence more often than attack.’\textsuperscript{17}

Women poets lived and wrote in opposition to iconographies of the poetess, whose validity critics reinforced by reviewing women together and by attributing feminine features to their work. In 1848, Frederic Rowton, in his forward-looking anthology of women’s poetry, concluded that ‘such a word as “poetess” should be struck from the vocabulary’ because it was responsible for the occlusion of woman’s intellect in poetry.\textsuperscript{18} However, the epithet ‘poetess’, was a continuum in the language of twentieth-century criticism. In 1921, when modernist experimentation was at its most acclaimed,\textsuperscript{19} the publication of An Anthology of Women’s Verse, edited by J. C. Squire, revived the ‘old controversy . . . Has Woman any really poetic talent?’\textsuperscript{20} The response to the anthology embodies the way in which the weakest women’s poems were publicised and universalised as the generic ‘Women’s Poetry’ from which literary women dissociated themselves. Rebecca West in

\textsuperscript{15} Babette Deutsch, \textit{This Modern Poetry} (London: Faber, 1936) 10.
\textsuperscript{17} Juhasz 37.
\textsuperscript{19} 1922 is considered the \textit{annus mirabilis} of modernism, with the publication of T. S. Eliot’s \textit{The Waste Land}, James Joyce’s \textit{Ulysses} and Virginia Woolf’s \textit{Jacob’s Room}. 

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The Bookman observed that it was ‘a remarkably thin volume and a remarkably poor one’, and advised that ‘feminist societies should buy up all copies of this book and suppress them’.21 It provoked a long article in the Times Literary Supplement, headed ‘Poetesses’. The reviewer admitted that civilisation is only ‘partial, one-sided, while the expression of its meaning and purpose is in the hands of one sex’, but embellished the mythologies of the ‘eternal feminine’: ‘sincere women’s poetry will have the warmth, the wholeness, the grace, the allurement, the tenderness, or the mockery of the feminine mind.’22 He further idealised the female muse: ‘The root of the impulse of poetry is love and woman is the object of man’s love.’ Since woman’s proper place was to inspire not write poetry, the reviewer took issue with Squire’s proposal that ‘“Even though we may not expect it, we should be only mildly surprised if a female Plato or Shakespeare were to appear, and a second of the sort would cause no surprise at all”’ to assert that, ‘our surprise would be immense’, because,

We know that the difficulties of artistic creation for women are far greater than for men, that their temperament is reflective rather than imaginative, and that the chance of any work of the widest scope being given to the world by a woman is remote, since Nature has irretrievably weighted the scale against them.

The final excoriation was the personal/public opposition:

Does not the poetry of women tend to be about themselves? Man, it would appear, in the intellectual as in the practical sphere, excels in the power to go forth and enlarge his life by what he finds and makes; woman excels in her power of attachment and assimilation, so that that alone is real to her which she includes, which she has brought home.

Literary women had to resist the relentless mythologies of femininity in constructing themselves as credible poets. In ‘The Sisters’, Amy Lowell imagines meeting Sappho, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Emily Dickinson, representatives of a woman’s tradition with which she could not identify:

Taking us by and large, we’re a queer lot
We women who write poetry. And when you think
How few of us there’ve been it’s queerer still.

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I wonder what it is that makes us do it,
Singles us out to scribble down, man-wise,
The fragments of ourselves.

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Strange trio of my sisters, most diverse,
And how extraordinarily unlike
Each is to me, and which way shall I go?

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I cannot write like you, I cannot think
In terms of Pagan or of Christian now.
I only hope that possibly some day
Some other woman with an itch for writing
May turn to me as I have turned to you
And chat with me a brief few minutes.

.

Although you leave me sad and self-distrustful,
For older sisters are very sobering things.
Put on your cloaks, my dears, the motor's waiting.
No, you have not seemed strange to me, but near,
Frightfully near and rather terrifying.23

The sense that the poetess was 'frightfully near and rather terrifying', impelled women to define themselves antithetically to the feminine.

In distancing themselves from 'women's poetry', women sought to be on equal terms with their male colleagues who accentuated gender difference. In 'The Poet as Woman', John Crowe Ransom confessed his difficulty in evaluating Edna St. Vincent Millay, a poet who 'is also a woman':

No poet ever registered herself more deliberately in that light. She therefore fascinates the male reviewer but at the same time horrifies him a little too. He will probably swing between attachment and antipathy, which may be the very attitudes provoked in him by generic woman in the flesh, as well as by the literary remains of Emily Dickinson, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Christina Rossetti, and doubtless, if we only had enough of her, Sappho herself.24
Amy Lowell's narrative poem, 'A Critical Fable', articulates women's troublesome relations with one another which were aggravated by the scepticism of their male contemporaries. It takes the form of a dialogue about changing fashions in poetry between the poet and a male critic who expresses his doubts about women's talent:

Then seeing me shrug, he observed, "I am human,
And hardly can bear to allow that a woman
Is ever quite equal to man in the arts;
The two sexes cannot be ranked counterparts.

... But have you no women whom you must hate too?
I shall think all the better of you if you do,
And of them, I may add." I assured him, "A few.
But I scarcely think man feels the same contradictory
Desire to love them and shear them of victory?"
"You think wrong, my young friend," he declared with a frown,
Man will always love woman and always pull down
What she does."25

The dialogue dramatises what Gilbert and Gubar describe as the anxious male reaction to women's progress which provokes the 'female affiliation complex' in women. They account for women's competing desires to both identify with and be separate from a segregated female tradition in Freudian terms of the pre-Oedipal mother-daughter relationship and the castration complex.26 Freud describes three lines of psycho-sexual development for a girl: renunciation of sexuality altogether, a 'masculinity complex', or normal femininity where she takes her father as the love object. Translated into literary development, these alternatives are: aesthetic frigidity, assuming a masculine identity, or identifying herself as feminine. The last way involves post-Oedipal envy for the male pen, the symbol of woman's missing phallus, and the attendant repression of her pre-Oedipal attachment to her mother; consequently, 'women writers oscillat[e] between their matrilineage and their patrilineage in an arduous process of self-definition.'27 This oscillation is indicated in Amy Lowell's imaginatively represented love/hate relationship with other women in 'The Sisters' and 'A Critical Fable'. However, Freud's diagnosis commits women to an inevitably negative access to the symbolic order of social and public discourse and prescribes an essential hostility towards their literary foremothers. In

27 Gilbert and Gubar, The War Of The Words 169.
addressing the problem of women's entry into male literary traditions, Cora Kaplan stresses the social construction of women's alienation and she recommends that women identify their entry into language as different rather than negative.\textsuperscript{28}

In evidence that they were up against cultural, rather than essentialised, prohibitions on their creativity, most women recorded that writing poetry was a process of liberation: it was the absence of a proper critical reception which damaged them. In replacing the negative mythologies of women's poetry with positive role models, emphasis will be given to the poets' negotiations with the cultural injunctions of gender so that Freud's Oedipal stage will be understood as a means of rationalising the social oppression of women writers. Marianne Moore defied all gender imperatives through her male and animal impersonations; the dramatisations or \textit{logopoeia} of H.D., Edith Sitwell, Gertrude Stein or Mina Loy were controlled subversions of 'masculine' language. The depictions of female autonomy and sexual desire by the 'Female Modernists', such as Edna St. Vincent Millay and Anna Wickham, in the final chapter particularly indicate a new aesthetic freedom for women.

In the context of militant women's suffrage and an intense period of legislation concerning the rights of women, the feminisation of women's poetry can be seen as a symptom of male resistance to women's entry into the professions and public places. As Virginia Woolf observed, women had an unprecedented freedom to write and publish but the activities of the suffrage movement presented men with unprecedented challenges to their authority:

> And if it be true that it is one of the tokens of the fully developed mind that it does not think specially or separately of sex, how much harder it is to attain that condition now than ever before. Here I came to the books by living writers, and there paused and wondered if this fact were not at the root of something that had long puzzled me. No age can ever have been as stridently sex-conscious as our own; those innumerable books by men about women in the British Museum are a proof of it. The Suffragette campaign was no doubt to blame. It must have roused in men an extraordinary desire for self-assertion; it must have made them lay an emphasis upon their own sex and its characteristics which they would not have troubled to think about had they not been challenged. And when one is challenged, even by a few women in black bonnets, one retaliates, if one has never been challenged before, rather excessively.\textsuperscript{29}


\textsuperscript{29} Virginia Woolf, \textit{A Room of One's Own}. 1929 (London: Granada, 1977) 107.
Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* (1929), was a key text for women writers and reflected a climate where the heightened consciousness of sex differences was counter-productive to the career of the woman writer. Critics tended to retreat into an excessively male terminology in reaction to the increasing influence of women: ‘It is not only that they celebrate male virtues, enforce male values and describe the world of men; it is that the emotion with which these books are permeated is to a woman incomprehensible.’ At the same time, women’s dissociation from ‘women’s poetry’ was rooted in their need for approval by the male critical establishment and resulted in textual concealments of their gendered identity. Virginia Woolf’s ideal of the androgynous imagination, the ‘man-womanly’ and the ‘woman-manly’ mind, was influential on intellectual women, but rarely entertained by men. As has been seen, part of asserting male values, was to assert the womanliness of women’s poems. In a special edition of *Poetry Review* on ‘Women-Poets’, May 1912, the editor, probably Harold Monro, stated ‘the truism that the great poet is neither man nor woman, but partially each’. In the rhetoric of binary opposition, however, he observed that Woman had failed to represent herself in poetry ‘through the belief that, in order to do so, she must become as Man.’ He tellingly identified—and thus prescribed—a trend in the woman poet to develop her own kind of verse, following on from Rossetti: she must ‘reveal that she is Woman indeed. In the poetess, perhaps, chiefly, this revelation is becoming apparent.’

One of the difficulties in avoiding gendered associations was that traditional poetic form was identified with the best of male and the weakest of female writing. William Archer, apparently in praise of Alice Meynell, denounced women generically for failing with form:

> Few poetesses of the past have shown a very high developed faculty for strict poetical form. I am not sure that the works of any woman in any modern language are reckoned among the consummate models of metrical style . . . ladies as a rule seem to have aimed at a certain careless grace rather than a strenuous complexity or accuracy of metrical structure . . . Mrs Meynell is one of the rare exceptions to this rule. Within a carefully limited range, her form is unimpeachable.  

It is for her ‘unimpeachable’ form, however, that Alice Meynell is considered traditionalist by modernist and feminist critics. They have not recognised the pressure upon women to prove themselves as poets through adopting the metres of the English poetic tradition. For

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30 Woolf 1977, 110.
example, in ‘The English Metres’, Meynell paid tribute to the tradition of British poetry which was stabilised by metrical conformity:

The rooted liberty of flowers in breeze
Is theirs, by national luck impulsive, terse,
Tethered, uncaptured, rules obeyed “at ease”,
Time strengthened laws of verse.33

The militaristic language strengthened the association between masculinity and poetic tradition. The gendering of poetic form cropped up again in ‘The Laws of Verse’:

Dear laws, come to my breast!
Take all my frame, and make your close arms meet
Around me; and so ruled, so worked, so pressed,
I breathe, aware; I feel my wild heart beat.34

In the ambiguous image of the male embrace as imprisoning and companionate, there is an uncertainty about whether the laws of traditional prosody are limiting or liberating for the woman. Consequently, it is not clear whether the poem’s energy derives from a battle against the straitjackets of metre and form or from the excitement of partnership with metre and form. Alice Meynell wanted to avoid being like all women poets ‘self-conscious and melancholy’35 but Edith Sitwell accused her of bringing women a bad name because she mismatched feminine sentiment with masculine technique: ‘sheltering tenderly under the protection of those manly boomings and burstings . . . we find Mrs Meynell’s limp exhortations to virtue.’36

Celeste Schenck uses Meynell’s ‘The Laws of Verse’ as an example of ‘the double bind of the woman poet . . . [in her] simultaneous exile from and to poetic form’:

The whole idea of the “genteel” against which modernism defined itself seems to be inextricably bound to these contradictory, even schizophrenic, notions of femininity . . . If gentility in poetry carries the disparaging connotation of soft and female, or worse, not male enough, it can also bear the opposite meaning of conservative and rigid, rhymed and therefore masculine and hard. Given the impossibility of

35 Leighton 245.
separating the two valences of the term, it is no wonder that women poets found themselves divided in the debate over genre.\textsuperscript{37}

A poet like Edith Sitwell found herself, 'committed both to a separate tradition of women's poetry . . . and to outdoing male poets in fashioning a poetics that is anything but wallowing and soft. Her recourse to form, then, was both prescribed and understandably defensive.'\textsuperscript{38}

In an article on women's poetry in 1925, Edith Sitwell presented the dilemma between identifying with either feminine or masculine traditions in terms of formalism:

Women poets will do best if they realise that male technique is not suitable to them. No woman writing in the English language has ever written a great sonnet, no woman has ever written great blank verse. Then again, speaking generally, as we cannot dispense with our rules, so we find free verse difficult.\textsuperscript{39}

She endorses the connection between the sonnet or blank verse and masculine technique. In reviewing Charlotte Mew's poetry, Edith Sitwell similarly indicated her preoccupation with the difference which gender made to writing. She commended Mew for avoiding perceived feminine writing—"It is usual for the poems written by women to be unendurably embarrassing when they deal with emotion . . . there is a general lack of restraint, decency and dignity, to be observed"\textsuperscript{40}—but in an article on women's poetry she condemned Elizabeth Barrett Browning for 'trying to write as a man':

Most of the rules for women poets begin with a "Don't" or an "Avoid". "Avoid metaphysics." "Don't be pompous." "Avoid the sonnet form, and, when possible, long lines." For poetry is largely an affair of muscle. When we ask ourselves why Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market" is one of the best poems ever written by a woman, and why Mrs Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "Aurora Leigh" is not, the answer is this: It is not only a matter of inspiration: Christina Rossetti in her poem found only and made use of a technique and a manner suitable to feminine muscles, whereas Mrs Browning used a technique and a manner which is only suitable to a man. Failure was the inevitable result. . . . It is true that the lady writing under the initials H.D. writes admirable and suave free verse which is technically among the

\textsuperscript{37} Schenck 228--9.
\textsuperscript{38} Schenck 228.
best free verse written today; but she is an exception. I like the contents of Amy Lowell’s free verse, but I find it for the most part formless and tuneless. Though her poems please me faintly while I am reading them, they leave no impression on my mind, because they are not definite entireties, and for this reason: they have no organic form. Free verse is a form—for it should have organic form—more suitable to men... how different is this ["Goblin Market"] from the clod-hopping, hearty tweed-clad manner of certain modern women verse writers, tumbling over everything they see, in their would-be mannishness! 41

The lengthy extract indicates Sitwell’s movement towards and retreat from the concept of a distinctive woman’s aesthetic in preference to ‘would-be mannishness’. Her association between metre and masculinity echoes men’s critical discourses.

Like her male colleagues, Edith Sitwell found both feminine and seemingly pseudo-masculine treatment of form unsatisfactory. Laura Riding expressed similar ambivalence about women’s competence with conventional poetic effects: ‘Women poets are for the most part distinguished from one another by the literary mannerisms they assume in being as-it-were-men. . . . ’42 Her phrase ‘as-it-were-men’ corresponds to Sitwell’s ‘would-be-mannishness’ and Lowell’s ‘writing man-wise’. Like Harold Monro, they suggest that women tended to write as men but that their poetry failed according to the ‘severe tests of a masculine standard’.43 Worse, however, was to be judged as feminine in the face of mockery about bad poetry made of ‘sugar and spice and everything nice’ and good poetry of ‘rats and snails and puppy dogs’ tails’.44

The common aesthetic of modern women poets is their attempt to demonstrate their competence with the conventions of British poetry without blindly conforming to them. It is this negotiation with, but not wholesale repudiation of, tradition which characterises poets as diverse as Vita Sackville-West, Edith Sitwell, Anna Wickham and Charlotte Mew. As Jan Montefiore concludes, poetry by women is not connected by common ideology, experience or subject matter, but by their manipulation of poetic traditions: ‘this struggle to transform inherited meanings, is where the real strength and specificity of women’s poetry lies’.45 In their resistance to the feminine tropes which were propagated by the literary and popular press, women variously plundered, appropriated and occasionally eschewed the male traditions with which they had been educated and the woman-consciousness is often

41 Sitwell, ‘Some Observations on Women’s Poetry.’
manifested in denial. The avant-garde women, who include Edith Sitwell, escaped the masculine/feminine dyad by destabilising conventional systems of representation. Only the ‘female modernists’, identified themselves as women and articulated feminist concerns.

The dissertation’s preliminary chapter on the literary context outlines women’s achievements in a cultural environment which demeaned them. The years 1910 to 1929 were a period of social upheaval dominated by the First World War and changes in legislation concerning the rights of women. In a climate of new opportunities, women became public literary figures for the first time; they published, wrote criticism, ran bookshops, presses and journals, but they found that the literary establishment had the ethos of the exclusive male club. In their poetry, women masked their womanly identity which was detrimental to their status.

The subsequent chapter addresses the cultural and literary significance of women’s poetry of the First World War. It registers women’s differing responses to the models of femininity projected through the powerful government recruiting propaganda. Some poems appear to be complicit with the official responses for women, as maternal nurturers of the country, while others resisted them through direct or implicit protest. Some poetry can be placed alongside canonical anti-war poems whereas others are obviously separated by the gender specific experiences of the war at home or medical aid abroad. Some women seemed to unconsciously enter into male experience and others paraded as the paradigms of feminine self-sacrifice, but a sense of disjunction between the writer and the discourse of the poem often provides textual ambiguity. It will be argued that women’s war poems are vital to the cultural records of the War, but also that war poetry was contiguous with, not parallel to, the fluctuations of modernist innovation.

The next grouping, ‘Between Georgian and Bloomsbury’, traverses the reductive binaries of ‘tradition’ and experiment’. It was difficult to classify any poets as simply ‘Georgian’, partly because it has become a term of ready contempt in literary criticism and partly because Frances Cornford and Vita Sackville-West do not conform to either Georgian stereotype—the country gentleman or the demure poetess. They represent writers like Ruth Pitter and Elizabeth Daryush who had successful publishing histories but have been subsequently neglected. Revisionary feminist criticism has a dual urge to defend and deny their stylistic caution, but if the appearance of literary conservatism remains unchallenged, uninformed second- and third-hand reports evolve into the accepted historical records. In her introduction to The Faber Book of 20th Century Women’s Poetry (1987), Fleur Adcock dismisses Dorothy Wellesley and Vita Sackville-West as ‘outmoded’ and considers Elizabeth Daryush as a ‘borderline case’ because ‘Her experiments with syllabic verse were of interest, but unfortunately she disguised their novelty in a diction which was almost as archaic as that of her father, Robert Bridges.’46 As Donald Davie has pointed out, however,
after her father died, Elizabeth Daryush’s work on syllabic metres corresponds to the
canonised American modernist, Marianne Moore.47 One of the reasons why these poets
have not been properly recognised is that where there is the possibility of different readings,
women’s poetry especially has been interpreted as simply traditionalist rather than as using
the form of the tradition in order to challenge and extend it. They tended to cover up their
gendered perspective through universal voices and conventional forms. As in women’s
First World War poetry, there is often an unofficial discourse below the official text of the
poems. As Isobel Armstrong recognised in her revisionist history of Victorian poetry:

The doubleness of women’s poetry comes from the ostensible adoption of an
affective mode, often simple, often pious, often conventional, but those conventions
are subjected to investigations, questioned, or used for unexpected purposes. The
simpler the surface of the poem, the more likely it is that a second and more difficult
poem will exist beneath it.48

There is a ‘doubleness’ in Vita Sackville-West’s superficially ‘agreeable’ poems, which are
masked love lyrics for her female lovers; the conventional forms and formal diction
represent the constructed persona of her public life. Some poetry is better understood in
terms of ‘conservative modernity’, a rejection of Victorianism but a deferral of a radical
modernity, often due to the internal conflicts surrounding prescribed gender roles.49 It will
be argued that ‘Georgian’ has become a repository for all that modernism excludes and by
association has connotations of ‘sentimental’ and ‘popular’. Redeeming the label means
restoring the expressive, which is favoured by oppressed groups, as a valid mode.

The remaining chapters come under the banner of modernism, but were difficult to
organise because of its shifting boundaries. Moreover, in order to destabilise its hegemony,
feminist critics can find themselves wanting to place women within modernism, to discredit
it as a meaningful term, to claim it as a feminine aesthetic, to identify a distinctly female
modernism or to locate it as an international female movement. Sandra Kemp states that
there is ‘no such thing’—it is simply a retrospective description of common tendencies in a
field of writing which has unconsciously been gendered as masculine.50 Clare Hanson
challenges periodisation because it always sidelines women, and argues for modernism as a
‘way of seeing’ which was pioneered by women and appropriated by men.51 There is a
convincing case for redefining modernism as a cultural crisis associated with feminist

49 Light 10.
50 Sandra Kemp, “But how describe a world seen without a self?” Feminism, fiction and modernism.”
Critical Quarterly 32. 1 (Spring 1990): 100.
activity at the beginning of this century. The persistent supremacy of formal experiment in
the rhetoric of literary criticism means that women must be counted among the
experimentalists if they are not to be perceived as perpetually conservative and irrelevant.
While experimental modernism continues to be associated only with male poets in Britain,
the conceptual association of ‘women’ and ‘sentimental’—because modernism defined itself
in opposition to the ‘sentimental’—is allowed to persist. Consequently, in this thesis the
experimentalists are grouped as avant-garde but a new category of ‘female modernism’
created for the poets who were less stylistically ground-breaking but radical in their class
and gender politics.

It is striking that there were technical links between women who were in closer
contact with the avant-garde communities in Paris and New York and can be said to have
influenced it. Just as Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot were native Americans, so the majority of
avant-garde women poets were American. It can be hypothesised that non-British writers
were less constricted by the reservations of British literary critics about ‘vers libre’. In ‘The
British Avant-garde’ chapter, Edith Sitwell is the luminary, but Nancy Cunard, Iris Tree
and Helen Rootham have been included because of their common social backgrounds and
collaborative work on the Wheels anthologies. Like Sitwell, they lived as independent
women in reaction against their families and were as sensitive to class as to gender
divisions. One of their concerns was how to express a social conscience with modernism’s
principles of impersonality, and their poetry negotiates the divide between anti-realism and
representation. Writing in opposition to the idealised ‘feminine’, they avoided gendered
identity in their writing and offered new models of the woman poet. These women have
not, however, been recognised in feminist histories, probably because there is no obvious
feminist protest in their poetry.

Like Edith Sitwell, the women in the next chapter, ‘The Anglo-American Avant-
garde’, hold their own in orthodox terms of high modernist experimentation, but they also
unsettle the framework; although the poetry is rarely woman-centred, its subversions of
traditional syntax and forms are feminist strategies of breaking and entering the traditions
from which women had been excluded. The poetry and criticism of H.D., Amy Lowell,
Mina Loy, Marianne Moore, Laura Riding and Gertrude Stein indicate how women gave
impetus to formal innovation. They influenced literary developments in Britain through
spending time with the intellectuals in London, through personal connections, through their
publications and through the new literary journals.

Feminist histories, motivated by the necessity of freeing women writers from
alleged ‘sentimentality’, have tended to canonise the formally adventurous. It is also notable
that non-Americans, Anna Wickham, Charlotte Mew, May Sinclair and Sylvia Townsend
Warner, have featured sparsely in feminist revisions of modernism. These poets, along with

51 Clare Hanson in Bonnie Kime Scott, ed. The Gender of Modernism (Indianapolis: Indiana University
Edna St. Vincent Millay, will be grouped as ‘Female Modernists’ in the final chapter. The category accords with Celeste Schenck’s distinction between ‘avant-garde’ and ‘rear-garde’ or ‘female’ modernists:

If Mew’s case is to be heard and the annals of poetic “modernism” duly revised, we must attend more carefully to the differences between rear-guard and avant-garde modernism. If we listen to the more traditional meters of Anna Wickham, Charlotte Mew, Sylvia Townsend Warner, Alice Meynell, and Edith Sitwell (not to mention the five hundred or so British women who wrote strong war poetry during the years around 1914) as attentively as we now hear the daring verbal experiments of H.D., Gertrude Stein, and Mina Loy, we must renounce, salutarily, any hope for a unitary totalising theory of female poetic modernism. The situation of marginalised modernists such as Mew, Wickham, Townsend Warner, Meynell and Sitwell has much to tell us, not only about the dispersive underside of the “Modernist” monolith but also about inadvertent feminist participation in the politics of canonicity.  

There have to be reservations about even Schenck’s division—between avant- and rear-garde modernisms—since it suggests a point at which a ‘rear-guard’ modernist goes over the ‘avant-garde’ line. Female modernists were clearly interested in the politics of language but in conjunction with the representation of social and gender issues. Their poetry is, however, distinguished by unashamed depictions of female identities. Through fictionalised personae they satirised gender stereotypes, substituted sexual desire for idealised romance and explored female psychology. In not displaying signs of either a masculinity complex or female affiliation complex, they refute Freud’s prescriptions of femininity. Female modernists acknowledge a tradition of women writers and rework conventional representations of women. They are emblems of women’s progress from a nineteenth-century aesthetic of self-renunciation to a ‘twentieth-century aesthetic of self-dramatisation’.  

The separation of ‘high’ and ‘female’ modernisms is not intended to endorse the superiority of stylistic innovation nor to entrench the clear-cut categories. On the contrary, it will be seen that the line is only ever arbitrary and that much superficially anti-realist poetry is neither non-representational nor as politically radical as it would appear. The radical content, identified as coded lesbian eroticism, feminist polemics or other challenge to dominant ideologies, in the work of Charlotte Mew, Edna St Vincent Millay, Anna Wickham and Sylvia Townsend Warner, can take both innovative and traditional verse
forms. Poets like Gertrude Stein, Charlotte Mew, H.D. Mina Loy and Amy Lowell can be classified as both ‘avant-garde’ and ‘female’ modernists. Although each chapter is necessarily circumscribed, its boundaries are presented as flexible and one poet can cut across them. Charlotte Mew exemplifies the ways in which orthodox categories are ill-equipped to contain the diversity and variety of the poetry written within their margins. The unclassifiability of Mew’s works means that she tends to accrue a variety of labels, namely Victorian, Edwardian, Georgian and high or lesbian modernist.

Any history is a simultaneous attempt to represent the moment in the past and to reassess it from the moment of recording. The priority of this thesis is to ‘put the record straight’ and attention is given to poets who appear to have been most significant in Britain through their publications, reputations, political and literary activities. Additionally, it positions poetry which was underestimated but which registers the context.
2. The Literary Context: Escaping the Feminine

The dominance of high modernist criticism and the omission of women from modernist histories have tended to perpetuate a conceptual binary opposition between experimental and women's poetry without reference to its socio-literary contexts. If all modern poetry is a reaction against the 'genteel' tradition and 'genteel' is associated with the feminine, there is a need to contest that association. In this chapter it will be argued that formal experiment has accrued 'an unearned moral glamour'\(^1\) and that women were more involved with the movements of modern poetry than has been acknowledged.

Records of the modern period indicate personal and professional obstacles to women's new roles as public poets but also register their achievements as producers and promoters of new writing. There was a complex nexus of a predominantly male conservative literary establishment and the cultural changes associated with women's suffrage, the First World War and the growth of popular culture. Attitudes towards pre-war suffragism, women's public roles during, and new rights after, the war spilled over into the reception to their poems. The model of reviewing set by the *Times Literary Supplement* (TLS) was particularly influential in establishing an atmosphere of the male club; it not only excluded women from its echelon but also from 'Poetry' by feminising their writing. In their introduction to *Victorian Women Poets*, Angela Leighton and Margaret Reynolds observe, 'The gender construction of women as instinctive, feeling, personal—and the consequent genderizing of poetry which appeared to be about the same thing—had far-reaching consequences which stretch well-beyond the nineteenth century'.\(^2\) The thesis of Angela Leighton’s study of eight Victorian women poets is that they distinguished themselves by fighting against the expression of sensibility which had come to caricature the woman writer.\(^3\) Similarly, in the twentieth century, it was the generic concept of 'women's poetry' which perpetuated the ideal of the feminine against which intellectual women had to fight. In their rejections of femininity, they progressed from mythologies of self-denying poetesses to self-dramatising and self-asserting poets. Their writing and participation in

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\(^3\) Angela Leighton, *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992).
literary production register the emerging psychological, sexual and economic independence of women.\footnote{See correspondence about the sexual needs of women. \textit{Egoist}. I. March 2 and March 16, 1914: 98–9, 120.}

The First World War, the influence of America through film, the radio and magazines, the impact of psychoanalysis,\footnote{See, for example, Herbert Read, ‘Psycho-analysis and the critic.’ \textit{Criterion}. III. 10 Jan. 1925: 214–230.} the first wave of feminism, the development of literary criticism and a large literate public were significant influences on cultural formations, particularly in relation to the concepts of nationalism and gender. The beginning of the twentieth century was a period of intense suffragette activity. In 1900, married women were allowed to vote in Local County Council elections (London County Council Act, 1899); the Private Members Suffrage Bill in 1908 was carried in its second reading. The Women’s Suffrage Bill went through eighteen parliamentary debates but the process was slow and hunger striking had begun in 1909. In 1910, the All Party Conciliation Bill for women’s suffrage passed its second reading but was quashed by the Government front bench. The ‘Cat and Mouse’ Act of 1913 (The Prisoners’ Temporary Discharge for Ill-Health Act) epitomises the impasse whereby there was no progress for, and no yielding by, women. The subsequent militancy of the suffragettes alienated the temperamentally and politically liberal who were in sympathy with the goal of equal rights and equal votes but not with violence. In 1913 suffragism became divided with the founding of the East London Federation for working class suffragettes by Sylvia Pankhurst who was asked to leave the WSPU (Women’s Social and Political Union). The non-violent National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies also started in 1913. It was in this climate of unachieved goals, divisions between the militant and non-militant, and between the working and middle or upper classes, that the First World War began. Women became involved in taking over men’s work and by 1918 all women over thirty who were on the local government electoral register were granted the vote. In 1919 Nancy Astor was the first woman M.P. to take her seat in the House of Commons,\footnote{Countess Markievicz was elected to Parliament in 1918 but Nancy Astor was the first woman M.P. to take her seat in 1919.} and the Sex Disqualification Act removed barriers to women becoming barristers, solicitors, magistrates and other positions of power or learning. Legislation in favour of women’s rights continued throughout the 1920s and 1930s. Oxford and Cambridge agreed to confer degrees on women (1920,1921), all women over twenty one were allowed the vote (1928) and there were alterations in law concerning divorce and inheritance. In 1918 Marie Stopes (1880-1958) published \textit{Married Love} and \textit{Wise Parenthood}, which emphasised changing attitudes towards marriage and the nuclear family, and \textit{Contraception} in 1923, which registered women’s advances towards sexual autonomy. Stopes started Britain’s first birth control clinic in 1921, the same year that the
American Birth Control League was founded. (Women in America had been granted the vote in 1920.)

In the post-war climate of new rights and opportunities, women developed confidence in publishing their work and presenting themselves as public literary figures. In his introduction to *A Book of Women's Verse* in 1921, J. C. Squire observed the phenomenon of women's public presence:

> Today we scarcely bother about the distinction between male and female writers. With thousands of women writing, with women's verses in every magazine and women represented in every newspaper office, when literary women congregate in clubs, and robust women novelists haggle with editors and discuss royalties with their male rivals, we take composition for granted as a feminine occupation.

It is significant that most of Squire's poets were dead. The number of women publishing provoked anxiety about their encroachment on to the male-dominated terrain: 'as is frequently the case in the history of sex relations, men view the smallest female steps towards autonomy as threatening strides that will strip them of all authority, while women respond to such anxious reaction-formations with a paradoxical sense of vulnerability.'

E. Macbeam's review of Squire's anthology in *Time and Tide* illustrates the anxious male reaction to the proliferation of women's poems:

> What can we say in "defence"? Women do write verse, far more of it than men do; a great deal of it gets into print in the *Poetry Review*, the prize page of *The Bookman*, and in minor publications. Women do not, however, always excepting the "star" names, produce great or lasting poetry. And yet the creative talent is not lacking . . . novels written by women are in greater demand than novels written by men.

'The Poetry of Women', a review of three new books of poetry in the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1920, also indicates the ways in which men's anxiety about women's new freedoms was projected on to the reception of their poems:

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7 Margaret Sanger had opened the first American birth control clinic in 1916.

8 J. C. Squire, ed. *An Anthology of Women's Verse* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1921). J. C. Squire was literary editor of the *New Statesman*, chief literary critic of the *Observer* and founded the *London Mercury* in 1919, which he edited until 1934. He was reputedly a congenial personality and championed the 'common man' but was treated with condescension in the *TLS*. Edith Sitwell coined the term 'Squirearchy' to represent the artistic complacency which he was purported to represent. Consequently, 'Squirearchy' became polarised to Bloomsbury. See John Pearson, *Facades: Edith, Osbert and Sacheverell Sitwell* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1978) 146-150.

Literature which answers to every change in the social life of a people, has already begun to register the fact of woman’s emancipation. The ideal of self-expression, which has supplanted self-sacrifice as the aim of the modern woman, has possibly brought with it as many abuses as it has banished. . . . Certainly, the result in literature may not at first seem very happy. As we contemplate the profusion of modern fiction with women’s names on the title page, we may reasonably fear for the welfare of art smothered between the smatterings of science and the anarchy of instincts. . . . But though we allow the novel to be abused in the interests of sex propaganda, lyrical poetry, by the very strict limits of its constitution, will permit no such transgression.10

The phrase, ‘The ideal of self-expression, which has supplanted self-sacrifice as the aim of the modern woman’, exemplifies the argument of this chapter, and of the thesis, concerning women’s progress from the mythologies of poetesshood which the reviewer seeks to sustain. Resistance to professional women writers was partly a nostalgia for the pre-war ideals of femininity (and presumably of masculinity):

The poetry of women, then, has its basis in a sympathy with nature rather than art, and, as interpreters of the beauty and sanctity of what is to so many of us almost a lost province, they may contribute new truths to poetry and refresh it as its source, provided they can criticise more carefully the organism of which they remain a part.11

‘What is to so many of us almost a lost province’ has been given emphasis because it illustrates how ‘woman’, as a generic concept, was used paradigmatically for the personal life, spirituality and traditionalism which were threatened by post-war modernity.

The insistence on the difference of women’s poetry and the attendant perception of the ‘feminine’ as intellectual weakness is palpably illustrated in ‘The Poetry of Women’. The whole article will be explored at length because it is typical of discourses which did not distinguish literary women from the weakest popular verse-writers. Fay Inchfawn’s The Verse-Book of a Homely Woman, published by The Girl’s Own and Woman’s Magazine, was easy fodder for the association of woman, the sentimental and the popular: ‘But for ourselves we find something worth the knowing in a woman who can think of God amid her groceries and praise Him in her scullery.’ The other two books prompted as much approval for women confining themselves to women’s concerns, namely motherhood, but not writing about them:

11 ibid. [Emphasis added].
Mrs Inchfawn can sing of her baby with as true and satisfying a restraint as Mrs Still can "embed" hers (most uncomfortably) in the "Silver of her kisses," because she tries to impose a false decoration on an instinct which was too realistic to deserve expression. And while maternity should have its intimate poetry (though we are tempted to doubt whether a mother is best suited to express it), but a poetry, at any rate, distinct from that which is offered externally by man as an act of homage. Mrs Still would have been wise to avoid all those merely physical experiences of motherhood which are too absorbingly natural to be poetical. She is happiest when she escapes from both the fear and sentimentality which attach themselves to the mere fact of a child and universalises her experience in a moment of triumph.

It is noticeable how often 'sentimental' cropped up in discussions of women's verses. 'Sentimental' was a pejorative term, and used conjunctively with 'poetess' it inflated the myths of universal womanhood. In The New Freewoman in 1913, Dora Marsden recorded the battle between intellectual women and 'Woman':

"Woman" spelt with a capital, Woman-as-type, is an empty concept and should be banished from the language. If we take "female reproductive organs" away from this concept Woman, what have we left? Absolutely nothing, save a mountain of sentimental mush... Woman? Is there such a thing even as a woman sensed from the inside?12

In Practical Criticism (1929), I. A. Richards included a chapter on 'Sentimentalism and Inhibition' in which he observed that 'sentimental' had become a term of abuse often followed by the word 'rubbish'. He recognised that 'sentimental' was one of the most overworked words in the whole vocabulary of literary criticism but did not identify its particularly detrimental application to women.13 Judging by the quoted extracts, however, there was some justification for the implications of sentimentality, but these three books of verse had been selected for review at length and the heading, 'The Poetry of Women', insidiously universalised them. This universality was driven even further by encompassing women of the nineteenth century into 'women's poetry': 'Nature accepted at a bad moment may produce the formless fidelities of Mrs Browning, at a good the pure gallantry of Miss Coleridge. None of these poets discriminates altogether between wrong and right impulses.' The attention to 'formlessness' indicates the measure of formalism which could be applied to women both negatively and positively.

12 Dora Marsden, 'Views and Comments.' New Freewoman 2.1. 1 July 1913: 24.
The implication that women were intrinsically sentimental—occupied with religion, nature and the personal life—was relentless: ‘It is in a delicate echoing of nature’s lyrical moments, to which man is possibly too philosophic to respond, that these writers obtain their happiest effects. . . . Woman accepts the language of children and birds and trees, because she is of nature’s household. Not even in her religion does she go abroad in quest of a fantastic grail’. The thrust of the review was to perpetuate the myths of the poetess through the rhetoric of binary opposition:

The inherent masculine faculty is to objectify, the feminine to express subjectivity: this is of course a broad distinction and infinitely transgressed (witness the number of poets who are parading their private sentiments to-day), but as a general principle we may say that woman sees and interprets life from within; she has neither to stoop nor to rise to nature—her response to it is only a wider expression of herself.14

Similarly, Thomas Moult, reviewing Teresa Hooley’s (1888-1973) *Collected Poems* (1926), commended her ‘charming verse’ about ‘birds, rain, leaves and stars, and all the little precious things of home’.15 ‘On the Threshold’, a review of three women’s books again demonstrates the effect of reviewing women in combination, whereby the womanliness and not the poetry is in focus. It fuelled the prejudices about women’s poetry as domestic, derivative, traditional and consoling.

Women were clearly conscious of the universal ‘feminisation’ of their work. They were also criticised for either metrical conformity or metrical slovenliness. *The Gift*, by Margaret Cecilia Furse, was applauded for being ‘in the tradition, yet not derived . . . [her] rhymes rhyme, her metres scan’; but May Cannan was charged with the woman’s faults of carelessness and emotion: ‘full of tenderness’, ‘sincerity’ and ‘slovenly rhythm’.16 The praise for Rose Macaulay was undercut by the suggestion of sentimentality: ‘at times she seems to write on needlessly to ease a burdened brain or breast—an excellent remedy, but one hazardous to share with the public.’

The patronising platitudes about women’s inherent interpretation of life ‘from within’ are not innocuous, since, as Cora Kaplan argues, ‘The emphasis on women’s imagination relating to the private realm can be understood as the control of high language which is a crucial part of the power of dominant groups, and . . . the refusal of access to public language is one of the major forms of the oppression of women.’17 Critics confined women to the personal life but rubbish it as suitable for good poetry. Suzanne Clark

points out that because sentimental discourse assumes sympathy through appeal to personal experience, it has become associated with personal experience; therefore, all expressive writing is perceived as sentimental. Consequently, marginalised groups are deprived of a valid discourse for representing their histories.

During the interwar period, sentimental became further associated with women because it was linked to the growth of mass culture, caricatured by women's magazines and Hollywood romances. The popular papers published women's verse which reinforced the association between women's poetry and sentimentality. In *Sentimental Modernism*, Suzanne Clark describes the literary 'reversal against the sentimental' which 'located women's writing within the obscenity of the sentimental':

> Women, of course, have a privileged (or fatal) relationship with the sentimental. From the point of view of literary modernism, sentimentality was both a past to be outgrown and a present tendency to be despised. The gendered character of this condemnation seemed natural: women writers were entangled into sensibility, were romantic and sentimental by nature, and so even the best might not altogether escape this romantic indulgence in emotion and sublimity, or so it might seem to a criticism anxious to make distinctions.

Since 'sentimental' became 'a shorthand for everything modernism would exclude', the legacy of the conceptual link between women and mass culture is that literary women have been ignored by modernist histories.

It has, however, to be recognised that the ideal of 'Woman' as the embodiment of high moral sensibility was as seductive to some women as to men, and that women too, unwittingly, conspired with this preservation of idealised womanhood. It is true that both women and men wrote within the genteel tradition without obvious challenge. It is these writers who represent the 'sentimentality' from which the progressive woman poet wanted to be dissociated. The expectation that women composed genteel nature lyrics is addressed by Anna Wickham in 'Explanation':

> It's so, good Sirs, a Woman-poet sings
> Sick self, and not exterior things,
> She'd joy enough in flowers, and lakes and light,
> Before she won soul's freedom in a fight.
> Thus half-creation is but half expressed,

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And the unspoken half is best.\textsuperscript{21}

In her poetry, Anna Wickham substituted the limiting feminine stereotype with the emancipated New Woman. The need for male approval may, however, explain why some women who were involved in political and suffrage activities suppressed their politics in their poetry. Consequently, they appear superficially to be more genteel than they really were. Poets like Eva Gore-Booth, Alice Meynell and Katherine Tynan were caught between the competing pressures of feminist emancipation and prescribed femininity which were exaggerated by the First World War. They were respected literary women with successful publishing histories but are difficult to position. Conservative critics played upon women’s sense of womanly duty by drawing it out in their readings of women’s texts. Eva Gore-Booth was described by Thomas Moult as ‘mistress of victorious expression . . . a superb example of noble vision combined with superb technique’ although the brief review of \textit{Broken Glory} in the \textit{TLS} implied that she was right to place ‘grace and distinction’ above pacifism.\textsuperscript{22} Eva Gore-Booth published five books of prose, several newspaper articles and ten books of poems including a \textit{Complete} and \textit{Selected Poems}. She was born in Ireland and moved to Manchester where she supported movements for economic and political reform and for the enfranchisement of women; she was a member of the Manchester Education Committee and secretary to the women’s trade union council.\textsuperscript{23} Although a vociferous suffragist, there is little feminist protest in her poetry. Likewise, although Alice Meynell was an active member of the women’s writing suffrage league and a respected voice for women’s emancipation, her poetry seems curiously separate from her political life.\textsuperscript{24} Significantly, she was constructed in terms of the feminine ideal in the literary press. \textit{The Last Poems of Alice Meynell} (1923), got one and a half columns in the \textit{TLS} and was approved for having the requisite combination of religious and poetic piety, albeit deficient in literary quality.\textsuperscript{25}

Women needed to break into literary circles to contest the superiority of masculine intelligence and the feminising of their work. Although, as J. C. Squire observed in 1921, women were such a common sight in publishing houses, they frequently experienced only a nominal acceptance by their male colleagues. In his introduction to \textit{Some Contemporary Poets} (1920), Harold Monro’s advice to young poets reinforced the sense of male

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{22} Review of \textit{Broken Glory}, by Eva Gore-Booth. \textit{TLS} 3 Oct. 1918: 471.
\item \textsuperscript{23} Thomas Moult, Review of \textit{Shepherd of Eternity and Other Poems}, by Eva Gore-Booth. \textit{Time and Tide} 10 July 1925: 673.
\item \textsuperscript{24} In 1922, Alice Meynell (1847–1922) was considered to be one of the foremost women poets of the day, but she has suffered from having her earliest and weakest poems, such as ‘The Shepherdess’, chosen for anthologies. She was a leading member of the Celtic literary revival and a friend to Yeats, Parnell, and Rossetti. For further discussion see Angela Leighton 1992.
\item \textsuperscript{25} ‘The Poetry of Mrs Meynell’. Review of \textit{The Last Poems of Alice Meynell} and \textit{The Poems of Alice Meynell}. \textit{TLS} 1 March 1923: 139.
\end{itemize}
exclusivity. He detected that poetry writing had become a professional and competitive occupation so that a poet needed ‘a technical acquaintance with London Literary Circles’. He admitted that ‘editors privilege publishers who advertise, friends and partisans of the paper, colleagues in the trade and great reputations.’ The ‘young poet’ was implicitly male as he was advised to court fashionable women for sponsorship and young women for invitations to dinner.26

Male rivalry which excluded and inhibited women was aggravated during the 1920s by the advance of literary criticism: ‘Criticism as a major growth industry and a method of forming public taste, only took off in the post-war years and many of those who led the way cut their critical teeth on T. S. Eliot and a school of poetry that was the result of a sharp reaction against tired Romanticism.’27 Muriel Bradbrook was conscious of the suppression of women when she went up to Girton in 1927. She recalled her weekly lectures by I. A. Richards, F. R. Leavis and Sir Arthur Quiller Couch who addressed the lecture hall as ‘Gentlemen’; she realised, however, that despite their appearance of absolute authority there was no ‘consensus of opinion’ among these critical ‘giants’.28 Women did not feature in the influential critical texts of the period such as The Sacred Wood (T. S. Eliot, 1920), Principles in Literary Criticism (I. A. Richards, 1929), Seven Types of Ambiguity (William Empson, 1928) and F. R. Leavis’ New Bearings in English Poetry (1932). Critical debate was also stimulated and sustained by the surge of literary periodicals, mainly based in London. Intellectual women needed to be recognised in the highbrow papers, such as T. S. Eliot’s The Criterion, F. R. Leavis’ Scrutiny, the Times Literary Supplement (TLS) and The New Statesman, but these tended to ignore or undermine them. Vera Brittain recorded how she and Winifred Holtby ‘were the first victims of that “discrimination” on which, with some justice, the New Statesman has prided itself ever since’ when their names were omitted from a list of contributors which included practically everyone else who had written for it. She found the discrimination significant because during the 1920s and 1930s the New Statesman and Nation became known for its ‘intellectual brilliance’ under its chairman J. M. Keynes.29 Brittain’s parenthetical phrase, ‘with some justice’, illustrates how even successful writers internalised a sense of inferiority. These cumulative exclusions entrenched ‘femininity’ and ‘intellect’ as binary opposites.

The number of new papers fuelled the prevailing spirit of competition but the publications shared a concern to preserve literary value and taste from contamination by mass culture.30 Between 1900 and 1930, the newly literate public provided an extended market for books but gave rise to concern about the erosion of literary standards. The

division between highbrow and lowbrow became a preoccupation of the literary papers. For example, the production of pocketbook Everyman poetry editions provoked debate about the cheapening of literature via widespread circulation. As David Perkins states, in the opening years of this century 'the partisans of poetic beauty were entrenched in the leading journals; if a poet offended their sense of values, their reviews could be gruesome'. In the preservation of tradition from the masses, the *Times Literary Supplement* was clearly regarded as the major voice of literary value: 'An austere format; the maintenance of anonymity; a heavy emphasis (not least in the correspondence columns) on traditional scholarship; a general flavour of club, common room and parsonage; the link with the *Times* itself—in avant-garde eyes, these were the unmistakable stigmata of the Establishment.'

T.S. Eliot considered that to be invited to write for the *Times Literary Supplement* 'was to have reached the top of the ladder of literary journalism'. He described a male enclave where drinks and lunches were part of the job.

Although it could condemn both men and women, its language of competition and almost exclusively male staff made the *TLS* seem impenetrable to women and its nationalistic sentiments were inhospitable to foreigners. Although Robert Bridges, poet laureate until 1929, was praised for his 'technical experiment' it was really for being 'English to the core' that he was prized:

Mr Bridges' experiments . . . teach us, as nothing else can teach us, what prosody is, and what is meant by metre and rhythm and the opposition and reconcilement of the two. For until we discuss these things, we cannot securely read any poetry, let alone his.

Articles such as 'Originality and Poetry', which identified poetry with the male English tradition, added to women's, often unconscious, sense of exclusion:

So long as England is the home of Englishmen, English Poetry will be what it has become through Chaucer, Shakespeare, Coleridge; its character is known . . . future poetry can only refine and diversify and superimpose.

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30 See, for example, review of *The New Criterion*, TLS 10 Feb. 1927: 94.
31 Perkins 140.
33 'Bruce Lyttleton Richmond.' TLS 13 Jan 1961. Gross 263.
The psychological complexities surrounding poetic form have to be understood because women needed to show mastery of form to win the approval of the literary establishment which they sought to enter. In 1917, the review of *Georgian Poetry* became a vehicle for shoring up the values associated with form—stability and the structures of national identity: ‘in these days [of war] when the spirit is hungry for any scrap of permanence and continuity . . . poetry goes on and, with it, all that poetry stands for.’36 Before the War, Britain had held economic dominance and one quarter of the world flew the British flag, but the rejection of British imperialism, associated with the revolt against Victorian dogma, was both accentuated and mitigated by the First World War. The War accelerated scepticism towards the rhetoric of nationalism but aroused caution regarding radical experiments because of their associations with violence. Consequently, the controversy over *vers libre* was tied up with post-war insecurities. Reviewers strengthened the association between ‘form’ and ‘tradition’ so that *vers libre* became synonymous with rebellion or was simply dismissed: ‘we doubt indeed whether *vers libre* has any right to call itself verse, unless it is much less free than most *vers libre* actually is.’37 In Britain, reviewers in the *TLS* and J. C. Squire in the *New Statesman* and *London Mercury* played upon popular prejudice against new art forms. The perceived link between revolutionary forms and revolutionary politics was repeatedly endorsed—‘Miss Sitwell and her little band of pilgrims—progressives, anarchists, or what you will, go on writing in their own way.’38 ‘Anarchist’ is not accurate but demonstrates that radical poetics were taken to be synonymous with ideological extremism.

As John Lucas observes, ‘The radical impulse in poetry of the 1920s is, therefore, a complex matter.’39 The continuing respect for traditional forms in the literary papers contradicts the myth that all literary practice was avant-garde. To some extent the war deflated the revolutionary ideals associated with imagism and vorticism. Although the General Strike in 1926 and two minority labour governments in 1924 and 1929 sharpened the socialist awareness of intellectuals, which developed in the 1930s, it was mitigated by their reaction against mass culture. Revisionists like John Carey have established both radical and reactionary faces of modernism: ‘The early twentieth century saw a determined effort, on the part of the European intelligentsia, to exclude the masses from culture. In England, this movement has become known as modernism.’40 Reading through the literary periodicals of the period, it is striking that the values and prestige attached to conventional poetic form was an obsession with poetry critics and a particular issue when reviewing the work of women poets. As Philip Hobsbaum points out: ‘The concern for form is a characteristic of a development in our poetry which has not, I

think, been separately recognised. Perhaps it is best called English modernism—as opposed to the American brand of Eliot, Pound, Stevens and Lowell.\textsuperscript{41} This is misleading in suggesting that the American moderns or modernists were not concerned with form, but there is some accuracy in distinguishing different attitudes to formal verse. The striking fact that most of the avant-garde women’s poetry was written by Americans further endorses the importance of interpreting the tendency towards formalism by British poets in its cultural context.

In Britain, American women had to contend with prejudices against foreigners, free verse, mass culture—the influx of Hollywood films added to the association of America with popular culture—and ‘women’s poetry’.\textsuperscript{42} The reviewer of \textit{What’s O’Clock? Poems by Amy Lowell}, was typically evasive about her literary facets:

\begin{quote}
It was plainly very necessary for a poet to be modern in order to win Miss Lowell’s approbation, but it was not at all plain to understand in what modernity consisted. At moments it seemed that the conception was wholly negative; modernity simply consisted in rejecting poetic vocabulary.\textsuperscript{43}
\end{quote}

The review was lengthy and dumbed down Lowell’s innovations with condescending adjectives such as ‘charming’, ‘placid’ and ‘pleasant’. Laura Riding’s \textit{The Close Chaplet} was also treated with condescension: ‘psychologically it is extremely interesting but it may be doubted if it is poetry’.\textsuperscript{44} In a letter to Marianne Moore in 1915, H.D. expressed her experience of the distinction between critical reception in the United States and England as indifference versus opposition: ‘I know, more or less, what you are up against, though I escaped some five years ago!—There are terrible difficulties & discouragements, to be met on this side, too—But at least, it is a fight—there is something definite \textit{To fight!} I felt so terribly when I was in USA, the putty that met my whetted [sic] lance!’\textsuperscript{45}

Although it was usually inimical to them, the response of the \textit{Times Literary Supplement} mattered to women because they needed approval from the literary establishment in order to be constructed as a writer rather than just a woman. Virginia Woolf recorded in her diary that the review of \textit{To The Lighthouse} hung over her like a ‘damp cloud’.\textsuperscript{46} (She did, however, work for the \textit{TLS} from 1905 although she did not review

\textsuperscript{41} Philip Hobsbaum, \textit{Tradition and Experiment in English Poetry} (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1979) 298.
\textsuperscript{42} In 1920, 95% of films shown in Britain were American.
\textsuperscript{44} Review of \textit{The Close Chaplet}, by Laura Riding. \textit{TLS} 6 Jan. 1927: 47.
Vita Sackville-West also articulated the desire for approval when *The Land* was published in 1926; she told Virginia Woolf of two good reviews, 'a very handsome tribute from Mr Drinkwater in *The Observer*. One is easily comforted,' and, 'I am so glad Julian [Bell] likes "The Land"—so glad he thinks me a poet,' but 'Now there remain [sic] the *Times Literary Supt.* for which I have an unreasoning respect.'

Women were clearly aware on the one hand of the power of the literary journals which rarely treated their poetry as serious literature, and on the other, of the damaging conservative leading popular papers, the *Daily Mirror* and the *Daily Express*, which sensationalised their personal lives. In an article, 'A Few Remarks on Sitwellism', in *Time and Tide* (1928), Edith Sitwell referred to the antagonism of both 'The crowd' which is taught to fear modern poets as 'alive and dangerous' (as opposed to the innocuous dead ones) and the reviewers who 'fly into a temper'. She satirised the tabloid obsession with her appearance—'are poets liable to a beauty competition?'—and asserted that 'the people who attack artists to-day are not the real critics, but the gossip writers of certain of the cheaper papers.' In 1928, The Six Point Group, which was dedicated to social equalities in law, advertised a debate on 'Women in the Press', the motion being 'That the influence of the Daily Press is detrimental to the position of Women'. It alluded to the growth of 'trash' weeklies aimed at women as consumers. Women's weeklies helped to give them identity as a sub-culture but they also provoked the equation between the 'popular' and the 'feminine'.

Critical writing provided intellectual women like Edith Sitwell, Laura Riding and Amy Lowell, with a means of overcoming the poetess stigma. Edith Sitwell's controversial claims in *Aspects of Modern Criticism* (1934) register her attempts to free critical practice from its stifling tones and limited responses. Laura Riding, with Robert Graves, published *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* (1927), which was a widely read attempt to identify current practice and integrated men and women. This and her *Contemporaries and Snobs* (1928) stimulated substantial reviews in the TLS but have been largely ignored in subsequent surveys of the period. Amy Lowell's *Tendencies in Modern American Poetry* (1917) was one of the first analyses of modern American verse and included H.D.

Although barred from the major literary papers, many women were involved in the more inclusive new magazines which became channels of poetry and criticism between the United States and Europe. In his forward to *A History of American Magazines 1910-1930*, Frank Mott connects the little magazines to the literary revolution of the years 1910 to 1920.

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47 Gross xix-xx.
51 'Women in the Press.' Advert in *Time and Tide* 16 March 1928.
Malcolm Bradbury similarly views the small periodicals in terms of their democratisation of literature without necessarily lowering its tone:

The tone of the important journals was *avant garde*: their circulation was small; they were addressed largely to a bohemian intellectual reading public. Such criticism as appeared in these magazines tended to be written by literary practitioners, like Pound and Eliot, Ford Maddox Hueffer and F. S. Flint, and was very much devoted to what Pound called, "making it New". It was reformatory rather than considered; but it offered many critical insights that subsequent critics sought to pursue with greater precision. The twenties were a period of *critical revolution*.

The promotion of the so-called 'avant-garde', was, however, one trend in a period of stylistic cross-currents and it was not exclusive to men. The papers adopted various political positions. The Poetry Society's *Poetry Review*, which started in 1912, was proudly reactionary and had a wide international readership. In 1913, Harold Monro left *Poetry Review* and set up *Poetry and Drama* as an alternative independent paper. New Age, edited by A. R. Orage, was 'a socialist weekly of considerable influence though small circulation'. The *Athenaeum*, *The Coterie* and the New *Coterie* were in sympathy with avant-garde poetry. Other journals like *The Adelphi* (the New *Adelphi* from 1927), *Criticism*, *The London Magazine* and *Review of English Studies*, which sprang up during the 1920s, set out their varying editorial principles which tended to be liberal in their aims of being 'representative'.

Women were reviewed in and contributed to these papers. They also set up journals which were arguably more progressive, but in keeping with their dominant goal of equality rather than segregation, they published both men and women. In the United States, Harriet Monroe’s *Poetry: A Magazine Of Verse*, based in Chicago, ran from 1912. She remained its editor until her death in 1936. *The Little Review* was edited by Margaret Anderson and Jane Heap between 1914 and 1929. Its ‘importance to the service of literature’ is acclaimed in *The History of American Magazines*: ‘The Little Review’s record for publication of important contemporary writers is not surpassed—if indeed it is equalled—by that of any other magazine of the period’.

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54 See Joy Grant, *Harold Monro and the Poetry Bookshop*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1967, for an account of Monro’s initial dealings with The Poetry Society and the inauguration of *Poetry and Drama*. He had been invited to edit *Poetry Review* but gave up after a year because he did not have enough autonomy and was prohibited from encouraging new writing.  
for the Little Review and Poetry, although their editors, akin with Harriet Shaw Weaver at the Egoist, found him difficult to work with.\textsuperscript{59} The Dial, formerly ‘Chicago’s conservative literary weekly’, became an important outlet for poetry and criticism under the editorship of Marianne Moore. In the running controversy over the relative progressiveness of The Dial and Poetry, Frank Mott describes The Dial as ‘the chief organ of the aesthetic experimentalist’;\textsuperscript{60} but Poetry is usually perceived as more consistently adventurous. In Britain, women forged The Egoist, formerly The New Freewoman, from 1914, and Time and Tide from 1920.\textsuperscript{61} The Egoist, subtitled ‘an individual review’, was outspoken on women’s issues such as women’s sexual needs and how to be unmarried and happy.\textsuperscript{62} Its stated aim, ‘Our war is with words in every aspect: grammar, accidence, syntax’, indicates the editors’ conceptual association between literary and social revolution.\textsuperscript{63} T. S. Eliot’s opinion, ‘[Harriet Shaw] Weaver is the only woman connected with publishing whom it is really easy to get on with,’ is a tribute but also reflects the sex war involved even in the progressive journals.\textsuperscript{64}

These publishing initiatives illustrate the significant presence of women within the network of intellectuals in London, Paris and the United States. Not only did they promote modern poetry through journals and critical works, but also through bookshops and printing presses. Sylvia Beach’s famous ‘Shakespeare and Company’ bookshop and lending library in Paris was an important meeting place for writers interested in modernism. In London, Alida Monro became responsible for the Poetry Bookshop in Devonshire Street.\textsuperscript{65} The bookshop was an international meeting place and eclectic in outlook. It provided a platform for new poets, including Frances Cornford, Charlotte Mew, May Sinclair and Anna Wickham, by publishing their work and organising readings. Nancy Cunard’s The Hours Press, in Réanville and then Paris, printed twenty-four books between 1928 and 1931, including the poetry of Richard Aldington, Louis Aragon, Robert Graves, Laura Riding, Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, Kay Boyle and Gertrude Stein, and most notably James Joyce’s Ulysses. Laura Riding with Robert Graves ran the Seizin Press (1927-39) to encourage new, mostly male, poets and later edited a critical review (Epilogue 1935-7). These initiatives may partly have stemmed from her lack of acceptance by her male colleagues in America in the Twenties. According to Frank Mott, she was a prize-winner,

\begin{itemize}
\item Mott 174.
\item Mott 167.
\item For more discussion of Time and Tide see This was My World, by Lady Margaret Rhondda (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1933) and Women’s Poetry of the 1930s, ed. Jane Dowson (London: Routledge, 1996) 181–2.
\item Editorial. Egoist II. 1 Jan. 1915.
\item Alida Monro took over the Poetry Bookshop when Harold Monro was called for war service. He then became too unwell to run it and died in 1932. See Grant 1967.
\end{itemize}
her poems were often printed in *The Fugitive* (1922-5) and she energetically promoted the magazine and the group of ‘Fugitive poets’ but ‘a woman could scarcely adapt herself to this unusual fellowship of gentlemen. Mrs Gottschalk quarrelled with Grand Master Hirsch, and though she was made a member of the board of editors, she was never a real Fugitive.’

The Fugitives also satirised Harriet Monroe as ‘Aunt Harriet’, playing upon her spinsterhood to imply that she, and therefore her magazine, were old-fashioned. The personal records surrounding these activities are important documentaries of the cultural climate. Less well-documented are the dependence of many men and women on the patronage of Dorothy Wellesley and Winifred Bryher. Dorothy Wellesley put money into the Woolfs’ Hogarth Press and Bryher provided funds for Robert MacAlmon’s avant-garde Contact Publishing Company in Paris, Sylvia Beach’s bookshop and the Egoist Press.

The new female autonomy reflected in women’s professional work and the unorthodox aspects of their lives is manifested in the developing stylistic independence of their writing. Their lifestyles contradict the myths of conventional femininity which were attached to the generic label of the woman poet. Upper-class writers such as Nancy Cunard and Edith Sitwell were distanced from the social snobbery and stifling traditionalism of their families, particularly because, as women, they could not hold power or inherit property. Many rejected heterosexual for lesbian relationships; the list includes Vita Sackville-West, Dorothy Wellesley, Sylvia Townsend Warner, Valentine Ackland, Natalie Barney, Amy Lowell, H.D., Gertrude Stein and Djuna Barnes. Leaving a marriage meant flouting the ‘cult of femininity’ propagated during and after the War. Dorothy Wellesley left her husband, H.D.’s marriage to Richard Aldington collapsed, Djuna Barnes divorced Courtney Lemon, after two years and settled in Paris with Thelma Wood; Mina Loy divorced her first husband. (Her second husband died.) Laura Riding divorced her first husband and lived with Robert Graves and his wife in Mallorca before returning to America and a second marriage. Frances Cornford and Anna Wickham remained in conventional marriages with children but Frances Cornford suffered from severe depressions and Anna Wickham separated from her husband for a while and eventually committed suicide because she felt a failure as a mother. Elizabeth Daryush, who spent time in Persia with her husband, a Persian government official, decided not to have children. Edith Sitwell, Winifred Holtby, Charlotte Mew, May Sinclair, Stevie Smith and Ruth Pitter were single.

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66 Mott 110.  
69 Edna St. Vincent Millay is thought to indicate a suppressed lesbian sexuality in some of her poems See www.sappho.ccm/poetry/e-millay.htm.
The un- and anti-orthodox lives and their literary activities demonstrate that the mythologies of femininity in the rhetoric of criticism and in the popular magazines were alien to these poets. In reaction, they often chose rigorous prosodic principles in order to forge an image associated with the high literary forms of ‘masculine’ writing. Their poetry holds its own in the stylistic terms of familiar categories, but at the same time requires a critical response which attends to their anti-feminine strategies. Where their poems seem ungendered, the woman-consciousness has to be perceived through its denial. The modernist concept of the ‘persona’, the masked identity of the poet on the page, was appropriated by some women to try out different masculine and feminine identities. Through these dramatisations, women developed a self-assertive colloquial voice. By their reworking of traditional forms, metres or symbols, and in their rejection of high poetic diction, all the poets participated in the literary revolt against Victorianism which was both precipitated and complicated by the First World War.
3. Women’s Poetry and the First World War

Women’s First World War writing records the cultural conflicts which centred on the ideologies of home and womanliness which had been developed before the War in reaction to suffrage activities and which were played upon during the War by equating motherhood with the ‘Motherland’. This rhetorical synthesis had the dual intention of quashing suffragism and of mustering support for the war effort. Recruiting propaganda required a reversion to traditional ideologies of gender yet women’s war work meant that they crossed the conventional lines between male and female roles. A minority of poems seem to support the dominant rhetoric of patriotism, maternity and sacrificial love but the majority indicate women’s psychological rejection of the idealised femininity on which the rhetoric depended. The separation of men’s and women’s experiences through the opposition of ‘Home’ and ‘Front’, meant that women were confronted with the difficulty of writing about distinctly female experience when they wished to avoid gender identification. Additionally, neither the canons of war poetry nor contemporary soldier poetry offered them relevant models for their experience. Like much war poetry, women’s is stylistically unadventurous, but several poems operate as implicit or explicit critiques of both literary and popular war verse. The contemporary idiom and anti-heroic irony in many poems contribute to the rejection of high diction and imperialist rhetoric which began before the war and was given impetus by poets writing during it. In a tradition of women’s poems, the First World War poetry indicates a move from private to public discourses, from the nineteenth-century aesthetic of self-renunciation to the twentieth-century aesthetic of self-dramatisation.1 Women projected themselves into male roles in order to engage imaginatively with the men at the Front, and dramatised various female roles for representing their new identities as workers, for protesting against pro-war propaganda or for faking the idealised femininity which the propaganda prescribed. The critical reception to women’s poems registers the continuation of the pre-war reaction against women’s suffrage in its endorsement of the values associated with traditional femininity.

It is important to include women in any conspectus of First World War poets because of the major impact which the War had in terms of cultural changes, and because these shifts have mostly been represented in male terms. As Michael Woolf states, ‘Any study of culture and society between the years 1900 and 1929 is obliged to confront the

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presence of the First World War as the central fact of historical experience. Jacqueline Rose similarly points to the intersection of the War's historical and literary significance, 'Neither Jacob's Room, nor The Waste Land, nor Ulysses, which also appeared in 1922, can be read without reference to the Great War'. The interface between suffragism, pacifism and nationalism has, however, been explored in women's fiction more than in their poetry. Classifying and evaluating war poetry written by women is particularly problematic because of its quantity and because much of it is hard to position within the established categories which foreground active service. Out of 2225 British writers who published war poems, at least 532 were women (pseudonyms and initials make exact figures impossible). In terms of their treatment of war, as Gill Plain observes, 'Lacking the superficial homogeneity of the soldier-poets' experience of life in the trenches, and even a cohesive vision of life on the home front, these disparate writers stubbornly resist comfortable categorisation as chroniclers, defenders or even supporters of the conflict. The poems which appear to collude with government propaganda are a problem for feminist criticism but literary history has to take account of these discourses as well as the oppositional ones. The poetry which voices dedication to the homeland appeals little to modern readers, but 'as an historical phenomenon it provides fruitful ground for an exploration of nationalism, as well as offering an unusually clear example of the interrelated working of the literary and social systems.'

The publication of Scars Upon My Heart: women's poetry and verse of the First World War (1981), one of the first revisionary anthologies of twentieth-century women's poetry, stirred up the female affiliation complex in feminist critics because of the pronounced difference between women's and men's poems. In Feminism and Poetry (1987), the anthology is discussed by Jan Montefiore under the heading 'The question of bad poetry' and described as 'conventional, sincere and amateurish'. She finds the poems valuable to the social historian, 'precisely because of their often uncritical handling of War, Sacrifice, Poetry and Religion: there is no professional finish to disguise thought and feeling', and to the literary critic for demonstrating 'the failed attempts to engage with masculine traditions.
and discourses'. As here, knee-jerk responses have tended to universalise the poetry from the weakest work and to imply that realist modes, the intersection of historical and literary relevance or the wrong ideology were pertinent only to women's poems. Literary histories of war poetry have tended to build on the binary model of combatant versus civilian yet, as Robert Graves recognised, 'many soldiers wrote as though they had seen more of the war than they really had.' Since women's experiences were more obviously 'at home', however, their writing has been prejudged as irrelevant in the terms of canonical trench poetry or the modernist opposition to domestic culture, for 'modernist sanctions against the personal and the sentimental continue as a political unconscious of criticism.'

Modernist sanctions against the expressive have undermined the literary status of all war poetry. In 1932, F. R. Leavis declared that, in comparison with T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, the war poets were not significant to the movements of British poetry, and the subsequent tendency to privilege the experimental poetry of the high modernists has overlooked the preference for realist modes when writing from the position of oppression or protest. Simon Featherstone reduces women's poems to two stylistic camps: doggerel verse, represented by Jessie Pope, and nineteenth-century romanticism, represented by Vera Brittain and Rose Macaulay. Featherstone concludes that the 'formal limitation' of women's poetry means that it 'remains peripheral to the major work of male poets' and he moves swiftly on to the modernist poetry of H.D. He does not, however, take into account the formal nature of most war poetry nor the particular imperatives upon women to write within recognised poetic traditions. As Elizabeth Marsland states, 'by far the majority of war poets adhered to conventional rhyme, metre and poetic syntax' but negotiated with the nineteenth-century war literature which had fed their imaginations. One should not, however, assume 'that the division between traditional and innovative forms is concomitant with acceptance or rejection of the Establishment position vis à vis the war.' Featherstone excuses what he implies is second-rate on the grounds that women suffered from 'uncertainty about the appropriate mode of writing to deal with female experience of the war.' He is accurate about the difficulty of finding an appropriate mode of writing, but the assumption that difference is synonymous with 'second-rate' needs investigating.

War poetry, especially, placed women between masculine and feminine discourses. The Great War was the first time that women were participants in, rather than spectators of,
what had previously been understood as a male event, but their experiences were separated.\textsuperscript{17} Before the War, ‘women were not then so concerned to express that area of their experience which was literally “no-man’s land”, off-limits to men and so outside the dominant culture. Rather, their literature was concerned with women’s entry into that exclusive part of the national culture which had previously been forbidden to women’.\textsuperscript{18} However, in war poetry particularly, it was hard for women to presume to speak in a universal voice when the universal voice was that of the male soldier poet. Neither the borrowed robes of nineteenth-century war verse, nor classical heroics, nor the combat poems of their male contemporaries were suitable for their experiences and perceptions of the War. In several poems, women adopted the voice of the male soldier; in others, they searched for a voice which related to their experiences of war work, leave-taking, loss or alienation from male militarism.

In all war writing, the pressure of extreme experience meant that realist discourses took priority over modernist syntactical fragmentations. As Paul Fussell states, ‘One of the cruxes of war . . . is the collision between events and the language available—or thought appropriate—to describe them.’\textsuperscript{19} Consequently, as Fussell has pointed out, poets looked to the literature of war to represent their experiences and traditional epic, narrative and lyric forms were appropriated for maintaining or subverting the heroic ethos of war. Helen Hamilton’s ‘The Romancing Poet’ illustrates that women were aware that these literary resources were ill-fitting to the First World War and particularly to their perspectives:

\begin{quote}
I wish you would refrain  
From making glad romance  
Of this most hideous war.  
It has no glamour,  
\hspace{1cm} Save man’s courage,  
\hspace{1cm} His indomitable spirit,  
\hspace{1cm} His forgetfulness of self!  
If you have words—  
\hspace{1cm} Fit words, I mean,  
\hspace{1cm} Not your usual stock-in-trade,  
\hspace{1cm} Of tags and clichés—  
\hspace{1cm} To hymn such greatness,  
\hspace{1cm} Use them.\textsuperscript{20}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{17} Nosheen Khan, \textit{Women’s Poetry of the First World War} (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1988) 2.  
\textsuperscript{18} Tylee 14.  
Women negotiated with the male traditions of war poetry which they knew; the biographies at the end of Catherine Reilly's anthology indicate that most of her poets were well-educated and many were connected with literary groups. Some, like Charlotte Mew, May Wedderburn Cannan and Katherine Tynan, were published poets before the war.

The diversity and complexity of women's responses, which the poetry records, are an important antidote to the mythologies of the maternal sentimentalist depicted in the recruitment posters such as the best known, 'Women of England say "Go!"'. As Claire Tylee puts it:

The main thrust of the official propaganda was an essentially Victorian ideal of war, which has dominated the British imagination of the Great War ever since. It promoted a chivalrous myth of British soldiers as pure young men who sacrificed their lives, innocently and willingly, to save their Mother-country and their womenfolk from violation. All criticism of this myth which implied that the war was anything other than a holy crusade against the bestial hun, was ruthlessly suppressed.

Since anti-war sentiment was suppressed, the poetry can be read as an instrument of women 'having their say' when they had no other means of public discourse. Phrases like 'Nobody asked what the women thought' indicate that they were aware of being gagged. Margaret Sackville was a pacifist and in 'Nostra Culpa' she suggests that women were guilty of keeping quiet because of their need for male approval:

We knew that Force the world has deified,
How weak it is. We spoke not, so men died.
Upon a world down-trampled, blood defiled,
Fearing that men should praise us less, we smiled.

The fact that several poets were active in feminist and socialist movements validates the interpretative approach which investigates the relationship between superficial passivity and unarticulated rebellion. Along with statistics, memoirs and fiction, Margaret Sackville's depiction of the unspoken protest of women registers the suppressed resistance which often lay below the surface acquiescence to their prescribed response. In 1928, H.D. confessed,

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21 Recruitment Poster, no. 75. See Plain 53.
22 Tylee 252.
23 S. Gertrude Ford, 'A Fight to Finish', Reilly 38.
24 Margaret Sackville, 'Nostra Culpa', Marsland 125, n. 54.
One of the most distinguished women of the political non-militant suffragettes said to me (in 1914) "I have studied the problem from every angle, but I can dare not question [sic] our cause for going to war. If I questioned it for one moment, I should go mad." I did not say to her then: "well, go mad." I would now.25

To look for the undertow of repressed opposition is not to suggest that the poetry is merely a cultural record. Responses to all war poetry exemplify the intersection of literary interest and historical significance.

The social and literary interest of women's poems is in their management of the competing impulses regarding their national and gendered identities. The War came at a time when suffragism had awakened the concept of equal rights and equal access to male-dominated public places and professions but it separated the experiences of men and women and set demands for nationalism above social equality. The opportunities to take over men's work during the war were countered by the prescribed feminine dedication to keeping the home fires burning and by the requirement to return to domestic duties when it was over. The disjunction between the ideologies of femininity, which were circulated by the powerful propaganda machines, and the individual experiences of women often provides the textual ambiguities which lifts the poetry above the merely documentary. According to Germaine Greer, the ambiguities separate the 'real' from the 'sham' poem and the difference between a poet and a poetess was the ability to recognise the ambivalence of her discourse:

The poetess typically presents a sanitized version of herself; she and her poetry are deodorized, depilated and submissive. . . . The poetess is seldom aware that the distinguishing characteristic of poetry is ambiguity; sometimes beneath the oily surface of a poetess' work the reader can discern the swell of troubled waters, a suggestion of bitterness so densely encoded that we cannot be sure that the poetess recognized it herself.26

It is profitless, however, to judge the extent to which the encoded 'swell of troubled waters' beneath the 'oily surface' was conscious, but it was often embedded. The frequent sense of liberation from domestic routine which underlies the symbolic rhetoric of sacrifice and duty is illustrated in Rose Macaulay's early war poem, 'Many Sisters to Many Brothers':

Oh it's you that have the luck, out there in blood and muck:
    You were born beneath a kindly star;
All we dreamt, I and you, you can really go and do,

25 H.D., in Rose 7.
26 Germaine Greer, Slipshod Sibyls: Recognition, Rejection and the Woman Poet (New York: Viking Press, 1995) xvi
And I can't, the way things are.
In a trench you're sitting, while I am knitting
A hopeless sock than never gets done.
Well, here's luck, my dear—and you've got no fear;
But for me... a war is poor fun.27

Rose Macaulay was apparently 'vilified for the seemingly naive sentiments' in this poem.28 In the light of recruitment propaganda, the anti-feminine stance was subversive, but the subversiveness is cloaked by the childlike rhythm and rhyming. It is likely that the innocent persona was a conscious cover for her resentment since Rose Macaulay was well aware of the ways in which men and women were manipulated by propaganda machinery. She was educated in Oxford and became a well-known writer, connected to Bloomsbury.

Much poetry illustrates the ways in which women at home were caught between the patriotic discourses of the establishment which surrounded them through the press and the anti-war writing of the combatant poets. Ironically, the hostility to the idealised feminine figure famously expressed by Owen in his denouncement of 'a certain poetess,' understood to be Jessie Pope,29 and by Sassoon in 'Glory to Women' was to a sentimental image largely constructed by men:

You love us when we're heroes, home on leave,
Or wounded in a mentionable place.
You worship decorations; you believe
That chivalry redeems the war's disgrace.
You make us shells. You listen with delight
By tales of dirt and danger fondly thrilled.
You crown our distant ardours while we fight,
And mourn our laurelled memories when we're killed.30

In Goodbye To All That, Robert Graves reprinted the 'Letter from “A Little Mother”' which indicated the cult of motherhood propagated by the Morning Post and other conservative media.31 It was published as a pamphlet and seventy five thousand copies were sold in less than a week. The 'Little Mother' asserted on behalf of the 'gentle-nurtured, timid sex' that the 'common soldier' would find the women of the British race at his heels, 'reliable,
dependent, uncomplaining.' The fact that it was designed to oppose 'those who disgrace their sacred trust of motherhood' indicates the significant presence of the female rebels and makes one wonder whether the letter was an editorial fiction.

Helen Hamilton's 'The Jingo-woman' represents vehement opposition to 'Little Mothers':

Jingo-woman
(How I dislike you!)
Dealer in white feathers,
Insulter, self-appointed. 32

The white feather doled out to men who did not volunteer for war service was a ruse initiated by Admiral Penrose Fitzgerald. As Nosheen Khan states, 'women were themselves the target of a great deal of pressure to send their men to fight; a fact which did not go unnoticed by them. As one [Lady Randolph Churchill] observed: "The English woman has to bear, in addition to separation, anxiety and possibly loss, the cruel responsibility of influencing the men's decision."' 33 Nora Bomford's 'Drafts' laments the way in which war exacerbated sex differences:

Sex, nothing more, constituent no greater
Than those which make an eyebrow's slant or fall,
In origin, sheer accident, which later, decides the biggest differences of all.
And, through a war, involves the chance of death
Against a life of physical normality—
So dreadfully safe! O, damn the shibboleth
Of sex! God knows we've equal personality. 34

Bomford vacillates between endorsing the heroic stature of male soldiers and bemoaning the exclusion of women from action in order to keep them 'So dreadfully safe!' Helen Hamilton was characteristically more outspoken against the ideal of vicarious glory which women were sold as consolations:

Abstain too, if you can,
From bidding us to plume ourselves
For being of the self-same breed
As these heroic souls. 35

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33 Khan 79.
34 Nora Bomford, 'Drafts', Reilly 12.
She addresses the poet who endorses such mythologies. The rhetoric of these poems indicate that women were still acutely 'sex-conscious'.

It is a myth that women lost the concept of equality during the War. In her leading article 'Women's Rights' in The Egoist, 1 October 1914, the former activist Dora Marsden assented to but lamented the halt of suffragism:

The war—still the war—has brought the wordy contest about women's rights to an abrupt finish, and only a few sympathetic words remain to be spoken over the feminist corpse. 36

May Sinclair's article, 'Women's Sacrifices for the War' published in Collier's Magazine, 1914, and Woman at Home, 1915, would have reached a wide audience. It detailed the ways in which women proved that they could do men's work equally well and argued that they would not collapse into preferring peace at any price. She insisted that it was not a question of 'sacrifice' but 'service' because women wanted to do men's work: 'If the war should last long and take a heavy toll of men, it would settle for all time the question of women's ability to fill all men's places.' 37 In June 1915, some seventy-eight thousand women had volunteered for clerical and shop work or war service in armament factories, agriculture and transport.

Many women in Britain were pacifists, but were inhibited from articulating their hostility towards the war machinery. In America, there was less constraint. In an article on women and war in the Little Review, September 1914, 'A Spectator' explained that she had observed the pre-war military suffragism in England with a mixture of terror and admiration, but the war demonstrated its justification: 'for the first time I felt the real tragedy of the women of Europe whose business is to bring up sons for the man's game of war'. 38 The same issue printed 'Children of War', by Eunice Tietjens, a regular contributor to Little Review, which associated patriotism with patriarchy:

And we shall pay—year after year, in our
Frail bodies and our twisted souls shall we pay
For your glorious patriotism.
Out of the wounds of war we cry to you,

38 Sonya Levien, 'Women in War', Little Review Sept. 1914: 5.
We who have yet to be.\textsuperscript{39}

The emotive device of unborn children's voices may have been deliberately appositional to the voice of the dead soldier which was a common strategy in men's war poems.

Harriet Monroe recalled that most of the poems submitted to \textit{Poetry}'s competition in 1914 were protesting against the war, and in 1917 she expressed her 'suspicion of the propaganda which was gradually luring us into the conflict'.\textsuperscript{40} In her editorial, September 1914, she argued for the role of poetry in constructing and changing man-made ideologies of war:

Poets have made more wars than kings, and war will not cease until they remove its glamour from the imaginations of men.

What is the fundamental, the essential and psychological cause of war? The feeling in men’s hearts that it is beautiful. And who created this feeling? Partly, it is true, kings and their “armies with banners”; but far more, poets with their war-songs and epics, sculptors with their statues—the assembled arts which have taken their orders from kings, their inspiration from battles. Kings and artists have united to give war its glamour, to transmute into sounds and colors and forms of beauty its ravages and horror, to give heroic appeal to its unreason, a heroic excuse to its rage and lust.

All this is of the past. The race is beginning to suspect those old ideals, to give valor a wider range than war affords, to seek danger not at the cannon’s mouth but in less noisy labors and adventures. When Nicholas of Russia and William of Germany, in solemn state the other day, invoked the blessing of God upon their armies, the emotion that went round the world was not the old thrill, but a new sardonic laughter.

As Cervantes smiled Spain’s chivalry away, so some poets of the new era may strip the glamour from war. . . . But the final word has not been said; the feeling that war is beautiful still lingers in men’s hearts, a feeling founded on world-old savageries—love of power, of torture, of murder, lob of big stakes in a big game. This feeling must be destroyed, as it was created, through the imagination. It is work for a poet.\textsuperscript{41}


\textsuperscript{41} Harriet Monroe, Editorial, \textit{Poetry} IV. VI. Sept. 1914: 232.
Monroe believed that the reversal of the heroic ethos was not mere wishful-thinking because a new poetry of grim protest was emerging. In her preface to *Tendencies in Modern American Poetry*, 1917, Amy Lowell recorded, 'It is impossible for anyone writing today not to be affected by the war. It has overwhelmed us like a tidal wave.'

The alienation of women from male militarism was supremely represented by Virginia Woolf in *Three Guineas*. In war, she says, a woman 'will find that she has no good reason to ask her brother to fight on her behalf to protect "our" country':

"Our country" she will say, "throughout the greater part of its history has treated me as a slave; it has denied me education or any share in its possessions. 'Our country' still ceases to be mine if I marry a foreigner. 'Our' country denies me the means of protecting myself... you are fighting to gratify a sex instinct which I cannot share; to procure benefits which I have not shared and probably will not share."

For Woolf, as Jacqueline Rose observes, 'the question of war is inseparable from that of gender or sex':

If at one level women find themselves bolstering up the system that maintains them ("our splendid empire") and then supporting war as one of the few opportunities to escape the tyranny of the home ("our splendid war") they none the less, because they are regularly excluded from the great civilisation—have a different take: "what is this civilisation in which we find ourselves?"

Given the psychologically complex relationship of women with nationalism, the patriotic poems are difficult to place. They are a testimony to the power of the propaganda machines which constructed the war in terms of duty, sacrifice and love. The Victorians had justified imperial militarism by Christian mythologies of chivalry and 'consciously or unconsciously, women's writing about the War was inextricably bound into these cultural conflicts.' In Pauline Barrington's 'Education' the stock image of the woman sewing or knitting is undercut by the critique of women's collusion with militarism in allowing her sons to play with toy soldiers:

The tears are slipping, dripping one by one;

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45 Tylee 46.
Your son has shot and wounded his small brother.
The mimic battle's ended with a sob,
While you dream
Over your seam.

... War is slipping, dripping death on earth.
If the child is father of the man,
Is the toy gun father of the Krupps?
For Christ's sake think!
While you sew
Row after row.46

In poems like this, there are two competing discourses: the official and idealised depiction of the women at home and an underlying objection to the man-made concept of military glory which was alien to them and which devastated their personal lives.

The poets who were most accommodating of the dominant pro-war ideologies, superficially, at least, were the ones who were most commercially successful and subsequently have been taken as more representative than they were. The most overtly patriotic poetry, like Jessie Pope's *War Poems* (1915) and May Wedderburn Cannan's *In War Time* (1916), were used to promote nationalistic sentiments by the literary papers and the popular press. Reviewers of Katherine Tynan’s *Flower of Youth: Poems in War Time* (1915) and *The Holy War* (1916) endorsed the conjunction of nationalistic and feminine qualities by applauding the perceived 'delicacy and tenderness' and 'appealing gentleness'.47 Similarly, the *TLS* embraced an anthology, *Lest we forget* (1915), which was published to aid the Queen Mary Needlework Guild. According to the review, it was "'inscribed", as Baroness Orczy says in her foreword, "to every individual woman and girl of Great Britain who today is bearing so heroically—so uncomplainingly—her own share of Britain's burden in this great war.".48 In reviewing Irene Hammond’s *War Verse and Others*, the alleged lack of 'poetic quality' was useful for keeping women poets in their place.49 Books like Rose Macaulay's *Three Days* (1919) and Margaret Cole's *Poems* (1918) which interrogate the ethics of war were less well advertised.

Lucy Whitmell’s devotional verse ‘Christ in Flanders’, first printed in *The Spectator*, 11 September 1915, was one of the most reprinted poems of the war.50 The prevalence of

Christian imagery in early war poems was part of the construction of the War as a Christian crusade by the careful propaganda campaign of the British government. Katherine Tynan’s ‘Mid Piteous Heaps of Dead’ accordingly pointed to the comfort offered by the Catholic faith in the story of a young soldier’s dying words which conformed to the promoted synthesis between the soldier and the crucified Christ and therefore between his mother and the Holy Mother. The publishers of Katherine Tynan’s *Flower of Youth* inflamed the popularity of the title poem by a note appended to the page: ‘In response to numerous applications, the publishers can supply copies of this poem printed separately at twopence each. The profits will be given to the Dublin Castle Red Cross Hospital.’ The poem offered consolations of Heavenly reward:

They run and leap by a clear river
And of their youth they have great joy.
God who made boys so clean and good
Smiles with the eyes of fatherhood.

The lines echo Rupert Brooke’s representation of war’s purification—‘as swimmers into cleanliness leaping’. These poems of Katherine Tynan and Lucy Whitmell’s ‘Christ in Flanders’ indicate the aspect of the female imagination which sought to enter into the events of war by imitating the well-circulated patriotic poems by Rupert Brooke and Rudyard Kipling.

Women allied themselves with men through depicting men’s war service and using men’s frame of reference. In *Flower of Youth*, for example, there are meditations on soldiers and airmen in England and Tynan’s native Ireland. The public school imagery in ‘The Golden Boy’ exemplifies how women projected themselves into the male arena:

The danger’s in his blood, like wine,
The old heroic passion leaps;
The son of the mighty fighting line
Goes glad whatever woman weeps.

He plays the game, winning or losing,
As in the playing-fields at home;
This picnic’s nothing of his choosing,
But since it’s started, let it come!

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51 Tylee 57.
He lives his hour with keenest zest,
And midst the flying death he spares
A laugh to the light-heart schoolboy jest,
Mingled with curses and with prayers.

Gay at Eton or at Harrow,
Counts battles as by goals and runs:
God keeps him from Death's flying arrow
To give his England fighting sons.55

As Paul Fussell has detailed, the competitive public school ethos provided a common vocabulary and imagery for the British soldier poets; it also emphasised the male-only site of experience. Although Tynan hints at the over-glorification of war, the protest is overshadowed by the endorsement of nationalism which made her poems successful.

Other poems depicted women's roles as men wanted to see them. In 'Play the Game' Jessie Pope's reinforcement of recruiting propaganda is in terms of male pursuits, football and shooting. She colludes with the 'Women of Britain say "Go!"' campaign, but the clichés demonstrate that the rhetoric is wholly adopted from the dominant discourses:

Football's a sport, and a rare sport too,
Don't make it a source of shame.
Today there are worthier things to do.
Englishmen, play the game!
A truce to the League, a truce to the Cup,
Get to work with a gun.
When our country's at war we must all back up—
It's the only thing to be done! 56

Jessie Pope was educated at Craven House, Leicester and North London Collegiate School—the same establishment as Stevie Smith. Her poems, humorous fiction and articles were printed in Punch and other leading popular magazines and newspapers. Her books of poems were always promoted in the Times Literary Supplement with approving noises like, 'We are glad of another volume of those poems as full of point and sling as the previous volume.'57 Her Simple Rhymes for Stirring Times (1916) had been individually printed in the Daily Mail and the Daily Express. The review in the TLS tellingly quotes from 'Mariana'

56 'Play the Game', Jessie Pope's War Poems (London: Grant Richards Ltd., 1915) 11
as an example of Jessie Pope’s ‘genre’; this poem sets women apart from the war by its
story of a woman who was woken by an air raid with her hair in curling pins so thereafter
she took care to look her best when she went to bed and even hoped to be disturbed by
bombs.58 The editor’s Preface to War Poems (1915) illustrates the propaganda which
fabricated such paradigmatic ‘femininity’ into a universality:

Since the war began Miss Jessie Pope has been publishing these poems, and has
received from all parts of the world letters in their praise; but perhaps the most
gratifying of them all is the letter which reached the office of The Daily Mail from a
soldier at the front: “The verses were much admired by us all out here, and I want
you to send them to my wife for me, as they will be such a ‘buck up’ for her, and
bucking up means as much to those at home as well as for us. Really, they need it
more, as after all, theirs is the most wearying suspense.”

The euphemistic language of the said soldier and the sentimental depiction of the waiting
women are imitated in ‘Comrades in Arm-lets’, which reassures the men of universal
feminine capitulation to the military uniform, an emblem of idealised masculinity:

Not theirs the popular uniform
That takes the feminine heart by storm,
And wins soft glances, shy or warm,
The perquisites [sic] of pluck.59

Similarly, the plural voice in ‘Captive Conquerors’—subtitled ‘(It is reported that women in
Stuttgart have been forbidden by military proclamation to cast amorous glances on the
British prisoners)’—affirmed men’s desirability and women’s constancy: ‘But, Fraus and
Fräuleins, what’s the use of it?/ Their hearts, please understand, belong to us!’60

Jessie Pope frequently constructed an apparently universal recruiting call to men.
‘Little and Good’ is unquestioningly propagandist and ‘The Call’ was an unabashed appeal
to have ‘true grit’ for the sake of the Empire. In ‘The Two Goliaths’ she appealed to the Old
Testament to legitimise the English cause.61 ‘Socks’, represents the knitting fever
phenomenon of the First World War:

He was brave—well, so was I—
Keen and merry, but his lip
Quivered when he said good-bye—
Purl the seam-stitch, purl and slip.

The inevitable conclusion was that 'he'll come out on top, somehow'.

These poems are difficult for contemporary, particularly feminist, critics because of their apparent lack of critical response to official propaganda. In the allusion to the soldier's lip quivering, however, even these jog-trot verses, which superficially do nothing but buck up dominant ideologies of military heroism and female dependence, move towards redefining masculinity, even at the moment where it seems most endorsed. It is also possible to interpret the superficiality as a register of the borrowed nature of the discourse when women assume the identity created for them by men. Jessie Pope's female impersonations can be strategies for masking the forbidden response, albeit unconsciously. It is possible to read into "'No'" both a compliance with and a denial of the chivalric platitudes which required women to view themselves in need of protection:

And what of the girl who is left behind,
And the wife who misses her mate?
Oh, well, we've got our business to mind
Though it's only to watch and wait.
So we'll take what comes with a gallant heart
As we busily knit and sew,
Trying, God help us, to do our part,
"Are we downhearted?"—"NO!"

The almost parodic cheeriness could stem from a genuine sense of independence which women were forbidden to profess. The exaggerated regularity also suggests the fictionality of the stock responses which the poem purports to articulate.

In 'War Girls' Jessie Pope leaks a more palpable suggestion that women's injunctions on men to 'Go!' were fuelled by their enjoyment of the unprecedented opportunities provided by life without them:

There's the girl who clips your ticket for the train,
And the girl who sweeps the loft from floor to floor,
There's the girl who does a milk round in the rain,

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63 Tylee 57.
64 Jessie Pope, “'No'”, War Poems 10.
And the girl who calls for orders at your door.
   Strong sensible, and fit,
   They’re out to show their grit,
   And tackle jobs with energy and knack.
   No longer caged and penned up,
   They’re going to keep their end up
Till the khaki soldier boys come marching back.

There’s the motor girl who drives a heavy van,
   There’s the butcher girl who brings your joint of meat,
There’s the girl who cries “All fares, please!” like a man,
   And the girl who whistles taxis up the street.
   Beneath each uniform
   Beats a heart that’s soft and warm,
Though of canny mother-wit they show no lack;
   But a solemn statement this is,
   They’ve no time for love and kisses
Till the khaki soldier boys come marching back.⁶⁵

Although the narrative capitulates to reinstating wife and mother as women’s preferred roles, the energetic rhythm suggests the pleasure of working ‘like a man’. The line, ‘No longer caged and penned up’, hints at the excitement which is recorded in memoirs, from which ‘we can see that the war represented an opportunity for “adventure” for many women. They used it to escape domestic restrictions, to get “out of the cage” . . . they gained self-respect and respect from other women’.⁶⁶

Nina MacDonald registered a similar sense of release from domesticity in ‘Sing a Song of War-time’:

   Ev’rybody’s doing
   Something for the War,
   Girls are doing things
   They’ve never done before,
   Go as ‘bus conductors,
   Drive a car or van,
   All the world is topsy-turvy
   Since the War began.⁶⁷

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⁶⁶ Tylee 253.
⁶⁷ Nina MacDonald, ‘Sing a Song of War-time’, Reilly 69.
The language is uncomfortably facile but the inappropriate nursery rhyme idiom and metre represent the disjunction between the unprecedented experience of women and the forms available to them. After the war, many women admitted to having tasted an independence which was by no means unpalatable and which they wanted to retain.

It cannot be denied that poetry like Nina McDonald's or Jessie Pope's is stylistically claustrophobic, but as Elizabeth Marsland points out, all propaganda poetry, whether patriotic or protesting, was subject to cliché and conventional formalism. She divides war poetry into two categories: 'propaganda', which includes both patriotic and protest poems because they are similar in tone and language, and 'non-propaganda'; both kinds of propaganda are prone to didacticism and both kinds are found in 'popular' verse. This stylistic link between protest and patriotic writing illustrates the double-speak which applauds anti-war but condemns pro-war polemic, ostensibly for aesthetic reasons. Most of the archaic patriotic verse was written in the early years of the war and, in accordance with a widespread move from idealism in 1914 to satire in 1918, the voice of protest was the more common after 1915. In *Scars upon my Heart*, the majority of the poetry can be labelled as propagandist and the poems of protest outweigh those which support the war.

Protest poetry can include bereavement poems because the articulation of grief contradicted the makers of 'A Little Mother' who declared that women should resist 'the lonely anguish of a bereft heart' in order 'to carry on the glorious work our men's memories have handed down for us now and all eternity.' Iris Tree's untitled poem represents the taboo on grief:

No more! — And we the mourners dare not wear
The black that folds our hearts in secrecy of pain,
But must don purple and bright standards bear,
Vermilion of our honour, a bloody train.

We dare not weep who must be brave in battle—

Gill Plain reads the bereavement poems in the terms of 'grief psychology', arguing that they demonstrate alternating moods of anger and passivity or the common phases of avoidance, postponement, keeping faith with the dead or reproaching them for leaving. Lesbia Thanet dramatises her tussle with the injunction against displaying grief:

O You — so commonplace, so dear,

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69 'A Little Mother', Graves 190.
70 Iris Tree, untitled poem, Reilly 115.
So knit with all I am or do!
Now braver thought I lack:
Only God bring you back—God bring you back! ⁷¹

The significance of the responses to grief are that they contradict the 'dominant patriarchal logic of war': 'Hence in the aftermath of war, these monuments, these calls to the dead, remain as semiotic irruptions within the symbolic order fundamentally unchanged by the ravages of war. In this context it is no surprise that these poems disappeared from the anthologies of war verse.'⁷² Plain's argument rehabilitates superficially sentimental verses and elegiac lyrics like Marian Allen West's ‘The Wind on the Downs’ which contradicts the palliative that women assumed a heroic stature through the deaths of their husbands.⁷³ Similarly, in the 'grief poems' by Katherine Tynan, Vera Brittain and May Wedderburn Cannan, the semiotic register breaks into the symbolic by rejecting the dubious consolations of being created heroines by the deaths of their men. In 'Lamplight', for example, Cannan subtly critiques the logic of war by juxtaposing personal grief with the ideals of Empire.⁷⁴

The poems also indicate that the loss of the men through whom women were given identity had the potential for allowing them to reconstruct themselves outside of the patriarchal order. Ruth Comfort Mitchell’s rejection of the 'tinsel platitudes' paved the way for an identity which was independent of 'dominant patriarchal logic':

*How much longer, O Lord, shall we bear it all?*

*How many more red years?*

*Story it and glory it all,*

*In seas of blood and tears?*

*They are braggart attitudes we've worn so long;*

*They are tinsel platitudes we've sworn so long—*⁷⁵

Although some grief poems indicate 'a retreat into conservative ideologies', voices like Mitchell’s, above, register the ways in which many women’s consciousness changed during the War.⁷⁶

There is less disjunction between the dominant discourses of war and the writer’s subjectivity in poems which represent women’s actual, rather than imaginative or prescribed, identities as medical workers abroad and volunteers at home. They present complex responses to war in an easier idiom. Some poems like ‘Women at Munition

⁷² Plain 61.
⁷⁵ Ruth Comfort Mitchell, ‘He went for a soldier’, Reilly 76.
⁷⁶ Plain 60.
Making express resentment at producing weapons and indicate a conflict between pacifist, suffragist and nationalist impulses. Other poems depict a relish at the opportunities to be involved in the machinery of war. These depictions of women’s differing psychological conditions are crucial to dispelling the myths that women universally supported the war or were by nature essentially pacifist. May Wedderburn Cannan’s ‘Rouen—26 April-25 May 1915’, was apparently very popular. The metrical similarity to John Masefield’s ‘Cargoes’ and Rudyard Kipling’s ‘Mandalay’ link it with the sort of narrative verse associated with imperial values but it expresses the excitement of independence, travel and access to male preserves which characterises much women’s First World War writing:

Can you recall those noontides and the reek of steam and coffee,  
Heavy-laden noontides with the evening’s peace to win,  
And the little piles of Woodbines, and the sticky soda bottles,  
And the crushes in the “Parlour”, and the letters coming in?  

Can I forget the passage from the cool white-bedded Aid Post  
Past the long sun-blistered coaches of the khaki Red Cross train  
To the truck train full of wounded, and the weariness and laughter,  
And “Good-bye, and thank you, Sister”, and the empty yards again?

May Wedderburn Cannan was a VAD and in the Intelligence Service during the war; she also worked for the Clarendon Press in Oxford, which published government propaganda materials, and then became a librarian. Claire Tylee states that she was consciously conservative in her literary style, unashamed in her admiration for Rupert Brooke and an example of women who helped ‘to make the War, and were intoxicated by it’.  

The subtext of welcome adventure in ‘Rouen’ and records like May Sinclair’s *Journal of Impressions in Belgium* (1915) indicate that women were more intoxicated by their new opportunities than by patriotism. May Sinclair went to Belgium for seventeen days with the Motor Ambulance Corps and was accepted by the Belgian Red Cross, but the advance of the Germans forced the Corps to retreat from Ghent to Bruges and then to

79 Tylee 81, 83.  
Ostend. Her journal recorded the ignominy of retreat and her envy of those who remained.81 She wrote three sets of verse about her experiences but only two were published, including ‘Field Ambulance Retreat’, subtitled ‘Via Dolorosa, Via Sacra’:

II
The road-makers made it well
Of fine stone, strong for the feet of the oxen and of the great Flemish hostess,
And for the high wagons piled with corn from the harvest.
And the labourers are few;
They and their quiet oxen stand aside and wait
By the long road loud with the passing of the guns, the rush of
armoured cars and the tramp of an army on the march forward to battle
And, where the piled corn-wagons went, our dripping
Ambulance carries home
Its red and white harvest from the fields.82

May Sinclair’s approval of imagist objectivity, economy and clarity can be discerned in the intensity of her description; the uneven line lengths are characteristic of her experiments with stream-of-consciousness. Like May Sinclair, Charlotte Mew can be described as modernist in her representation of individual or collective consciousness.83 In ‘The Cenotaph: September 1919’, for example, Mew explores the effect which the war memorial will have on the passers-by through interior monologue:

Only, when all is done and said,
God is not mocked and neither are the dead.
For this will stand in our Market place—
Who’ll sell, who’ll buy
(Will you or I
Lie to each other with the better grace)?84

Mew was more preoccupied with psychological responses than the with the events or ethics of war. Rose Macaulay’s experimental poems like ‘The Shadow’ are also evasive in terms of their perspective on the War.85 These oblique, sometimes ambivalent, perspectives on the war’s events are implicitly subversive.

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83 May Sinclair’s and Charlotte Mew’s non-war poetry is discussed in chapter 7, ‘Female Modernists’.
In the *Egoist*, J. G. Fletcher cited Amy Lowell’s ‘Bombardment’ as one of the best war poems, appearing to be ‘male-authored’. Her ‘September 1918’ accords with imagist principles of concrete observation:

This afternoon was the colour of water falling through the sunlight;  
The trees glittered with the tumbling of leaves;  
The sidewalks shone like alleys of dropped maple leaves,  
And the houses ran along them laughing out of square, open windows.  
Under a tree in the park,  
Two little boys, lying flat on their faces,  
Were carefully gathering red berries  
To put in a pasteboard box.

Some day there will be no war,  
Then I shall take out this afternoon  
And turn it in my finger,  
And remark the sweet taste of it upon my palate,  
And note the crisp variety of its flights of leaves.  
To-day I can only gather it  
And put it into my lunch-box,  
For I have time for nothing  
But the endeavour to balance myself  
Upon a broken world.

It is significant that the freer verse forms and more natural idioms are found in modernist and anti-war poetry which was detached from the official discourses and propaganda. Even where the versification is regular, it does not conform to Featherstone’s types of popular doggerel or nineteenth-century Romanticism. Iris Tree frequently manipulated the sonnet to challenge the traditional celebration of honour and explore the male psychology of war—‘will the fatted gods be gloried yet?’ Nancy Cunard’s sonnet ‘Zeppelin’ foregrounds perception rather than events: ‘I saw the people climbing up the street/Maddened with war and strength and thought to kill.’

The anti-heroic poems are the most poignant for end-of-the twentieth century readers and often ring the most true. It is also notable that women found a public voice in these anti-war texts, often, however, through a male persona. Catherine During Whetham

parodies Wordsworth’s sonnet in her anti-epic figuration of wartime, ‘The Poet and the Butcher’:

Milton, thou shouldest be living at this hour,
England hath need of thee. She is a den
Of sugar cards and meatless days and feasts,
Yclept of all their wonted pageantry. 89

Cicely Hamilton’s ‘Non-Combatant’ dramatises her contempt for and fear of femininity ‘in as far as it implied weak helplessness’. 90 It is the monologue of a wounded soldier who finds the condition of passivity and dependence humiliating: “‘With life and heart afire to give and give/I take and eat the bread of charity.’” 91 Although the subject is a man, Claire Tylee reads the poem as voicing the shameful uselessness with which most women had to come to terms because the Great War forced them into dependence on the male army for their defence against invasion. Cicely Hamilton was a ‘familiar figure on suffragette platforms’ and a director of Time and Tide. She worked in a British women’s hospital in France during the war. 92 The poem could support the ideology that war service was the highest form of human activity, but it is an implicit indictment of the propaganda which made the soldier feel useless.

In order to censure recruiting talk, Vera Brittain dramatises the inglorious reception to the returning soldier in ‘The Lament of the Demobilised’:

And no-one talked heroics now, and we
Must just go back and start again once more.
“You threw four years into the melting pot—
Did you indeed!” These others cry. “Oh well,
The more fool you!”
And we’re beginning to agree with them. 93

S. Gertrude Ford similarly treats the euphemistic rhetoric of newspaper language with the satire of her male contemporaries. The form of ‘A Fight to Finish’ parodies the rhyming couplets associated with popular jingoism:

“Fight the year out!” the War-lords said;

90 Tylee 137.
91 Reilly 46.
92 Biographical note on Cicely Hamilton, Reilly 133.
What said the dying man among the dead?

"To the last man!" cried the profiteers:
What said the poor of the starveling years?

"War is good!" yelled the Jingo-kind:
What said the wounded, the maimed and blind?

"Fight on!" the Armament-kings besought;
Nobody asked what the women thought.

"On!" echoed Hate where the fiends kept tryst:
Asked the Church, even, what said Christ?  

Again, dramatisations enable her to shoot the invectives not expected of women. Ford was a socialist, feminist and writer. In addition to publishing poems in periodicals, she wrote Lessons in Verse Craft and edited the Little Books of Georgian Verse. Her concern for economic equality above warfare is expressed in 'The Tenth Armistice Day':

Spend not on us your cares
Your wreaths, for we have better flowers to gather.
But lift the load our workless comrade bears:
Flowers for the dead? Bread for the living rather!

She manipulates the device of the dead soldier’s voice, which commonly called survivors to guilty or reverent remembrance, to challenge the misplaced political priorities.

In the protest poetry, the perceived enemy was rarely the German but the propagators of war. Elizabeth Chandler Forman’s 'The Three Lads' consists of the parallel narratives of a German, Russian and English soldier fighting for the same allegedly just cause:

"Then hey! for our righteous king!" (he cries)
"And the good old God in his good old skies!
And ho! for love and a pair of blue eyes,—
For I'm off to the war and away!"
The ballad defies the nationalistic rhetoric and Christian-chivalric mythologies of war doled out to the recruits. The ironic register in a poem such as this is the dominant feature of British First World War poetry and consequently of subsequent twentieth-century poetry.\(^9\) Irony, which represents the discontinuity between language and experience,\(^8\) figures in several poems, such as ‘What Reward?’ by Winifred Letts:

You gave your life, boy,
And you gave a limb:
But he who gave his precious wits,
Say, what reward for him?\(^9\)

It has the satirical edge and the economy of Siegfried Sassoon. Other poems by Winifred Letts (1882-1971) are less acerbic but also anti-heroic. ‘The Deserter’ challenges recruiting pressure in its sympathy for the war refuser.\(^10\) Winifred Letts was a VAD and in ‘Screens’ she describes the common experience of nurses who witnessed the deaths of young men. In ‘The Veteran’ Margaret Cole’s tragically ironic depiction of a nineteen year old war victim is similar to Wilfred Owen’s ‘Disabled’.\(^10\) Nosheen Khan is happy to point out that ‘women were writing protest poetry before Sassoon and Owen’ as an implicit measure of literary value, but is cautious about ‘The Veteran’ because of its ‘moralising tone which stems from the writer’s pacifist sympathies’.\(^10\) The dramatic dialogue, however, has a dialectic which avoids didacticism. Margaret Postgate Cole was the daughter of a Cambridge professor, educated at Roedean and Girton, a classics teacher at St. Paul’s Girls School in London and the wife of G. D. H. Cole, ‘socialist writer, economist, labour historian and author’. She too was a prolific political and literary writer and took up political work in the Fabian Research Department from 1917.\(^10\)

Women’s activities and autobiographical records which testify to their deep-seated objections to war help dissolve any idea that they were simply latching on to the trend for satire. They also dissolve the simple opposition between the suffering men at the Front and the pro-war civilians at Home. After the war, the insistence on women returning to their pre-war roles was channelled through the continual publishing of nationalistic early poetry, like Rupert Brooke’s sonnets and Jessie Pope’s *War Rhymes*, and through the terms of approval and disapproval of literary criticism. Conservative critics entrenched the association of

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\(^12\) Khan 15, 26.
\(^13\) Biographical note, Reilly 131.
women with the personal life and perpetuated the rhetoric of patriotism, maternity and love as an antidote to the effect of women's suffrage movements.

In the 'Afterword' to Forever England: Literature, Femininity and Conservatism Between the Wars, Alison Light concludes that there is 'still much work to be done exploring the full cultural meanings of that “war to end all wars” for British social life.'

The War had complicated the suffragist project because its leaders agreed to support the war effort and all women over thirty were granted the vote in 1918; at the same time, their taste of men's work and men's pay meant that they resented the requirement to return to prescribed domesticity when the men came back. It was difficult to overtly express any resentment when they were expected to honour the men who had fought for national freedom and to respect the memories of those who had died, many of whom were members of their own families. If women were attached to their homes as wives or daughters, however, it was often through duty or financial dependence, rather than affection or gratitude. Many were single at the end of the war and were aware of the surplus of women, but as Ruth Pitter stated, 'We knew very well that we couldn't all marry and we liked the idea of independence.'

Only sentimental histories maintain that women only thought of fulfilment through marriage. In 1914, in a letter to The Egoist headed 'Marriage is Dead', R. S. Kerr observed that 'the vast majority of educated women have left marriage behind them forever'. The War's 'brides who never were' became the emancipated career women of the 1920s and 1930s.

Although largely realist, much women's poetry contributes to the ironic treatment of classical or nineteenth-century heroic verse which is associated with First World War poetry. As Elizabeth Marsland indicates, although experimental writing was not common among war poets, 'there is little doubt that the conflict between pro-war and anti-war factors hastened the demise of nineteenth century poetic conventions, when it disestablished amongst the young literati after the war the social attitudes that traditional verse expressed pro-patria.'

F. R. Leavis wrote off the war poets on the grounds of technical caution—'the debilitated nineteenth-century tradition, then, continued without serious challenge, and there had been nothing to suggest a serious new start'—but Quentin Bell linked the changes of mood and idiom to the spread of modernism: 'A certain scepticism, a certain uneasiness, replaced the glorious certainties of 1914. The war poets began to speak in a new tone of voice. In a word, the mood was one of disenchantment, and in that mood the British public was ready to listen to what Bloomsbury had to say.'

107 Judith Kazantzis, Preface, Reilly xvi.
108 Marsland 5.
109 Leavis 58.
Georgian departures, from high rhetoric in favour of conversational idioms and from the abstract to the ordinary, were taken up in war poems by men and women.
4. Between the Georgians and Bloomsbury: Frances Cornford (1886-1960) and Vita Sackville-West (1892-1962)

Frances Cornford and Vita Sackville-West could be given modernist credentials through their personal connections or the psychological interest of their poems but it is counterproductive to endorse modernism’s evaluative weight when it is responsible for undermining non-experimental poetry like theirs. It is precisely because their poems cut across Georgian and modernist categories that it has lain in a no-man’s land. Vita Sackville-West was considered ‘Georgian’ in her day but does not feature in Georgian histories; Frances Cornford was well-known as a modern poet in the 1920s but labelled ‘Georgian’ in retrospect. Their publications and reputations should be recognised within the Georgian period but separated from the negative mythologies which have turned ‘Georgian’ into a critical term of abuse—‘an automatic sneer’. Furthermore, since ‘Georgian’ can be a metonym for ‘expressive’, its rehabilitation has implications for harnessing poetry to politics because, as has been seen in First World War poetry, the language of extreme experience or protest tends towards realist modes. The classification ‘Between the Georgians and Bloomsbury’ dismantles the misleading binary divide between Georgian and modernist and the associated opposition between tradition and experiment. Although stylistically cautious, they eschewed the high rhetoric and abstractions associated with Victorian sentimentalism and the didacticism of Edwardian jingoism in favour of the clarity and directness of the Georgian. The formal restraint was also a symptom of feminine denial. Both Frances Cornford and Vita Sackville-West espoused the theory of the androgynous mind, and Sackville-West used poetic conventions to mask her bisexuality. In the progress of twentieth-century women poets, their female male impersonation appears to liberate them from the self-denying aesthetic of the nineteenth century but to limit their stylistic freedom.

The unadventurous versification and the apparent lack of gender politics have meant that these poets have been largely uninvestigated by feminist critics. Since all Georgian poetry had regular form, there was and is a fallacious assumption that all poems with regular form were what Georgian came to stand for: out of touch, traditional and sentimental. The implications are particularly detrimental for women because they tended to use conventional forms in order to identify themselves with the male tradition which they sought to enter. In discussing the exiles from literary modernism, Celeste Schenck puts a case which is central to the re-evaluation of non-experimental writing:

If... the radical poetics of modernism often marks a deeply conservative politics, might it also possibly be true that the seemingly genteel, conservative poetics of women poets whose obscurity even feminists have overlooked might pitch a more radical politics than we had considered possible?²

It cannot be claimed that there is a ‘radical’ gender or class politics in the poetry considered here, as there is in the ‘Female modernists’. Frances Cornford and Vita Sackville-West tended to conceal their gender but there is often a personal undertow. Although they did not voice feminist protest, they investigated social conventions, notably concerning marriage and motherhood. Schenck’s statement especially applies to Vita Sackville-West who qualifies stylistically as a Georgian yet whose covert lesbian agenda has not been recognised in her poems.

In reassessing non-experimental women’s poetry, it is particularly important to reject the binary opposition between modernists and Georgians because of the associated distance between the intellectual and weak-minded. As David Perkins argues, ‘The conventional statement among critical sheep thus came to be: the modernists had displaced a school of Georgian poets; these poets had been unoriginal and slack in technique, shallow in feeling, slight in intellect; their poetry specialised in insipid appreciativeness, false simplicity and week-end escapism.’³ Similarly, George Walter believes that the homogenising of Georgian by its weakest aspects has exaggerated the predominance of modernism: ‘By lumping all Georgian poets together and following the modernist line that it was “complacent” and reactionary, subsequent commentators have ensured that modernism has maintained its place as the only convulsive shift in the history of early twentieth-century English poetry.’⁴ It is also misleading to homogenise ‘Georgian’ when it has always been a movable definition, sliding between periodisation—all poetry written during the reign of George V (1910—1936), Edward Marsh’s five Georgian Poetry anthologies published between 1912 and 1922, a list of variable names such as Rupert Brooke, John Masefield and Walter De La Mare, or as a certain kind of poetry characterised by rural setting, colloquial diction and regular verse form. It was not always a pejorative term with connotations of archaism. The first volume of Georgian Poetry 1911-12 (1912) was introduced with ‘the belief that English poetry is now once again putting on a new strength and beauty’ and on being selected by Edward Marsh, Wilfred Owen famously celebrated, ‘I am held peer by the

Georgians; I am a poet's poet.' In *The Trend of Modern Poetry* (1934), Geoffrey Bullough identified the link between Georgian directness and the psychological realism associated with modernism: 'the value of [the Georgians'] experiments in the familiar poetry of commonplace incident lit by fancy, and their tentative probing of conscious thought-processes is insufficiently recognised today'.

Georgian poetry achieved some degree of cultural democracy because the conversational idiom made it more widely accessible than the high diction of the Edwardians or Victorians and Marsh's Georgian anthologies reached a wide audience. The recorded sales of the first four volumes were between fifteen and nineteen thousand. They were followed by many others anthologies such as Thomas Moult's annual *Best Poetry* collections which brought poetry by American and British men and women to both literary and general readers. Additionally, several anthologies emerged from the 'provinces' such as Merseyside and Birmingham. Edith Sitwell's counter series *Wheels*, however, arguably exacerbated the conceptual polarity between tradition and experiment.

The post-War literary climate was marked by radical and reactionary cross-currents. In the myriad discussions of poetry during the period, the co-existent tugs of the new and the old are evident by implication and in the contradictory value judgements of reviews:

Here one sees represented the holding to old traditions, old forms and conventions, with the breaking into new forms, which beside the old seem almost of no form, but are none the less, indeed some will say, are the more, true poetry. Here is felt the restlessness, the desire for change, interwoven with the clear and steadfast faith which can be seen in the world this poetry mirrors.

Geoffrey Bullough detected at least five significant tendencies at the start of the twentieth century and observed that the survival of traditional poetry meant that the modern did not go unchallenged. When *The Waste Land* was published in 1922 it was greeted with caution in the literary papers, partly because the First World War had put a brake on experimentation. As David Peters Corbett states, Futurism and Vorticism lost their impact because radical art became associated with destruction: 'Modernism was irrecoverably associated with what the war was being fought to defeat and returns to figuration and realism were applauded.'

In 1925, Edith Sitwell recorded, 'Many of the poets labelled Georgian are still writing at the moment from the point of view as that which has prevailed since Wordsworth, and therefore

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8 Bullough 44–5.
seems less obscure and alarming to a certain portion of the press and of the public.'\textsuperscript{11} The three column review of \textit{Georgian Poetry 1916-17} demonstrates how the association between form and cultural stability became embedded during the war:

If these young poets write in metre and rhyme and shape, it is because they want to, because expression urges them to form. And it is mighty comforting— in these days when the spirit is hungry for any scrap of permanence and continuity— to see the old friendly boots shaping themselves thus kindly to the proud young feet.\textsuperscript{12}

Although Georgian poetry was understood to represent some stability in a changing set of values, modernism was also characterised by nostalgia for a distant past and it did not cast off all formal effects; notably, T. S. Eliot maintained classical metres and traditional rhyming patterns.

The importance of arguing that literary movements were less distinct than retrospective categorisation commonly suggests is that the technical reserve of women has made them seem irrelevant to histories of modern poetry. Although Harold Monro's Poetry Bookshop Press published the Georgian anthologies, edited by Eddie Marsh,\textsuperscript{13} Monro believed that after the first two volumes they lost their cutting edge, and he published modernist poets like Ezra Pound through his chapbooks. He was in dialogue with Pound and other writers associated with \textit{The Egoist} and with T. S. Eliot at \textit{The Criterion}. However, the hostility of T. S. Eliot, Edith Sitwell and Virginia Woolf to the Georgians partly accounts for the exaggerated schism between Bloomsbury and 'Squirearchy'.\textsuperscript{14}

Eliot's condemnation of Georgian poetry in \textit{The Egoist} in 1918 fatally separated Georgian from 'modernist': 'Georgian Poetry . . . is inbred. It has developed a technique and a set of emotions all of its own . . . [characterised by] "pleasantness".'\textsuperscript{15} Eliot's disparagement of a mythologised comfortable Georgian coterie may have been intended to define himself as a modernist, but according to Quentin Bell, T. S. Eliot was not 'one of us' and 'no part of Bloomsbury . . . A new Englander—Puritan. He wanted tradition.'\textsuperscript{16} Bloomsbury was not the definable entity or close-knit group of literary mythology, nor were the 'Georgians' a settled gentleman's club. The number of poems by D. H. Lawrence in Marsh's anthologies

\begin{footnotes}
\item[13] Edward Marsh was private secretary to Winston Churchill and allegedly treated poetry as more of a leisure activity than a profession.
\item[14] For information on J. C. Squire see Chapter 2, fn 8.
\end{footnotes}
illustrates that ‘Georgians wrote modernist poems and modernists were anthologised in Georgian collections.’

Vita Sackville-West was linked to Bloomsbury through her associations with Virginia Woolf. She was described by Quentin Bell as ‘a friend and in some respects a Bloomsbury figure’ yet several of her poems were published in the Georgian Poetry anthologies. Frances Comford has been connected with the Georgians through her friendship with Rupert Brooke and Edward Marsh but she was never in his anthologies. Her poems were published by the Woolf’s Hogarth Press as well as by The Poetry Bookshop. If, as Quentin Bell believes, distaste for the besetting sins of nineteenth-century art, ‘vulgarity, sentimentality and rhetoric’, were the hallmarks of Bloomsbury, Vita Sackville-West and Frances Comford were in tune with Bloomsbury. At the same time, they aimed to write in the direct style associated with the Georgians. They represent poets like Elizabeth Daryush (1887-1977), Ruth Pitter (1897-1992), Dorothy Wellesley (1889-1956) and Sylvia Lynd (1888-1952) who were popular between the wars. In particular, Pitter and Daryush attracted attention during the 1920s but their better work was published in the 1930s. (Delayed publication makes precise dating difficult.) All these women can be distinguished from the ‘elder poets’ like Alice Meynell (1847-1922) by a more contemporary diction and technical versatility. Like other interwar writers they indicate a ‘conservative modernity’ in that they rejected Victorian and Edwardian cultural conventions but psychologically deferred their entry into modernity.

One reason for the disappearance of these women’s poems is that their formalism has appeared commendable but irrelevant to the movements of poetry in the terms of modernist criticism. In The Oxford Companion to Twentieth-Century Poetry, Elizabeth Daryush is said to have ‘established herself as a traditionalist poet writing in conventional prosody but (like her father) willing to experiment in non-traditional forms’; Pitter’s poetry is described as ‘usually but not always written in conventional prosody,’ and the entry on Sackville-West points out that her reputation rests on The Land which was ‘deliberately anti-modernist and provincial, using regular iambic lines and archaic diction’. Frances Comford was posthumously classified as ‘Georgian’ in a commemorative Poetry Review which stated that she ‘declined to follow the Eliot-Pound fashion in her poetry’. Fleur

18 Quentin Bell 114.
Adcock was ambivalent about including them in *The Faber Book of 20th Century Women's Poetry*:

It is not easy now to summon a great deal of enthusiasm for the more well-mannered, ladylike poets of the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s, such as Yeats's favourite Dorothy Wellesley (although my inclusion of Ursula Bethell, Frances Comford and others is evidence that I think we should overcome this natural prejudice and not dismiss them all).23

Ruth Pitter is one of those ‘others’; Elizabeth Daryush is admitted only a ‘modest place’ because of a tendency to be ‘archaic’ and Vita Sackville-West is excluded for being ‘outmoded’. Fleur Adcock is clearly more comfortable with ‘technical innovators’ like Marianne Moore.24

The perceived ‘outmodedness’ is the traditional formalism which arose from the need for critical approval which meant disguising their gender. Given a chance, male reviewers reinforced the association between the conventional, feminine and sentimental in women’s poems. For example, Daryush’s *Verses* (1917) were ‘Twenty two little flowers of fancy’.25 The inclusion of a woman in *Georgian Poetry 1918-1919* was registered in the *TLS*, ‘Mrs Fredegonde Shove’ was ‘the first poetess to appear in these anthologies. One wonders why. Hers is a happy talent with a novel quaintness. Quaintness seems to be rising in poetical estimation’.26 Both women’s poetry and Georgianism were implicitly belittled by the pointed adjective ‘quaintness’. It was galling for intellectual literary women not to be distinguished from the generic mythologies of ‘women’s poetry’. Frances Cornford recorded her lack of sympathy for anthologies of women’s poetry ‘due to the horror in which all right-thinking people must hold the word “poetess”. She, we all feel, is somebody with far too much fervent, personal emotion per square yard, so to speak. A woman poetess was “never gay”.’27

These poets grew up alongside suffragism but were not connected with the suffrage movement. Although there is no protest in their poems, there is a gender awareness in their

24 Adcock 8.
avoidance of femininity. As Alison Light observed, following the First World War ‘Even those who would not call themselves feminists were linked by a resistance to “the feminine” as it had been thought of in later Victorian or Edwardian times’. For a start, they would have been alienated from the idealisations of motherhood propagated during and after the War. Frances Cornford recorded her suicidal exhaustion from the tension of being a wife, mother and poet; Ruth Pitter was single and worked for a living; Elizabeth Daryush married a Persian official, had no children and spent several years abroad; Dorothy Wellesley left her husband and became part of a love triangle with Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West; Vita Sackville-West constructed a male identity in her affairs with Violet Trefusis and other women.

It is debatable whether their success at avoiding a feminine, and therefore a personal, poetic voice is the achievement or weakness of the poets. Ruth Pitter and Elizabeth Daryush were clearly respected for their ‘craftsmanship’, but the paternalistic approval has distanced them from their so-called ‘modernist’ contemporaries. In Ruth Pitter: Homage to a Poet, Pitter’s verse forms are commended as ‘those of the mainstream English poetic tradition’ and consequently, ‘It would be possible to argue that Ruth Pitter is a man’s poet’. All had healthy publishing histories and won prizes. Even at the time, however, there was a suspicion that prize-winning was a mark of literary conformity. Virginia Woolf was notoriously disparaging about Vita Sackville-West’s Hawthornden prize (1927) and recorded her scepticism in A Room of One’s Own (1929): ‘the persistent voice [of male pedagogy] admonish[es] them [women] if they would be good and win, as I suppose, some shiny prize, to keep within certain limits which the gentleman in question thinks suitable.’

The result is a technical restraint which Virginia Woolf called the ‘something muted’ in Vita’s poetry.

It is clear from their literary papers and correspondence that Cornford and Sackville-West were attracted by Woolf’s theory of the androgynous imagination—‘It is fatal for anyone who writes to think of their sex. Some collaboration has to take place in the mind between the woman and the man before the art of creation can be accomplished.’ Frances Cornford’s ambivalence about whether writing was gendered was almost identical to Virginia Woolf’s:

People will think that poetry is just the words you write, but really it’s a state of mind. And I believe that when writers enter into that state of mind they are neither

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28 Light 10.
29 Vita Sackville-West dramatised herself as ‘Julian’ in her novel Challenge, which she withdrew from publication. See footnote 108.
31 For further details see Women’s Poetry of the 1930s, ed. Jane Dowson (London: Routledge, 1996).
32 Virginia Woolf, A Room of One’s Own. 1929 (London: Grafton, 1977) 82.
33 See discussion of Sackville-West later in the chapter and fn. 93.
male nor female, they are androgynous, though fortunately the voice in which they
describe the regions from which they return will be either a man’s or a woman’s.35

For Frances Cornford, Woolf’s theory of ‘woman-manliness’ partially offered an
intellectual resolution to the bind between assuming man’s clothing—the ‘old friendly boots’
of metre and rhyme—and being identified as a woman. It allowed women the concept of
gender difference without chaining them to a woman’s, that is feminine, ‘voice’. The
influence of, or like-mindedness with, Virginia Woolf is also evident in Vita Sackville-
West’s unpublished autobiography where she advanced her theory of the dual personality
‘in which the feminine and masculine elements alternately predominate’.36 The notion of
androgyny provided her with a means of containing her ‘duality’, her term for her
bisexuality. Fleur Adcock disparages Sackville-West’s ‘Miltonic or Virgilian’ imitations but
does not recognise that her recourse to these writers was a means of both entering into the
British literary tradition and of masking her same-sex orientation.37

Frances Cornford

Frances Cornford was well-known to both intellectual and ‘middlebrow’ readers.38 A
review of Spring Morning (1915) in Poetry: A Magazine of Verse, recorded that ‘Frances
Cornford’s verse has been known in Cambridge (England) circles these few years.’39 In
Some Contemporary Poets (1920), Harold Monro, includes her in his conspectus of current
British poetry and a reviewer of Thomas Moult’s Best Poems of 1924 cited Frances
Cornford in ‘a list of names which attract attention even before their contributions are
savouried.’40 Different Days (1928) was reviewed in The Criterion where it was noted that
‘She already has a reputation, and her technique is known to the wide world of readers of
Poems of To-day.’41 Spring Morning (1915) and Autumn Midnight (1923) were published
by Harold Monro’s The Poetry Bookshop press and Different Days (1928) was the first of
the Hogarth Living Poets series. As is suggested by her association with both the Monros’

34 Woolf A Room 112.
35 ‘View and Recollections of a Sunday Poet’, Tuesday 27 March 1956. Mss S8387. Literary Papers of
Frances Cornford.
102.
37 Adcock8.
38 Alison Light defines ‘middlebrow’ culture as ‘one whose apparent artlessness and insistence on its own
ordinariness has made it peculiarly resistant to analysis.’ Light 11–12. Virginia Woolf was disparaging
about ‘Middlebrows’, for vacillating between High- and Low- brow cultures, in ‘Middlebrow’, Collected
and Woolfs’ publishing houses, Cornford’s poetry has both Georgian and modernist associations, an eschewal of high rhetoric and an interest in representing thought processes.

The notice of Frances Cornford’s death in Poetry Review is typical of records which make her poetry sound old-fashioned:

Winner of the Queen’s Medal for Poetry in 1959, Mrs Cornford, grand-daughter of Charles Darwin, declined to follow the Eliot-Pound fashion in her poetry, which was written from first to last in ‘this Cambridge calm’—she had married a Cambridge University Professor. The April-June number of The Poetry Review was dedicated to her as a ‘Georgian’ poet and author of four books of verse.42

The tribute is inaccurate in that she actually published eight poetry books (and two books of translated poetry). It is also typical of the tendency to give her credentials through her father, husband or son, and to tether her to the kind of poetry which she consciously rejected. Helen Fowler records Cornford’s ‘predilection for craftsmanship’ but also that ever since ‘Brooke had lumped her with the “heart-criers” . . . she seems to have been blamed for the sort of poetry which, in the main, she did not write.’43 In her poetry readings and lectures, Cornford rated Rupert Brooke as a minor poet and explained that they had both struggled to resist ‘turgid’ Georgian metres.44 Her success can be gauged by the fact that ‘neither the advocacy of Rupert Brooke nor that of J. C. Squire could persuade Edward Marsh to put her work into his Georgian anthologies’.45

Frances Cornford’s reputation has further suffered from being associated with only one poem, ‘To a Fat Lady seen from a Train’, largely because it is in W. B. Yeats’ Oxford Book of English Verse (1936). As Joy Grant points out, it is striking for the way in which adult psychology is expressed in a child’s language, but Frances Cornford wanted to be freed from her association with the poem:

I should like to disassociate myself entirely from the Fat White Woman who walked through the field in gloves. But she, chiefly surely, because the average anthologist has a mind almost indistinguishable from the mind of sheep, she goes on and on.46

Frances Cornford’s literary papers record her conscious breaking away from the disreputable features of the Edwardians:

44 ‘Notes for a Talk’, Mss 58385. Literary Papers of Frances Cornford.
45 Entry on Frances Cornford in Hamilton 99-100.
46 ‘Notes for a Talk’, Mss 58385, Literary Papers of Frances Cornford.
[The reason why] I look at my early verses with a good deal of distaste is because I grew up in such a poor state of poetry ambience... surrounded with faded poeticisms and lolloping turgid metres... all "finger thumping poets" as Sassoon called them. I long to write much more in the stresses of my natural speaking voice though I think I only occasionally succeed at doing this.

Similarly, in her notes for a reading at the Cambridge Literary Circle she regretted the ‘moribund poeticisms and clichés, and many jog-trot sentimental rhythms, well sunk into our unconscious’. She believed that W. H. Davies and Siegfried Sassoon were admirable ‘Georgian poets’, but T. S. Eliot was ‘joyful liberation’. These notes are illuminating for the vehemence with which she renounced her early work and with which she rejected Victorian rhetoric and the jingoistic consolations of Edwardian verse: ‘I cannot bear in poetry all those abstracts—the ineffable and eternal etc. which for me it is largely the business of poetry to suggest to the imagination in concrete images.’ To this end, like the Georgians, she aimed for a naturalistic idiom, using rhyme and regular rhythm. Like the Georgians, she concentrated on the local and specific, as in ‘Cambridgeshire’:

The stacks, like blunt impassive temples, rise
Across flat fields against the autumnal skies.
The hairy-footed horses plough the land,
Or as in prayer and meditation stand
Upholding square, primeval, dung-stained carts,
With an unending patience in their hearts.

Nothing is changed. The farmer's gig goes by
Against the horizon. Surely, the same sky,
So vast and yet familiar, grey and mild,
And streaked with light like music, I, a child,
Lifted my face from leaf-edged lanes to see,
Late-coming home, to bread-and-butter tea.

Her depiction of rural stasis is characteristically accompanied by a sense of transition. Her popular snapshots of familiar places such as university gardens and quadrangles also explore the psychological significance of place.

It is questionable whether Frances Cornford would have received more enduring publicity and whether her style would have been more orthodoxly modernist had she been

47 'Lunchtime Talk at Foyle's', MSS 58386. Literary Papers of Frances Cornford.
more part of the Bloomsbury social milieu. Although drawn to the literary circles in London, she remained in Cambridge out of family loyalty or duty. At the same time, if as Quentin Bell observed, Bloomsbury was defined by a certain 'manner of speech', she qualifies for Bloomsbury. Siegfried Sassoon identified her gift as the ability to represent universal feeling and her limitation as 'Cambridge intellectualism':

She succeeds through keeping on her own ground of feeling and experience. She did feel and suffer deeply. But it is all overlaid by Cambridge intellectualism and refinement (one might say the same of Virginia Woolf?). It is a cultured humanistic mind speaking, with perfectionist versercraft. The power and the glory of spiritual aspiration are absent. Thoughts and emotions beautifully, sometimes poignantly, articulated. But never “the roll, the rise, the carol, the creation”. Much as I admired her, I did feel that she was too intense, analytic and cultured for me. That vibrant voice of hers had a quality of academic aloofness in it. One couldn’t imagine her outside of Cambridge.

It is true that the culture of the economically comfortable is represented in some of the idioms and diction, like 'tucked-up children' and 'bread-and-butter tea', or the allusions to dressing-up and dinner parties. Although the framework of reference may be a cushioned world, Frances Comford frequently demythologises the alleged securities of wealth and other idylls. In 'On August the Thirteenth', for example, what to the outsider would appear a 'solid order' at 'The Mount, Marsden, Bucks' can be easily disturbed. The reason for the unspecified addressee’s departure is presumably death:

Out of this seemliness, this solid order,
At half-past four to-day,
When down below
Geraniums were bright
In the contented glow,
Whilst Williams planted seedlings all about,
Supremely geometrically right
In your herbaceous border,
You had to go
Who always liked to stay.
Before Louisa sliced the currant roll,

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And re-arranged the zinnias in the bowl,
All in a rhythm reachless by modernity,
Correct and slow.  

The narrative investigates but maintains the ‘seemly’ surface of cultural conventions and clockwork routine is represented as both secure and stifling. Such mixed feelings towards change are characteristic of a ‘conservative modernity’.

Gwen Raverat’s biographical Period Piece: a Cambridge Childhood indicates that she and her cousin Frances were not at ease with the social conventions of their childhood. For them, it was ‘torture’ to dress up properly, and they dreaded dancing classes, ‘the worst of social events’. However, in the large Darwin family they were more exposed to ethics than dogmas. Gwen and Frances were evidently independent spirits who worked through for themselves the questions of duty, religion and convention. It is interesting that a reviewer of Frances Cornford’s early poems identified the tone of a ‘rebellious protest against an unjust world’. Although it cannot be claimed that she was political in any actively socialist sense, she speaks in the language of democracy. She believed that the poet’s role was to represent universal experience—‘I thought the poet’s vision always incorporated the general in the particular, and this above all means the images, often concrete images’. She combated the high modernist tendency to make poetry esoteric—‘Do not think of verse writing as some kind of sacred mystery’ —and used popular forms such as ballad, epitaph and epigram. Her concept of universal experience usually assumed a human nature which was common to men and women. It connected to the liberal humanism of the early nineteenth-century Romantics but the difference in Cornford’s poetry is that it is informed by early twentieth-century psychology. (She read Jung more than Freud).

There are many voices in the poems and it was the voice of the under-represented that Frances Cornford often aimed to present. In ‘Notes for a Talk’ she records that she wanted to show what it feels like to be old, a child or an animal. She often adopted the persona of a child and depicts an infant’s voice in ‘The New-born Baby’s Song’. She also assumed these personae of innocence in order to explore a psychological condition, most commonly regret, grief, alienation and divided duty. The ballad ‘The Princess and the Gypsies’, is not merely a fantasy, but an interrogation of fantasy. The rich, comfortable but confined princess is attracted by the liberties of the gypsies:

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52 Frances Cornford, ‘On August the Thirteenth’, from Mountains and Molehills, 1934. SP 16. The poems in Mountains and Molehills were probably written between 1927 and 1933.
55 ‘Notes for a Talk’, Mss. 58385. Literary Papers of Frances Cornford.
56 Frances Cornford, Undated lecture on poetry, Mss. 58385. Literary Papers of Frances Cornford.
57 ‘Notes for a Talk’, Mss. 58386. Literary Papers of Frances Cornford.
"O gentle, gentle gypsies
    That roam the wide world though,
Because I hate my crown and state,
    O let me come with you!"

The gypsies educate the princess about the hardships of their nomadic life and the princess’s decision to stick with her safe but stultifying situation leaves her broken-hearted:

    I hung about their fingers brown
    My ruby rings and chain,
    And with my head as heavy as lead
    turned me back again.

    As I went up the palace steps
    I heard the gypsies laugh;
    The birds of spring so sweet did sing,
    It broke my heart in half.59

As in several poems, the impulse for freedom is in tension with the conservative impulse to keep things as they are.

Fairy tales were important to Frances Comford, perhaps because they embody the distinction between hope and quotidian reality, especially as experienced by the developing child. The ‘Fairy Tale Idyll for Two Voices’ is a lyrical narrative which seems to yearn for mythical fairytale fulfilment or pre-lapsarian perfection:

    O sing and tell of this, and tell no more
    But how, as on the first created day
    All things were new60

Again, albeit under a cloak of amusement, nostalgia for the ‘fairy story place’ is contrasted to the social world of convention and non-communication in ‘Journeys End in Lovers’ Meeting’:

    I used to wish when I was 17

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60 Frances Comford, ‘Fairy Tale Idyll for Two Voices,’ from Mountains and Molehills, 1934. SP 25.
That I could find that fairy-story place
Where there is everything that might have been

In this, as in other poems, Hell is conceived of as the place of missed opportunities.

Knowledge of Frances Cornford's depressions, her sense of failure as a mother and her frustrations as a woman writer is a guide to the ambiguity of poems which have often been mistaken as simplistic or 'genteel'. In her account of The Poetry Bookshop, Joy Grant records that Frances Cornford was 'a sweet-hearted, domesticated woman bred among men of culture from whom she had learned discrimination. It was a creditable, but quite uncontroversial addition to the Poetry Bookshop's list.' In fact, modernity for Frances Cornford involved repeated bereavement and the frustrating bonds of domestic duty.

Frances Cornford's heightened awareness of death was part of belonging to a large family—her father was one of six children. She inevitably encountered deaths as a regular occurrence, but after her mother's death when she was 17, she suffered the first of three long depressions. In the First World War she lost several friends and her father died in 1925, her son John was killed in the Spanish Civil War (1936) and other friends and relatives in the Second World War. Her husband died in 1943. Nijinsky is mentioned in three poems and is a significant symbol of mental breakdown. The poem 'Grand Ballet' recounts an occasion when Frances and her husband saw the famous ballet dancer—an occasion upon which she often dwelt:

That thunderous night
We saw Nijinsky dance.
Thereafter fell
On the awaiting world the powers of Hell,
Chaos, and irremediable pain;
And utter darkness on your empty brain

The Nijinsky image represents the fine line between sanity and insanity or life and death which is a preoccupation in many poems.

'Contemporaries' (original title, 'No Immortality'), a response to the number of young men killed in the First World War, particularly commemorates the death of Rupert Brooke. Although respectfully eulogising his youthful attractiveness, it does not offer religious consolations:

Perhaps

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61 Frances Cornford, 'Journeys End in Lovers' Meeting', from 'Occasional Verses'. SP 45.
63 Frances Cornford, 'Grand Ballet', from Mountains and Molehills, 1934. SP 18.
A thousand years ago some Greek boy died
So lovely-bodied, so adored, so young,
Like us, his lovers treasured senseless things,
And laughed with tears remembering his laughter,
And there was friendship in the very sound
Of his forgotten name to them. Of him
Now we know nothing, nothing is altered now
Because of all he was. Most loved, on you
Can such oblivion fall? Then, if it can,
How futile, how absurd the life of man.  

Here, as in other poems, Cornford’s treatment of death is stark. It has none of the ‘excesses of poetesshood’ such as ‘lingering descriptions of loss’ proposed by Germaine Greer in her mythical image of the demure poetess. 

Although avoiding femininity, Cornford’s poetry connects with other interwar writers who represent the unquiet depths ‘beneath the apparently unruffled surface of sensible and quiescent womanhood.’ She studiously avoided the ‘embarrassingly personal’. In fact, Sylvia Townsend Warner used her as an example of women writers who were apt at ‘vanishing’ out of their writing so that the quality of immediacy replaces them: ‘the writing is no longer propelled by the author’s anxious hand, the reader is no longer conscious of the author’s chaperoning presence’. Placed in their cultural and biographical contexts, however, superficially agreeable poems like ‘A Glimpse’, carry a personal undertow. Read in conjunction with her later poem ‘The Scholar’, which depicts her husband’s temperamental distance from his family, it suggests alienation from the male-dominated university territory where, as Woolf recorded in A Room of One’s Own, women were trespassers.

The figure of a scholar carrying back
Books to the library, absorbed, content,
Seeming as everlasting as the elms
Bark-wrinkled, puddled round their roots, the bells,

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64 Frances Cornford, ‘Contemporaries’ (‘No immortality’), from Different Days, 1928. SP 15.
66 Light 13.
68 Woolf, A Room. 10.
And the far shouting in the football fields.\(^6\)

The scholar's occupation is represented as enviably peaceful and its male-only property endorsed by the reference to the sounds of a football match. Unusually, it avoids rhyme while the compound adjective 'Bark-wrinkled', here as in other poems, suggests the influence of Gerard Manley Hopkins.

Frances Cornford's correspondence constructs a cheerful compliance with the competing demands of family life and forays into the world of publishing, but her journal entries illuminate the 'not-waving-but-drowning' undercurrent:

Mostly the sense of my being is a strain, hushed anxiety, and depression, guilt, not keeping going as if in a beleaguered city and, and of constant ill health and exhaustion to be skilfully dodged . . . I seem to myself to be only keeping my head just above water and complete neuroticism—a period comes and I dip under again.\(^7\)

In 'She Warns Him', a series of metaphors indicate the emotional deadness recorded in her diaries: 'a lamp that is out', 'a star that is dead', a 'shallow stream' and an empty book:

\begin{quote}
Why do you smile and deny, my lover?
I will not be denied.
I am a book, a book with a cover,  
And nothing at all inside.\(^7\)
\end{quote}

It is debatable whether the childlike idiom and imagery are successful reconstructions of a disintegrating psyche or failed attempts to find a language which expresses women's experience without appearing feminine.

'The Sick Queen', from *Different Days* (1928), appears to vacillate between the self-negation of the nineteenth-century feminine ideal and the self-assertion of twentieth-century female modernists. Not-waving-but-drowning is encoded in the extended symbolism but the more adventurous versification and bolder self-dramatisation exhibit greater stylistic freedom than many of Cornford's poems:

\begin{quote}
I hear my children come. They trample with their feet,  
Fetched from their play to kiss my thin-boned hands lying on the sheet,  
Fresh as young colts with every field before them,  
With gazing apple-faces. Can it be this body bore them?
\end{quote}

\(^7\) Frances Cornford, Mss. 58390. Literary Papers of Frances Cornford.  
\(^7\) Frances Cornford, 'She Warns Him', from *Different Days*, 1928. *SP* 15.
(This poor body like an outworn glove,
That yet subdues a spirit which no more knows that it can love.)
All day is theirs. I belong to night,
The brown surrounding caverns made of dream. The long failing fight,
On and on with pain. Theirs is sweet sleep
And morning breakfast with bright yellow butter. They can laugh and weep
Over a tiny thing—a toy, a crumb, a letter.
Tomorrow they will come again and say: "Now are you better?"
"Better, my lords, today", the Chamberlain replies;
And I shall be too tired and too afraid to cry out that he lies.72

The effort to appear well is projected through the ragged line lengths—the longest lines give the impression of trying to sit up in bed. The disjunction between the mother's role and her struggling subjectivity is indicated in the contrasting images: young colts, apple-faces and bright butter juxtaposed with bony hands, a worn out glove of a body and a mind consisting of dark caverns.

The distortion of the fairy tale persona in 'The Sick Queen' is a strategy of which Virginia Woolf would have approved because it kills the myth of woman as the angel of the house:

I discovered that if I were going to review books I should need to do battle with a certain phantom . . . The Angel in the House. It was she who used to come between me and my paper when I was writing reviews. . . . She was immensely charming. She was utterly sympathetic. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily.73

The concealed weariness of the sick queen was a condition familiar to both writers and may largely account for their affinity. The following extract is from a letter to Frances Cornford on December 29th, 1929, in which Virginia Woolf said that her poems had struck a chord with herself. Woolf was writing from Lewes, Sussex, where she sought respite from 'the chaos of London'. 'My book', is presumably A Room of One's Own:

I was all a heap when I read your letter with pleasure that you should like my book. Everything had to be boiled to a jelly in the hope that young women would swallow it. I'm very happy that a wise and distinguished woman, with growing daughters should find some sense in it. Yours is so much more important a contribution to life than mine. I am, or was till Christmas Eve, a harassed middle class middle aged (47

72 Frances Cornford, 'The Sick Queen', from Different Days, 1928. SP 15.
to your 43) woman, stepping into Hamley’s toyshop and buying presents for nephews and nieces.\textsuperscript{74}

Earlier exchanges of letters testify to the mutual appreciation between poet and novelist—‘I like your poems . . . I wish you did write more of them’.\textsuperscript{75} On 12th November, 1923, Frances Comford answered Virginia Woolf’s ‘delightful’ letter—‘I’ve never had things said about my poems that I appreciated so much’—and on 1st February, 1926, wrote enthusiastically about Virginia Woolf’s essays in \textit{The Common Reader} and \textit{Mrs Dalloway}.\textsuperscript{76} It is difficult to be certain about the degree of acquaintance between the two women. They were both associated with the Neopagans and the Comfords had evidently met the Woolfs. There is correspondence between the husbands, Francis and Leonard, dating from 1913 and between the wives during the 1920s. Frances Comford’s letters express the regret at being unable to offer the Woolfs hospitality because of her busyness. In reciprocation, when Virginia Woolf made a plea for more poems, it was so that they could hold ‘disembodied communion’ since meeting up, although preferable, was impracticable. The dual demands of professional and personal responsibilities dogged both wives and both feared mental breakdown. (Frances Comford’s third bout of depression lasted from 1934 to 1940; Virginia Woolf committed suicide in 1941.) With five children, Frances Comford understood the \textit{Room-of-One’s-Own} struggle between family commitments and writing: ‘none requires the expense of spirit as domestic life does on a woman’.\textsuperscript{77}

The journal entries, notebooks, literary papers and correspondence indicate Frances Comford’s acute sense of the difficulties of the woman writer, yet she did not dramatise the concept of the New Woman in her poetry. She and her husband supported meetings for women’s suffrage before the war but she demonstrates ‘conservative modernity’ rather than feminist protest in her depiction of women. Many of her poems, like ‘Constant’, allude to the altruism and silent grief of women suffering from ‘the pain unknown’ of loss. ‘Mother and Child Asleep’ reflects on the requirement of women to give all to their families and then to let them go. ‘A Peasant Woman’, included in \textit{Twentieth Century Poetry} (1929), edited by Harold Monro,\textsuperscript{78} is about the isolation and waiting which such women endure, without regret, at every stage of their lives:

\begin{verbatim}
I saw you sit waiting with your sewing on your knees,
Till a man should claim the comfort of your body
\end{verbatim}

\textsuperscript{74} Letter from Virginia Woolf to Frances Comford, Mss 58422. Literary Papers of Frances Comford.
\textsuperscript{75} Letter from Virginia Woolf to Frances Comford, Mss 58422. Literary Papers of Frances Comford.
\textsuperscript{76} Letters from Frances Comford to Virginia Woolf 1923-6 Sx.Ms.18. MHL.(VW), Brighton: University of Sussex Library.
And your industry and presence for his own.

I saw you sit waiting with your sewing on your knees,
Till the child growing hidden in your body
Should become a living creature in the light.

I saw you sit waiting with your sewing on your knees,
Till your child who had ventured to the city
Should return to the shelter of his home.

I saw you sit waiting with your sewing on your knees
— Your unreturning son was in the city
Till Death should come along the cobbled street.

I saw you sit waiting with your sewing on your knees.

Characteristically, the poem is also about the effect of the subject on her observer. A question raised here, as in most of her poetry, is whether Frances Cornford’s articulation of unfulfilled identity is liberated or stifled by its stylistic restraint. Significantly, she wrote to Virginia Woolf that she was conscious of writing back ‘through one’s fathers’. As Gilbert and Gubar observe, such female male impersonation operates as either a ‘shroud’ or as self-realisation through dramatisation.80

Vita Sackville-West

The initial tendency to position Vita Sackville-West within the ‘genteel’ Georgian tradition partly explains why she was considered too ‘archaic’ for The Faber Book of 20th Century Women’s Poetry. In the review of Collected Poems (1933) in the Spectator, the features associated with Georgian poems were applied to her entire oeuvre:

Speaking familiar language and of familiar things, Miss Sackville-West has written, not one or two lines or lyrics, but a body of verse, which will, I think, never be forgotten. . . . Her poetry does not merely describe nature; it does not merely

79 Letter from Frances Cornford to Virginia Woolf, 1 Feb. 1926. Letters from Frances Cornford to Virginia Woolf 1923-6 Sx.Ms.18. MHL.(VW), Brighton: University of Sussex Library.
express her feeling: she describes, and in what she writes Nature and her feeling are one.\textsuperscript{81}

The view of Vita Sackville-West as ‘archaic’ can also partly be attributed to the narrow representation of her poems in anthologies and the unavailability of her work. The surprising lack of new readings of the poems, when feminist critics have take an interest in her other writing, can be accounted for by the fact that they have been out of print for over half a century. Victoria Glendinning has read Vita’s life in conjunction with the novels, travel writing and historical fictions and she has alluded to the significance of some poems, but recognises that there is more work to be done on them.\textsuperscript{82}

Vita Sackville-West was linked by her social and amorous connections with the leading figures of both the conservative literary establishment and the Bloomsbury intellectuals. J. C. Squire and John Drinkwater dined at the Nicolson’s home at Long Barn in Kent and Vita was invited to publish with the Hogarth Press when Virginia Woolf was wanting to develop their acquaintance. As a poet, she qualifies as Georgian in all uses of the term: she was in Edward Marsh’s anthologies; she wrote within the historical timespan (1910 to 1936)—most of her poetry was written and published between 1918 and 1938, the best during the years 1926 to 1932—and if Georgian means a style characterised by regular form and metre, a focus on nature and the English countryside, some of her poems conform to these characteristics. They also enlarge any canon of Georgian poetry in number and type because many of the ostensibly descriptive poems are coded love poems. They are difficult to categorise as simply ‘Georgian’ since the conventional versification operates as a cover under which she explores the duality of her sexual orientation. They qualify for the aspect of female modernism which investigates or rejects heterosexuality, conventional marriage and the literature which endorses the traditional family plot.

It cannot be claimed that the poems are technically experimental, but there is often a psychologically complex relationship with modernity and an investigation of sexual politics which have not yet been examined. Within the framework of conventional versification her impersonations of the male lover are symptoms of a ‘masculinity complex’, which is when women entertain fantasies of being men. According to Freud, the ‘masculinity complex’ is the condition of female homosexuals. As the controversy over the censorship of Radclyffe Hall’s \textit{The Well of Loneliness} (1928) registers, it was not possible to openly articulate lesbian love. Vita Sackville-West was on the side of the intellectuals who defended the book from the charge of obscenity. In a letter to Virginia Woolf, 31 August 1928, she stated ‘I feel very violently about \textit{The Well of Loneliness}. Not on account of what you call my proclivities; not because I think it is a good book, but really on principle . . . I really have no

words to say how indignant I am." Earlier, in 1920, two of the reasons she gave for writing her autobiography, which gives the impression that it was written to be published at a later date, were that it would provide a record of same-sex connections because she had had to operate without any models, and because same-sex connections would be considered more natural in future times. At the time, critics either ignored or did not recognise the lesbian coding. *King’s Daughter* (1929), a sequence of love poems, was interpreted as a pastoral: ‘Miss Sackville-West is known as the poet of good husbandry in these times.’ Jane Dunn places her ‘romantic and backward-looking pastoralism’ as typical of a homosexual subculture of the nineteen twenties and thirties: ‘a prepubescent utopian dream, free of heterosexual conflict and oppression.’

*The Land* (1926), dedicated to Dorothy Wellesley, won Vita Sackville-West fame as a poet, the Hawthornden prize (1927), and the serious proposal as Poet Laureate in 1929 when Robert Bridges died. Although mocked by experimentalists like Edith Sitwell, it reached a wide audience through the radio, public readings and newspapers—it was initially published in extracts—and anthologies. *The Land* is an important poem in the annals of Georgian practice. In its easy metre and country settings it was ultimately ‘agreeable’ poetry but it was also useful to Vita’s persona as the contented home and country lover. As she recorded in her autobiography, ‘secrecy was my passion’, and her affair with Violet was ‘that little undercurrent’.

*The Land* addresses both the beauty and the rougher side of country life—the work and the war with the elements. It follows Virgil’s *Georgics* in advising the reader about farming methods. It was carefully researched and an important record of country customs which were disappearing. According to Victoria Glendinning, Vita Sackville-West set out to document the skills, processes and landscapes which were being modified by mechanisation. Her sources were her own observations, encyclopaedias of agriculture, old poems and farming treatises:

She incorporated into her deliberately archaic verse-vocabulary country words still in use, and old place names and field names of the Weald, as well as words that were already falling into disuse: droil, yavy, reasty, undern, winsel, kexen, dwale, scrannel, fisking, eild, teed, spline, yelm, stelch, sneath, yerk, weazen. (Of these,
“undern”, meaning “in the afternoon”, became part of her private language with Virginia).

In this poetry of dung and marl and tilth and toil—classical Georgian verse, poetry in gumboots—she charted the Wealden farmer’s yearly round: beekeeping, woodcraft, sheepshearing, sowing, haysel and harvest, craftsmanship, threshing, ploughing, cidermaking and hop-picking.88

Some pages of *The Land* seem hyperbolic and there is no evidence of the political engagement of Virgil nor the scope of his reference and use of myth, but the best passages detail and explore the psychology of rural rituals. The daily round of the country folk is universalised but the context is local: ‘The Weald of Kent, . . . /From Edenbridge to Appledore and Lympne/Draned by the Medway and the Rother stream’.89 Other passages such as ‘Winter song’ evoke classical lyrics of seasonal celebration, ‘Many have sung the summer’s songs/Many have sung the corn,’90 but there is some recognition of modernity in the yeoman’s resistance to new farming methods:

He tills the soil to-day,
Surly and grave, his difficult wage to earn.
Cities of discontent, the sickened nerve,
Are still a fashion that he will not learn.
His way is still the obstinate old way.91

In the conventional juxtaposition of city and country, Vita Sackville-West may well have had her new Bloomsbury acquaintances in mind:

Book-learning they have known.
They meet together, talk, and grow most wise,
But they have lost, in losing Solitude,
Something,—an inward grace, the seeing eyes,
The power of being alone with earth and skies,
Of going about a task with quietude.92

These passages connect back to Wordsworth’s imaginative ‘bliss of solitude’ but, albeit defensively, Vita professed a hatred for Wordsworth after reading *The Prelude*, ‘I HATE

88 Glendinning 166.
89 *The Land* 24.
90 *The Land* 22.
91 *The Land* 37.
92 *The Land* 38.
Wordsworth, the old prig, bore, preachifying old solemnity'.

David Perkins defends Georgian poetry of the countryside by arguing that for the poet, it was not simply a case of either escapism from the grim reality of modern life or of clinging to poetic tradition, but an exploration of the craft of poetry: taking the Romantic poets as their standard, 'they were nature poets by inheritance'.

The Land invokes the Romantic tradition in the context of the modern environment.

Vita Sackville-West's writing exemplifies how women took their models from the male traditions on which they had been brought up, although it is not clear how far she modelled her poem on Virgil's Georgics. She is alleged to have denied knowledge of them, but Harold noted that she conceived a kind of 'English Georgics' in 1921 when she first started on The Land.

As a whole, the poem bears the mark of unconnected revisions: Part One alternates first and third person voices and there is a change to the second person in Part Two so that it becomes more like Virgil's instruction to the reader, but it is not as much of a manual for farming as Virgil's, nor does it appropriate his allusions to war. There is the odd reference to Virgil's poem, such as in the passage on the rotation of crops, 'And ever shall he bear in mind the art/Known to the Roman, of a changing crop'.

The poem ends with a direct allusion which seems somewhat nominal, as if to encourage readers to associate The Land with the Georgics:

Then thought I, Virgil! how from Mantua reft,
Shy as a peasant in the courts of Rome,
You took the waxen tablets in your hand,
And out of anger cut calm tales of home.
(Isfahan April, 1926).

More significant here, however, is the reference to the anger behind Virgil's calm tales; this should be taken as a clue to the characteristic passions underlying Vita's apparently pleasant account of country life. Whereas Virgil's Part Three was largely about war and implicitly the civil unrest which threatened the Roman world, section three of The Land, 'Summer', makes allusions to Persia where Vita revised the poem, having left a nearly completed manuscript with Virginia Woolf. The lyrical passage 'Summer Song' is a celebration of romantic love and some lines suggest personal lovesickness: 'This know, and know then how the heart can ache/With pining for the woods and clouds of home.'

Although accompanied by Dorothy Wellesley on her visit to Harold in Persia, at the time of finishing The Land Vita wrote several love letters to Virginia Woolf which include the famous

Glendinning 168.

Perkins 215.

Glendinning 119.

The Land 43.

The Land 108.
profession, 'I am reduced to a thing that wants Virginia. . . . I just miss you, in a quite simple desperate human way . . . It is incredible how essential to me you have become.'

The reviewer in the TLS did not construe the professed heartache as sexual passion but as patriotism. Drawing attention to the 'postmark', Isfahan, he constructed The Land as a hymn to England, 'It is a learned love, the love of one who delights to attach herself to the countryside by a knowledge of its crafts and husbandry, its flora and its traditional lore.' It was a good and long review which approved of the lack of sentimentality, 'she is careful not to indulge her emotion apart from the objects which inspire it.'

The reviewer also used the poem to endorse certain meritorious values with phrases like 'the reward for toil . . . and patient cultivation' and 'a lyrical delight in nature and a love of all the craft of husbandry is disciplined by detailed knowledge and observance'.

Superficially, The Land can be read as an archetypal Georgian poem in its sketches of English country life. It deserves attention because it was important and well-known in its day. Vita Sackville-West was allegedly inspired by Edward Marsh's complaint against the 'short lyric cries' of modern poets, 'which exactly expresses the irritation that is driving me into trying the experiment of a volume of connected verse' and she found favour with Marsh who called her the 'best living poet under 80'. Although she appeared to Marsh to be taking arms against the sea of innovation, Vita also wanted to be well-received. In a letter to her mother, in 1922, she wrote that 'the people who make or destroy reputations are the professional critics . . . and they start out naturally with a prejudice against the dilettante'.

Although The Land established Vita Sackville-West as a poet (it was on its third reprint by the end of January 1927), it also estranged her from the avant-garde. Edith Sitwell, who was exceptionally disparaging about Georgian poetry, caricatured Vita as the Georgian 'gentleman': 'Nobody is more able to tell you what country life in this English climate is like than she!' Similarly, Peter Quennell played upon the easy mockery of The Land in The Criterion. He then moved on to King's Daughter which he found 'disappointingly flimsy'. Far from 'flimsy', King's Daughter (1929), number eleven of the Hogarth Living Poets published by the Woolfs, is a sonnet sequence which is between a pastiche and parody of seventeenth-century courtly love lyrics; the persona of the male courtier allowed Vita to dramatise her fantasies with her female lovers.

Vita Sackville-West was not embraced by either the Georgian gentlemen or by the avant-garde, although the Woolfs encouraged her in what she wanted to be most of all, a

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98 The Land 68.
103 Glendinning 125.
'good poet', by publishing her work. Virginia advised her to free up her technique, once she had shown that she could master formalism: 'the danger with you is your sense of tradition and all those words'.

Vita was aware of the possibilities of contemporary experiment; she invited Djuna Barnes to stay at Long Barn and she contemplated dedicating her *Collected Poems* to Edith Sitwell. However, she seemed unable to break away from the security of regular metre, rhyme and a slightly formal idiom, perhaps on account of the 'something muted' in her nature—which Woolf believed restrained her writing:

And isn't there something obscure in you? There's something that doesn't vibrate in you; it may be purposely—you don't let it: . . . something reserved, muted . . . It's in your writing, too, by the by.

In April 1926, Vita wrote, 'all I can say is, that rhythm and I are out of gear', and in December 1928, she considered 'going into mourning for my dead muse'. She wanted her poetry to be well received—'I mind about that poem [*The Land*], never having minded about other books.' She was, however, disillusioned with *The Land* for being 'damned bad. Not a spark in it anywhere. Respectable but stodgy.' In later letters, she was similarly self-deprecating about her *Collected Poems* although it is likely that she was seeking Virginia's reassurance—'all that tripe . . . I can't rid myself of the idea that it is all a little pretentious.: 'It [*Collected Poems*] is the only book of mine I shall ever have minded about—(i.e. I don't give a damn for my novels, but I do give 1/2 a damn for my poems, which is not saying much). The *Collected Poems* is divided into thematic sections which make it difficult to make links between personal events and the poems or to look for stylistic development. A convincing case can be made for a more psychological realism, freer versification and less forced rhyme schemes after her connection with Virginia Woolf and Bloomsbury in 1922, although *The Land* was already in draft and little influenced by Virginia's advice to free up her technique. Two sections in *Collected Poems* hive off 'People' and 'Love' whereas most of her poems can be read in terms of her relationships; the dedications indicate that Vita had people in mind when writing them. Read in conjunction with biography, these poems correspond to the investigation of sexuality and marriage in her letters, fiction, unpublished autobiography and diaries. Like her correspondence with her husband, they appear to

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construct a sense of order and control which mask her complicated relationship with social and sexual conventions.

A more complex poetic landscape, which can be detected after 1918, was the result of personal, rather than national, circumstances. 1918 was a year of psychological confusion for Vita due to Harold's need to tell her of his venereal infection; this disclosure also meant the revelation of his bisexuality which was accompanied by the acknowledgement of her own. 1918 was the year in which her relationship with Violet Trefusis, although formed in 1910, became openly passionate. As Victoria Glendinning puts it:

She had to rethink her whole marriage and her picture of her husband, of his sexual nature—and her own. She had to recognise a parallel duality in her own nature that was sexual and not just temperamental. The unthinkable, after the first shock, becomes the thing most thought about. It was a turning point.111

'Dissonance', dated 1918, can be read in terms of this turning point. Like Frances Cornford, Vita Sackville-West seems to be struggling for a language which articulates her experience without appearing to be personal, that is feminine or sentimental:

Clamour has riven us, clamour and din.
My hand reaches blindly out for your hand, but within
My mind cannot reach to your mind, because of the clamour and din.

Clang as of brass, an uproar that will not cease.
I would take from the strangest god or devil the gift of peace.
If the strife that divides us were suddenly stilled and would cease,

I could come to you, come under washed void skies,
My thought in your thought embraced, my eyes and your eyes
Levelly meeting without quick faltering of disguise.

But all is harshness and rack in vain
We strive through the grossness of flesh to discover our souls again,
And the closer we clasp one another, the further apart remain.112

The rhymes offer aesthetic consolation but are dissonant with the harsh diction and declarations of separateness. The uneven line lengths and vocabulary of discord—'din', 'clang', 'strife', 'rack'—overwhelm the images of unity. The depiction of mental and

111 Glendinning 88.
112 'Dissonance', CP 289.
physical distance makes sense if it is read as if addressed to Harold after his confessions. However, given Vita’s insistence on being able to love two people at once, it could also be addressed to Violet who was allegedly not as keen on sex as Vita.

The poem corroborates Virginia Woolf’s depiction of Vita in Orlando (1928) where she has difficulty in composing a poem because the ‘spirit of the age’ inhibited her from writing about women:

When she had written “Egyptian girls”, the power told her to stop. Grass, the power seemed to say, going back with a ruler such as governesses use to the beginning, is all right; the hanging crops of fritillaries—admirable; the snaky flower—a thought strong from a lady’s pen, perhaps, but Wordsworth, no doubt, sanctions it; but—girls? Are girls necessary? You have a husband at the Cape, you say? Ah, well, that’ll do.

The episode ends with Orlando finding herself able to write freely because she has publicly conformed to the spirit of her age by marrying. Similarly, for Vita, traditional forms, harmonious rhyming and regular metres were covers under which to explore her dual identity.

In a letter to Virginia Woolf dated 1928, Vita Sackville-West’s phrase, ‘I hate safety. I would rather fail gloriously than dingily succeed’, does not indicate a passive receiver of prescribed conventional codes. ‘Night’, dedicated to Harold Nicolson, seems to be recording a joyful return to her husband but it is likely that this was one of Vita’s homecomings from her travels with Violet Trefusis which always made Harold anxious. It should, therefore, be read as an aesthetic representation of happy reunion:

My Saxon weald! my cool and candid weald!
Dear God! the heart, the very heart of me
That plays and strays, a truant in strange lands,
Always returns and finds its inward peace,
Its swing of truth, its measure of restraint,
Here among meadows, orchards, lanes, and shaws.

The regular iambic metres provide a measure of stability but words like ‘truant’ and ‘restraint’ signify a psychological restlessness and the exaggerated enthusiasm approaches the parodic. Just as the letters fictionalise the closeness missing in their actual marriage, the self-dramatising dresses up her rejection of marriage as a social institution:

113 Woolf, Orlando 252–4.
115 ‘Night’ CP 144–146.
The marriage of their correspondence was its platonic ideal, in which they both believed. If this was an instinctual psychological device to contain the looseness of their union, it was a successful one—so successful that it took on a life of its own. The more effectively they could meet on the page, the more separate they could be in the everyday. What began as a unifying process legitimised their separateness.116

Although the personal agenda of the poems is illustrated through biography, the poems are not ‘confessional’. Vita frequently alluded to masks, and both male and female impersonations allowed her to try out different identities. As early as 1910, her novel *Behind the Mask* showed her to be deeply disillusioned about marriage, no doubt considering her parents’ difficulties at this point: ‘Is there anyone without the mask? . . . . Not the husband, not the wife, not the son whose every secret the mother thinks she knows.’117 She and Harold talked publicly about marriage but most of the time she was involved in some ‘emotional trilism’—with Violet Trefusis and Pat Dansey, a confidante of Violet Trefusis, among others.118 Pat Dansey was initially an alibi for Violet and Vita but she became attracted to Vita and insanely jealous of Vita’s lovers.119 ‘Black Tarn’ records Vita’s excursion to Wales with Dorothy Wellesley and Pat Dansey who competed for her attention. With reference to the ‘mask’ and her ‘discontent with . . . the safety, and the ease’ she dramatises her inability to settle with one person:

I have seen Black Tarn,
Shivered it for an instant, been afraid.
Looked into the waters, seen there my own image
As an upturned mask that floated
Just under the surface, within reach, beyond reach.120

Typically, the alternating long and short lines mirror the paradoxical reaching out and retreat of her temperament. The dedication to Pat Dansey and the elusive persona may have been strategies to provoke the possessiveness and dependence which Vita required of her friends.121 These poems encode the dominant features of Vita’s character:

. . . a distaste for the idea of marriage; an apparent candour with her intimates that was no candour at all; a capacity for sustaining multiple relationships; the division in

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116 Glendinning 146.
117 Glendinning 37.
118 Glendinning 197.
119 Glendinning 133–7.
120 ‘Black Tarn’, *CP* 137–9.
121 Glendinning 125.
her mind between passionate and companionate love; her fantasy—to be realised—of “living alone in a tower with her books”; also, her disinclination to let anyone who loved her go—keeping them on a string, rebuffing them if they asked too much of her, but drawing in the line sharply if they showed signs of straying.122

The poems addressed to ‘Eve’, alias Violet Trefusis, such as the sonnet—‘This little space which scented box encloses’—have the potential for the most romantic reading.123 Two other poems, ‘Eve’ and ‘Eve in Tears’,124 dated 1919, are love lyrics to the ‘grande passion’ of her life.125 After the ‘Eve’ poems, the next most covertly passionate poems are the ones associated with Dorothy Wellesley who lasted through many of Vita’s other lovers and with whom she went to Persia when Harold was first posted there. Dorothy Wellesley was described by Vita in the Dictionary of National Biography as, ‘Slight of build, almost fragile, with blazing blue eyes, fair hair, transparently white skin, she was a natural rebel, rejecting all conventions and accepted ideas, living to proclaim herself an agnostic, a fiery spirit with a passionate love for beauty in all its forms.’126 ‘Full Moon’, which was written for her, along with an extract from The Land, was printed in Georgian Poetry 1920-1922 and in the Observer in 1922; it was also in James Reeves’ Georgian anthology (1962). The editors were no doubt unaware that the subject of the love sonnet was the wife of Lord Gerald Wellesley. She was referred to as ‘Dottie’ by Vita and Virginia and ‘A’, for ‘Aprile’, was Vita’s pet name for her. ‘Insurrection’ from Orchard and Vineyard, dedicated ‘To A’, is a six page exploration of the sweet torments of sexual passion.127 As Victoria Glendinning also points out, Orchard and Vineyard (1921) gave the impression of a collection of poems about Kent, but knowing the background, a reader can ‘trace the emotional confusion of her preceding year, but the common reader in 1921 did not have the key’.128

King’s Daughter(1929) included three of a group of eleven sonnets written during her affair with Mary Campbell (1927)—wife of the poet Roy Campbell. Vita feared that the lesbian eroticism was too transparent in the other sonnets and made them unprintable. Mary Campbell was followed by Hilda Matheson, with whom Vita went to Val D’Isère in July 1929. (Hilda Matheson was director of talks at the BBC and promoted Vita’s poems on the radio.) The love poems dated 1931 in Collected Poems are addressed to Evelyn Irons, a Scot who was the editor of the woman’s page of the Daily Mail. She and Vita became lovers in 1931.

122 Glendinning 50.
123 ‘Sonnet’ CP 153. In her novel Challenge, Vita Sackville-West fictionalises her affair with Violet, named ‘Eve’, and conceals her own identity by depicting herself as a male, ‘Julian’. It represents the conflict between love and duty. It was never published in England because it was thought that Vita and Violet were too easily identifiable and too well known.
124 ‘Eve’ and ‘Eve in Tears’ CP 262–3.
125 Glendinning 94.
126 Glendinning 113.
128 Glendinning 122–3.
Given that Vita Sackville-West depicts fantasy personae in her poems and that the solitary writer was one of her fantasy images, *Solitude*, published in 1938 but begun in 1927 when she had little time to herself, has to be read as a self-dramatisation of that image. *Solitude* gives the impression of a 'worldly-sick' recluse exploring the liberties of her youth, but the line, 'Those cheap and easy loves! but what were they?' upset Vita's female lovers.\footnote{Glendinning 197.} Although it appeared to be autobiographical, Hilda Matheson wrote to say that she 'found no clue, in this self-communing poem, to the things in you which I have failed to understand in the last few years. I am puzzled by your attitude to love—cheap and easy'.\footnote{Vita Sackville-West, Letter to Harold, 20 November 1926. *Vita and Harold: The letters of Vita Sackville-West and Harold Nicolson 1910–1962*, ed. Nigel Nicolson (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1992) 173–4.} Hilda Matheson echoed Virginia Woolf's earlier reference to the 'something muted' in Vita which limited her writing. Vita acknowledged it in a letter to Harold:

> There is something muted . . . Something that doesn't vibrate, something that doesn't come alive . . . It makes everything I do (i.e. write) a little unreal; gives the effect of having been done from the outside. It is the thing which spoils me as a writer; destroys me as poet. But how did V. discover it? I have never owned it to anybody, scarcely even to myself. It is what spoils my human relationships too, but I mind less.\footnote{Vita and Harold: The letters of Vita Sackville-West and Harold Nicolson 1910–1962, ed. Nigel Nicolson (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1992) 173–4.}

Vita Sackville-West's adherence to rhyme, metrical rigidity and formal diction corresponded to the public persona of a traditional country lover which she constructed through her correspondence with Harold, her gardening columns and talks. Behind these impersonations of respectability lurked the non-conformist adventurer which is glimpsed in the ambiguities and coded passions of the poetry. Like Frances Cornford, her male impersonations appear to muffle a stylistic freedom but liberated her from the self-negating aesthetic of the conventional poetess. Although keen not to be identified as 'feminine', through dramatisation they addressed or resisted socially prescribed female roles. In retrospect, they alter the association of traditional forms with male writing.
5. The British Avant-garde: Edith Sitwell (1887-1964) and the Women of Wheels—Nancy Cunard (1896-1965), Iris Tree (1897-1968) and Helen Rootham (d. 1938)

During the nineteen twenties, Edith Sitwell was synonymous with progressive poetics and her Wheels (1916-21) anthologies, intended as an antidote to Edward Marsh’s Georgian Poetry books, were a launch pad for a new generation of poets in which men and women were on equal terms. Socially and through Wheels, she was associated with Nancy Cunard and Iris Tree, also daughters of aristocrats, and with Helen Rootham, her former governess who became a lifelong companion. Apart from John Pearson’s Facades, their poetry and involvement in Wheels have barely been registered:

To start with, there was Helen Rootham: she was a poet, a translator of French poetry and almost a member of the [Sitwell] family. Then there was the Eiffel Tower group, particularly that extraordinarily liberated pair, Nancy Cunard and Iris Tree. Both were poets, both had violently rejected their rich parents’ world and what they had stood for, and both were emphatically against the war.1

Although they did not produce a large body of poetry, Iris Tree and Nancy Cunard provide strong models of women holding their own among the intellectual elite in London and Paris. Together with Edith Sitwell, they occupy the otherwise vacant space of the British avant-garde and indicate a new aesthetic freedom and confidence in women poets. Sitwell especially presented herself as a public poet through her poetry performances, lectures and criticism.

Edith Sitwell has largely been ignored by feminist critics, probably because she did not articulate any sympathy for women’s rights; she is not in The Gender of Modernism (1990) nor mentioned in Writing for their Lives: The Modernist Women 1910—1940 (1987). She denounced ‘women’s poetry’ and tended to adopt young male poets as protégés, but her radical experiments fractured the authority of British literary traditions and were fuelled by antagonism towards her social background. She constructed a persona which was self-consciously antithetical to the poetess but she became mythologised as ‘eccentric’ in dress and behaviour. Although vehemently opposed to affiliation with the ‘feminine’, she did not resort to perceived masculine writing. Her statements about the nature of poetry by women indicate her preoccupation with the relationship between

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women’s poetry and tradition but her formal and syntactical subversions avoided connotations of either male or female practices.

Edith Sitwell was remarkably successful in publishing poetry, prose and criticism. Her publishing history spans the years 1913, when ‘Drowned Suns’ was printed in the Daily Mirror, to 1982 when her Collected Poems was reprinted. Her most successful period was 1922 to 1929. Between the wars she published Clowns’ Houses (1918), The Wooden Pegasus (1920), Bucolic Comedies (1923), The Sleeping Beauty (1924), Troy Park (1925), Rustic Elegies (1927), Gold Coast Customs (1929), Collected Poems (1930), Five Variations on a Theme (1933) and Selected Poems (1936). She was also a prolific literary reviewer and critic; she wrote a novel, historical and satirical biographies, edited several poetry anthologies and gave poetry readings and lectures on poetry in Europe and the United States. She was awarded the Royal Society of Literature’s medal for poetry in 1934. She is usually grouped with her brothers but they tended to tread separate paths after 1924 when Sacheverell married. She visited Paris in the nineteen twenties and moved there in 1932. In France she was influenced by European art and her meeting with Gertrude Stein in 1924 began an important alliance between the two champions of avant-garde poetics, although it became tinged with rivalry.

Edith Sitwell’s significance to modern, and specifically modernist, poetry has been unevenly acknowledged. Reviews of the recent Selected Letters of Edith Sitwell (1997) perpetuate the personal mythologies with titles like ‘Epistles of a great English Eccentric’ and ‘Withering Heights’. Carol Rumens’ entry in The Oxford Companion to Twentieth-Century Poetry is cautious about the quality of her poetry, ‘Whatever her credibility as a poet, Sitwell is undoubtedly an important figure in the literary history of England in the present century. She was a crusading force against the native tendencies to philistinism and conservatism.’ While endorsing the significance of her crusade for modern poetry, her credibility as a poet also needs reinstating. Her public image and her poetry were two sides of the same coin.

The following discussion of Edith Sitwell’s poetry, criticism and the Wheels anthologies identifies the nature and impact of her avant-gardism which was contiguous with her eschewal of ‘the feminine’. As Anthony Thwaite observes, ‘[Edith Sitwell] was, in the popular mind, the leader of the 1920s avant-garde (far more so than Eliot), and her verbal and rhythmical fancies, such as Facade, took no notice of social matters.’ While rightly indicating her reputation, the opposition between her ‘verbal and rhythmical fancies’ and ‘social matters’ is, however, misleading. Her anti-realist strategies were an aspect of the psychological retreat associated with post-war modernity and were also evasions of
gendered identity. Sitwell’s poetry negotiates between the anti-representational—her famous ‘surfaces’—and psychological or social realism. In common with Nancy Cunard and Iris Tree, she combined the modernist ideals of impersonality with a response to the sense of a crumbling civilisation and social inequality. She was influential in representing the unconscious through associated images using devices borrowed from contemporary art. Although preoccupied with rhythm and rhyme for the purposes of representing the condition of abstract art or music, Sitwell also talks of her poems as being ‘about’ something: ‘In many poems the subject is the growth of consciousness . . . whilst some poems are about the materialism and the world crumbling to dust.’

Edith Sitwell ‘presented an image of Bohemian contempt for the social and moral constraints of society’ and her avant-garde work after the war maintained the momentum for stylistic innovation when the literary press was wary of revolutionary forms because they were conceptually associated with violence. David Peters Corbett (1997) argues that the rejection of the authority of Victorian rhetoric and the loosening of social etiquette achieved through the most progressive pre-war war artistic practices were replaced by a ‘culture of tranquillity’—‘In the midst of a world changing utterly, the English pretend things are as they wish they had always been.’ This post-war yearning for stability is one explanation for the view that modernist poetry was largely an American affair. Corbett believes that Sitwell’s avant-garde represents the evasions and concealments of post-war modernity but it also opposed the reactionary ‘culture of tranquillity’:

The Sitwells exploited simultaneously a nostalgia for the social thrill of pre-war modernist radicalism, and the refusal of the meanings of that stance which was current in the twenties. The bulk of their achievement after the immediate post-war years lies in the evocation of a pre-modern dream world, an imaginary alternative to modernity.

The caution or animosity towards Edith Sitwell and the *Wheels* anthologies register how post-war sensibilities watered down the radical zeal of pre-war experiment. Contemporary histories testify to the Sitwells’ success in sustaining interest in literary innovation. There was frequent correspondence in the papers about ‘the Sitwells’, particularly Edith, in connection with the new poetry. Martin Gilkes’ chapter ‘The Sitwells’ begins:

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8 Corbett 160.
9 See, for example, Letter from Lawrence Housman, *Time and Tide* 22 June, 1928: 612.
Mention modern poetry in general company—or at a dinner party, say, if the atmosphere seems not too unfavourable—and nine times out of ten the response, if there is any at all, will be a somewhat tentative, "Oh—ah—yes. The Sitwells I suppose you mean?" . . . (unless of course someone particularly up-to-date gets in first with "Auden-Spender-Lewis"). Press further and you may elicit a still more tentative "Difficult stuff! And isn’t it recited? To a flute and drum: or something of that sort? And that extraordinary new music!"  

As early as 1934, Geoffrey Bullough detected the Sitwells’ influence on exploring the contingency of language and consciousness which characterises avant-garde modernism:

Their contribution to poetic technique was considerable for they enlarged the associational thought of their contemporaries by new similitudes, fostered rhythmical flexibility, by their experiments in metre and texture, invented a new instrument of satire, and vindicated a decorative art where “All is surface and so must die”.  

The creation of ‘decorative art’ was certainly an aesthetic principle, but the anti-realist evasions also correspond to the facades which the Sitwell children constructed in their public life. The striking sounds and shapes which draw attention to the constitution of the text mirror Edith Sitwell’s outlandish clothing which created a dramatic persona for public appearances.

Self-educated and brought up by governesses, Edith Sitwell reacted against her privileged heritage at the family estate of Renishaw Hall, Derbyshire, because of her parents’ cruelty. Her mother rejected her because she was the first child in a marriage into which she had been forced and later passed her over in favour of Sacheverell, the youngest. Her father had married for an heir and found his daughter ‘unsatisfactory’ for neither being male nor conforming to traditional models of femininity. Both parents persistently drew attention to her ugliness and she opted out of the conventional path for high society daughters. Instead of ‘coming out’ in society, she left home for London in 1914. This meant becoming financially self-supporting and holding her own among literary acquaintances who were mostly men. In a letter to Stephen Spender, she confessed that that there had not been an adequate female model ‘to point the way . . . I had to learn everything—learn, among other things, not to be timid, and that was one of the most difficult things of all.’  

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These tea parties of hers really were one of the most extraordinary literary affairs of the twenties when you think of them. For there she was, all but penniless, in a dingy little flat in an unfashionable part of London. All she could offer was strong tea and buns. Yet because of who she was she attracted to that flat almost every major literary figure of the twenties.\(^\text{13}\)

She also had to deal with the persistent taunting by her male colleagues and by critics who were challenged by the figure of a woman who did not fit the innocuous poetess stereotype. They undermined her writing, grouped her with her brothers and mocked her idiosyncrasies. In the 1920s, cartoons of her appeared in the papers and in the nineteen thirties, 'It seem[ed] as if Sitwell-baiting was a necessary ritual.'\(^\text{14}\) Her confrontations with the high priests of poetry, Geoffrey Grigson, F. R. Leavis and Wyndham Lewis, are part of British literary mythology.\(^\text{15}\)

Like other women who became public figures, such as Edna St. Vincent Millay and Marianne Moore, Edith Sitwell cultivated a protective public image. She also channelled her sense of exclusion into the revolutionary forms of her poetry and retreated psychologically from the treatment of critics and her parents through fantasy and dreamstate. The impersonality of modernist principles provided a legitimate escape from identifying herself as a woman. She could not identify with male literary traditions because male critics insisted on women's difference and she was embarrassed by the alleged sentimentality of women's poetry. Her inability to identify with male or female traditions was also a symptom of the rejection by both her father and mother. Drawing upon her own 'hell of a childhood', Sitwell challenged the false appearances of happy families in an early poem, 'En Famille': 'for Hell is just as properly proper/As Greenwich, or as Bath, or Joppa.'\(^\text{16}\) In a letter to John Lehmann, she connected the suppressed pain of her childhood with her writing: 'I can't tell the truth about my sainted mother. If I had been a slum child, I would have been taken away from her. But I wasn't a slum child, and motherhood is a very beautiful thing! I often wonder what my poetry would be like if I had had a normal childhood.'\(^\text{17}\) The long poem 'Mother', printed in the first volume of *Wheels* but not in her *Collected Poems*, is a disturbing monologue of a mother who is killed by her child, figured as a boy, presumably to detract from autobiographical associations. It ends with the mother speaking from beyond the grave:

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\(^{13}\) Geoffrey Gorer, Pearson 155.


He did no sin. But cold blind earth
The body was that gave him birth.
All mine, all mine the sin; the love
I bore him was not deep enough.\(^{18}\)

'The Drunkard', also printed in *Wheels*, relates to her mother's drink problem. The monologue dramatises the murderous thoughts of the discarded child as she observes her mother's unconscious body:

And if, to spite her, I dared steal
Behind her bed and feel

With fumbling fingers for her heart...
Ere I could touch the smart,

One more wild shriek on shriek would tear
The dumb and shuddering air....

Yet still she never speaks to me.\(^{19}\)

Edith Sitwell's difficult relationship with her mother—"It was my mother, and not my father, who made my childhood and youth a living hell,—and I am not exaggerating"\(^{20}\)—contributed to the vehemence of her female affiliation complex in relation to women poets. Pearson believes that her prickliness was tied up with her convictions of being ugly,\(^{21}\) which meant that she could not relate to other women, and 'her desperate anxiety to be accepted as an authoritative poetess' meant that she lost her sense of humour where her artistic reputation was at stake.\(^{22}\) In a letter to Robert Nichols in 1919, she complained of 'a depressing evening where all the guests were female poets.'\(^{23}\) Her antipathy to other literary women was no doubt also sparked by the dismissiveness towards women in reviews. Significantly, in a letter to Nichols the previous year she had complained about her poems being called 'trivial' in the *New Statesman*:

\(^{18}\) Edith Sitwell, 'Mother', *Wheels* 1916. 45-8.
\(^{19}\) Edith Sitwell, 'The Drunkard', *CP* 172-3.
\(^{21}\) Edith Sitwell's profile was published in the last edition of *Little Review*. Writers had been asked to respond to a questionnaire. Sitwell confessed that she liked being a poet but disliked her appearance: 'I worship the arts, loathe cruelty, am hideously bored with decadence, and cannot bear people with loud voices or people with dogs'. *Little Review* Spring 1929.
\(^{22}\) Pearson 168.
Damn them,—oh damn them! If they only knew the amount of concentration I put into these things, the amount of hard work and the frayed nerves it entails. They grumble because they say women will try to write like men and can't—then if a woman tries to invent a female poetry, and uses every feminine characteristic for the making of it, she is called trivial. It has made me furious, not because it is myself, but because it is unjust.24

Sitwell’s reviews of women’s books, her article ‘Some Observations on Women’s Poetry’ (Vogue, 1925) and her frequent references to the nature of women’s poetry illustrate her preoccupation with the gendering of poetic techniques which she confronted in the rhetoric of male criticism. Initially, she believed that women were different—‘Women poets will do best if they realise that male technique is not suitable for them’25—but later was more anxious to eliminate the ghettoising of ‘women poets’—‘If one can’t write like a man, one has no business to write at all.’26 It is likely that she was attracted to Virginia Woolf’s concept of the androgynous mind in A Room of One’s Own (1929). Sitwell wrote an enthusiastic letter to Woolf in 1930: ‘You know that you are one of the only living writers whom I can read with joy and perpetual astonishment and satisfaction, and the fact that you like my poems makes me proud and happy.’27 Sitwell’s famous renunciation of her literary foremothers explains one of her central aesthetic concerns, to negate the feminine, largely through avoiding the expressive or personal:

Women’s poetry, with the exception of Sappho (I have no Greek and speak with great humility on that subject), and with the exception of “Goblin Market” and a few deep and concentrated, but fearfully incompetent poems of Emily Dickinson, is simply awful—incompetent, floppy, whining, arch, trivial, self-pitying,—and any woman learning to write, if she is going to be any good at all, would, until she had made a technique for herself (and one has to forge it for oneself, there is no help to be got) write in as hard and glittering a manner as possible, and with as strange images as possible—strange, but believed in. Anything to avoid that ghastly wallowing.28

Her admiration for Christina Rossetti, as indicated above, emerged in an early poem, ‘Singerie’, which is strikingly similar to passages in Goblin Market:

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Papagei, O Papagei,
Buy our greenest fruits, oh buy,
Melons misty from the bloom
Of mellow moons on some hot night,
Melting in the August light;  

The collage of imagery in 'Singerie' illustrates that early on Edith Sitwell reformulated the French symbolists whom she admired into her ideal of self-contained aestheticism. In her notes, critical books and articles, Edith Sitwell consistently drew attention to what she called the 'texture'—the sounds and shapes—of language, in ways which can taunt and frustrate the reader because they test conventional systems of meaning. By displacing conventional symbols, she defamiliarised the reader for the purposes of invigorating their consciousness. The refusal to provide recognisable signifiers also unsettled conventional representations of gender.

Rhythm and rhyme provide the unifying principles in Sitwell's work. She believed that rhythmical variety was the major instrument for enlarging consciousness. For her, the growth of consciousness meant a person achieving enlightenment about 'something beyond the conscious that is yet buried in sleep' and rhythm was 'one of the principle translators between dream and reality'. Rhyme was integral to rhythmic effect:

Most modernist poets are keenly interested in developing technique along the lines laid down for us by our predecessors. For myself, I spend much of my time in experimenting in the effects that rhyme and texture have on rhythm. Many of the violent rhythms which I obtained in Bucolic Comedies were got largely by the use of rhymes, internal and external.

Significantly, here, Sitwell situated her experiments away from the continuities of 'our predecessors'. Her juxtaposition of allusions from several traditions such as classical and Christian, literary and nursery rhyme, are part of this defamiliarising process and have an irreverence unencumbered by nostalgia for the traditions which she recast.

Bucolic Comedies (1923), which consists of twenty one parts, operates on the level of 'texture' and also explore the psychological effects of Sitwell's childhood. The images, drawn from the house and gardens at Renishaw Hall, and the rhythmic shifts interchange dream—or nightmare—and realism in the memories of her hellish past. In Osbert's words, Edith was driven from home by the 'atmosphere of violent hysteria' surrounding their mother, the 'Countess of [Hel]L':

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29 Edith Sitwell, CP 8.
30 Edith Sitwell, Taken Care of: an autobiography (London: Hutchinson, 1965) 44, 123.
But Anne was five years old and must know
Reality; in the goose-soft snow

She was made to walk with her three tall aunts
Drooping beneath the snow's cold plants.

They dread the hour when with book and bell
Their mother, the old fell Countess of L—

Is disrobed of her wig and embalmed for the night's
Sweet mummified dark; her invective affrights

The maids till you hear them scamper like mice
In the wainscoting—trembling, neat and nice.32

John Press suggests that 'her preoccupation with images of cold indifference, isolation, betrayal, corruption and suffering probably stemmed from her own terror and loneliness as a young child.'33 In 'Colonel Fantock', dedicated to Osbert and Sacheverell, images of loneliness, like 'I think that only winged ones know the eyrie is so lonely', are woven into the tapestry of remembered detail. 'Dagobert' and 'Peregrine' were Edith's pseudonyms for her brothers:

But Dagobert and Peregrine and I
Were children then; we walked like shy gazelles
Among the music of the thin flower-bells.
And life, still held some promise,—never ask
Of what,—but life seemed less a stranger, then,
Than ever after in this cold existence.
I always was a little outside life—
And so the things we touch could comfort me;
I loved the shy dreams we could hear and see—
For I was like one dead, like a small ghost,
A little cold air wandering and lost.34

The profession of alienation—'I always was a little outside life'—reads simultaneously as a tormented memory and a means of psychic reconstruction by aestheticising the memory. The 'old military ghost' represents their distinguished ancestry which haunted the children:

All day within the sweet and ancient gardens  
He had my childish self for audience—  
Whose body flat and strange, whose pale straight hair  
Made me appear as though I had been drowned—  
(We all have the remote air of a legend)—.35

The psychological effects of her childhood appear to have dogged Sitwell throughout her life. She continually quipped about her parents' rejection and cruelty, particularly putting her in an iron brace, her 'bastille', allegedly to strengthen her long spine.

In *The Sleeping Beauty* (1924), set in her maternal grandmother's home at Londsborough,36 Sitwell's violent opposition to her conventional upbringing is depicted in the image of her stuffed parrot in a cage:

Imprisoned now in a gilded cage  
In her powder closet, far from the rage  
Of winter, it can only sing  
Roulades, and preen its bright clipped wing

Upon her perfumed dressing table  
In a cage with a foolish bell-hung gable,  
Beneath the portrait of dead Queen Anne  
(Whose life was the sweet air blown from a fan),

'Midst brightly perfumed water flowing  
Eighteenth-century silks where growing  
Strawberry flowers of the frail frost  
Upon the diamond-panes are lost.37

Typically, Sitwell negotiates between psychological realism and a substitute world of dreams and enchantments. The poem illustrates her experiments with the discordant effect of adjacent rhymes:

The country bumpkins come, with faces round

35 'Colonel Fantock', *CP* 176.  
36 Edith Sitwell, *Taken Care Of* 61.  
And pink as summer fruits, with hair as gold,
Sharp-pointed, as the summer sun (that old
Bucolic mime, whose laughing pantomime
Is rearing pink fruits from the sharp white rime).\(^{38}\)

Sitwell represents fractured memories while disrupting recognisable systems of representation, including conventional constructions of female identity. In *The Sleeping Beauty*, she deftly subverts fairytale romance by foregrounding the fiction and temporality of its narratives:

And we remember nursery afternoons
When the small music box of the sweet snow
Gave half-forgotten tunes, and our nurse told
Us tales that fell with the same tinkling notes . . .
“Once on a time,” she said, “and long ago.”
Her voice was sweet as the bright-sparkling rime,
The fruits are cold as that sweet music’s time—
Yet all those fruit like the bright snow will fade.\(^{39}\)

*The Sleeping Beauty* was the first of Edith Sitwell’s works to appear simultaneously in an edition in the United States while in Britain the *TLS* review says something about the respect she had gained during the nineteen twenties:

The greater part of the poem, its scenery and symbolism, has the individuality of form and colour which we have come to associate with this poet’s work. The principal theme of the poem may be said to represent the subjection of youthful vision, personified by the princess, to the necessities of age and its accompanying malice in the figure of the evil fairy Laidronete. There are, of course, many undertones which can only be heard in the verse itself, and it is not the mortality of beauty which is mourned, but the impossibility of retaining the perception in our early purity. It is a profound theme, and one to which Miss Sitwell has brought her accustomed thoughtfulness and uncommon intellectual awareness.\(^{40}\)

The reviewer appeared not to identify any autobiographical allusions but he did recognise that her fairies were ‘drawn in Beardsley fashion’ and therefore represented the aristocracy. He was alert to the way in which the shades of the prison-house closed around the growing princess and that there was no Prince Charming in her fairy tales.

\(^{38}\) ‘The Sleeping Beauty’, *CP* 87.
\(^{39}\) ‘The Sleeping Beauty’, *CP* 87–8
In ‘Spring’, from *Bucolic Comedies*, Sitwell similarly deflates both pastoral and mythical idealism, particularly idealised romance:

But King Midas heard the swan-bosomed sky
Say, “All is surface, and so must die.”

And he said: “It is spring; I will have a feast
To woo eternity; for my least

Palace is like a berg of ice;
And the spring winds, for birds of a paradise,

With the leaping goat-footed waterfalls cold,
Shall be served for me on a dish of gold

By a maiden fair as an almond tree
With hair like the waterfalls’ goat-locks; she

Has lips like that jangling harsh pink rain,
The flower-bells that spirt on the trees again.”

At the end of the poem, Midas believes that he is in charge of the universe and calls for the fair maiden but she refuses him: “‘And you are my Eve!’—but the maiden flies.”

Underneath the textual antics was the motive to shake off traditionalism. Julian Symons complained that there was ‘no reference through symbols to reality as there is in Yeats’. As she explained in her lengthy article, ‘Modern Poetry’, Sitwell was aiming to rescue literary language from stagnation:

One of the principal aims of the new poets is to increase consciousness, and, to do this, we must use all the powers that nature and intelligence and insight and dream and fact have given us. . . . The modernist artist wishes us to see things for ourselves—not merely to believe the trees are green because we have been told so.

Significantly, she identified herself as ‘modernist’ and also maintained that form and rhyme were not oppositional to modernist principles: ‘We leave the weak, the formless, unformulated verse which is neither free verse nor anything else, to the café-haunters of

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41 Edith Sitwell, ‘Spring’, *CP* 14–5.
43 See footnote 31.
Paris, both [sic] English, French and American'. The early eight part sequence *Marine* is a study of a semi-conscious crowd and section Six, 'Portrait of a Barmaid', seems Prufrockesque in its depiction of shifting perceptions and alienation:

Metallic waves of people jar  
Through crackling green toward the bar,

Where on the tables, chattering white,  
The sharp drinks quarrel with the light.

Those coloured muslin blinds, the smiles,  
Shroud wooden faces; and at whiles

They splash like a thin water (you  
Yourself reflected in their hue).

The conversations, loud and bright,  
Seem spinal bars of shunting light

In firework-spirting greenery.  
O complicate machinery

For building Babel!44

Sitwell characteristically confuses the reader’s senses by connecting the concrete with the abstract; conversations are figured as ‘spinal bars of shunting light’. In mingling perspectives she resembles Cubist experiments with angles and dimensions.

*Façade* marks the stage between the greater realism of Edith Sitwell’s earlier and later work when she was experimenting with the equivalent to abstract art and with the rhythms of music, particularly dances like waltzes and fox-trots. According to Sitwell, *Façade* was a series of experiments with pacing, rhythm and syntax and the deceptive gaiety of the lyrics concealed her seriousness about aesthetics.45 Her seriousness about aesthetics was a principle about the self-contained status of art, part of her commitment to enlarging consciousness and also rooted in her reaction against British conventionality. The title of *Façade* introduces the theme of socially constructed appearances which the poem explores. Disguise and facades became a way of life for the Sitwell children and is central to much of

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44 Edith Sitwell, *CP* 166.  
45 Edith Sitwell, *Taken Care Of* 124.
their work. Edith's anger towards her parents fuelled her satirical portraits of national traditionalism in *The English Eccentrics* (1933) and in her poems.

In 'Sir Beelzebub', the last section of *Façade*, the exaggerated versification is a swipe at the rigidity of Victorian values:

Alfred Lord Tennyson crossing the bar laid  
With cold vegetation from pale deputations  
Of temperance workers (all signed In Memoriam)  
Hoping with glory to trip up the laureate's feet,  
(Moving in classical metres) . . . 46

Irreverence for tradition is structured through the parodic dactylic tetrameter, for through 'mimicking the forced conformity of rhyme and metre in Victorian Poetry. . . . the overall impression is one of playfulness, the shaking loose of meaning instead of fixing it in some monolithic scheme'.47 Sitwell explained that 'The poems in *Façade* are abstract poems—that is, they are, too, in many cases, virtuoso exercises in technique of an extreme difficulty.'48

More specifically,

My experiments in *Façade* consist of inquiries into the effect on rhythm and on speed of the use of rhymes, assonances, and dissonances, placed at the beginning and in the middle of lines, as well as at the end, and in most elaborate patterns. I experimented, too, with the effect upon speed of the use of equivalent syllables—a system that produces great variation.49

In 'Fox Trot' and 'Hornpipe', although attending to rhythmic effect, the customs of the aristocracy such as foxhunting and dancing are mocked through the caricatures of Queen Victoria and Lord Tennyson, emblems of British imperialism and literary heritage:

Where Lord Tennyson in laurels wrote a gloria free,  
In a borelaic iceberg came Victoria; she  
Knew Prince Albert's tall memorial took the colour of the floreal  
And the borealic iceberg.50

46 Edith Sitwell, 'Sir Beelzebub', *CP* 158.
48 Edith Sitwell, *CP* xvi.
49 ibid.
50 Edith Sitwell, 'Hornpipe', *CP* 155.
The nonsense-verse imitation undermines the authority of high cultural tropes. ‘Hornpipe’ and ‘Sir Beelzebub’ exemplify her play with popular and literary forms—nineteenth-century nonsense and Tennysonian narrative verse—which anticipates postmodernism.

Many anecdotal references to the Sitwells relate to the first public performance of Façade, in the Aeolian Hall on 12 June 1923, which became ‘part of the artistic history of the twenties, and central to the whole mythology of the Sitwells.’ Some mythologies were created by Noel Coward’s parodic show, London Calling, but the event mostly became scandalised as a shambolic riot in the popular press, although according to the Daily Express the audience was ‘in ecstasy’. First-hand witnesses, however, found it respectable, if not subdued: ‘Everyone was perfectly good-mannered and no one objected violently at all. There were certainly no boos or catcalls. On the other hand there wasn’t much enthusiasm either.’ Three years later, the revised score by William Walton helped the performance of Façade at Chelsea to be a notable success:

It became a demonstration of the support and interest which their name could now attract among the socially artistic cream of London. Diaghilev was in the audience, and Cecil Beaton found the hall so crowded that he could not get a seat and had to stand “along with the mass of other thrilled and expectant people. Half the audience seemed nicely arty and the other half merely revolting arty.”

The nicely arty and the revolting arty were for once united in their enthusiasm. There were repeated encores, and afterwards the Sitwells and their allies dined in triumph at the Eiffel Tower [restaurant].

The significance of the reference to the Russian impresario Sergei Diaghilev is that the staging of Diaghilev’s Parade in 1917 ‘was one of the historic moments in the modern movement’. The sets and costumes of Parade, designed by Pablo Picasso, were described as ‘surreal’ by Guillaume Apollinaire, the first recorded use of the term. John Pearson believes that Sitwell’s poems written around 1919 and 1920 were woven from nursery rhyme figures which were reworked into characters in a Diaghilev ballet. They were also set against brightly coloured backcloths like Picasso’s paintings which she and her brothers admired. The fact that when Façade was again performed in the Aeolian Hall twenty years later it was rapturously received, suggests that any initial resistance to the Sitwells was reactionary because they were too progressive for their time.

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51 Pearson 183.
52 ‘Poetry through a Megaphone’. Daily Express 13 June 1923.
54 Pearson 205–6.
55 Sergei Diaghilev presented a season of Russian opera and ballet in Paris in 1909.
57 Pearson 151.
58 Pearson 354.
Sitwell’s poetry operates according to Bakhtin’s theory of carnivalesque where high cultural signifiers are treated with irreverence. A reviewer of The Bucolic Comedies in the TLS appreciated the interpolation of pauses and still small voices among the ‘audacious pell-mell carnival’. Geoffrey Bullough also noticed the magic realism, especially in Façade:

Her clowns are the clowns of the commedia dell’arte. They exist in her imagination side by side with Ethiops and Victorian ladies, Greek Nymphs and centaurs, wigs and patches, costumes of all ages, statues, fountains, waterfalls, fruits and flowers, unicorns, caves, modern servants and ancient queens, a phantasmagoria without limitation of place or time.

Although Sitwell’s fantastic imagery challenges what Bakhtin describes as the ‘official seriousness’ of traditional rituals and ceremony, she did not substitute the lower cultural order for the ruling class. She depicted the commedia dell’arte rather than street carnival. However, the absence of linearity and the transgression of social conventions allowed in the carnivalesque were strategies for rejecting literary traditions and avoiding stereotyped femininity. Through the carnivalesque suspension of identity, she trod the line between representing and aestheticising a mind troubled by the decaying culture of post-war modernity. The evocation of an outworn culture in Façade connects with The Waste Land (1922) which Sitwell admired. She first met T. S. Eliot in 1917 and their acquaintance continued, if somewhat intermittently, for many years.

The restorative potential of fantasy in Edith Sitwell’s figurations of the unconscious was discussed in a good full-length column review of Three Rustic Elegies in the TLS: ‘Miss Sitwell’s poems have then the qualities but not the function of dreams. The function of dreams, in poetry at any rate, is mainly to provide compensation’. The poems were also well-received in Time and Tide, but neither reviewer caught the ways in which the elegies subverted the Georgian pastorals through the surreal landscapes of the poems. The first Rustic Elegy, ‘The Little Ghost Who Died for Love’, commemorates a young woman who was hanged in 1708 for shielding her lover in a duel. Part 2, ‘The Hambone and the Heart’, dedicated to Pavel Tchelitchew, the homosexual painter with whom she was allegedly in love, consists of a dialogue between a girl and her heart. The cumulation of morbid imagery represents a nightmare condition which is both personal and cosmic:

For underneath the lime-tree’s golden town
Of Heaven, where he stood, the tattered Clown

60 Bullough 112.
Holding the screaming Heart and the Hambone,
You saw the Clown's thick hambone, life-pink carrion.\(^{64}\)

In his introduction to *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse* (1936) Yeats described 'The Hambone and the Heart' as one of the most tragic poems of the time. The third part, 'The Ghost Whose Lips were Warm' is a tragi-comedy, based on a seventeenth-century tale of a man who is visited by the ghost of his first wife. The tone of the elegy is both sincere and irreverently parodic. It was included in the Parisian review *Échanges*, founded by Allanah Harper in 1929.\(^{65}\) *Three Rustic Elegies, The Madness of Saul and Elegy on Dead Fashion* anticipate the move towards realism in *Gold Coast Customs* (1929) in dwelling upon a 'crumbling civilisation' where tragedy is both personal and cosmic.

*Gold Coast Customs* (1929), dedicated to Helen Rootham, is based on the Ashante ritual, 'Customs', of killing the poor and slaves to provide blood to put upon the dead body of an important person. In the poem, the crucified Christ is the emblem of suffering *in extremis* caused by human hands.\(^{66}\) Sitwell explained *Gold Coast Customs* as a poem in which 'I have tried to produce, not so much the record of a world as the wounded and suffering soul of that world, its living evocation, not its history, seen through the eyes of a protagonist whose personal tragedy is echoed in that vaster tragedy.'\(^{67}\) Inspired by the hunger marches, *Gold Coast Customs* was also an attack on fashionable society, personified in Lady Bamburgher who hosts champagne parties while men starve; the inequalities of her 'Mayfair Jungle' mirrored the cannibal rites of King Munza of Ashanti.\(^{68}\) In the poem, Edith Sitwell's opposition to economic injustice is characteristically communicated through insistent rhythm:

> Yet the time will come
> To the heart's dark slum
> When the rich man's gold and the rich man's wheat
> Will grow in the street, that the starved may eat,—
> And the sea of the rich will give up its dead—
> And the last blood and fire from my side will be shed.
> For the fires of God go marching on.\(^{69}\)

As Michael Roberts indicated, 'The poetry of Edith Sitwell, like the poetry of Vachel Lindsay and E. E. Cummings, needs to be read aloud, with careful change of rhythm,

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\(^{64}\) Edith Sitwell, 'The Hambone and the Heart', *CP* 181-6.
\(^{65}\) *Échanges*, ed. Allanah Harper, ran for five quarterly numbers. It included poems and an article 'Modernist Poets' by Edith Sitwell. See note 1, Lehmann and Parker 38–39.
\(^{66}\) Edith Sitwell, *CP* 249–50.
\(^{67}\) Edith Sitwell, *CP* xli.
\(^{68}\) Salter and Harper 151.
\(^{69}\) Edith Sitwell, *CP* 252–3
volume, pitch, and tempo.\textsuperscript{70} He analysed Sitwell’s manipulation of sound at some length in his Introduction to \textit{The Faber Book of Modern Verse} (1936):

"Often an effect of logic in a poem, which when examined, proves illogical, is due to auditory rhetoric rather than to fantasy. The poetry of Edith and Sacheverell Sitwell shows, for example, not only an unusually vivid use of sensuous impression, of image patterns based, like nursery rhymes, on the compelling force of dreams, but also an effective use of sound-patterns having this convincing facility of speech."\textsuperscript{71}

Through its experiments with ‘auditory rhetoric’ \textit{Gold Coast Customs} negotiates the line between expressing and aestheticising oppression. It got a lengthy and good review in the \textit{TLS} although the social realities were denied: ‘Respect for the moral indignation of the poetess, enjoyment of her curious versification and novel senses of vocabulary, cannot prevent us from feeling that the case against Lady Bamburgher is not sufficiently evidenced.’\textsuperscript{72} In a later article, ‘What is Slavery?’ (1935), Sitwell was more direct: ‘Have we not got the extreme swing back of the pendulum in the ugly curve of the slave system, when it swings from the “hunger marcher”, with his banner-inscription: “Feed us, or shoot us”, to the charity-dancer, with his card of admittance, and its “champagne included”?\textsuperscript{73}

Although \textit{Gold Coast Customs} reflects her hatred for the abuse of social privilege, Edith Sitwell did not situate herself with the younger generation of thirties poets. Typically, if not able to join them, she belittled them as a clique of minor talent, remarking, ‘if they hadn’t all been at Oxford together, they would never have been heard of.’\textsuperscript{74} The longer lines and the despair at human barbarity in \textit{Gold Coast Customs} anticipate the style of ‘Still Falls the Rain’ (1940). This and other later poems like ‘Street Song’ and ‘The Song of the Cold’ demonstrate the pressure of responding to extreme national upheavals which was taking precedence over avant-garde aesthetics between the wars and particularly during and after the Second World War.

The Sitwells’ importance during the 1920s was in sustaining the revolutionary zeal which had inspired the imagist and other poets before the war. In the \textit{TLS} review of Osbert Sitwell’s \textit{England Reclaimed: A Book of Eclogues} in 1927, one claim stands out in a climate where criticism rarely gave away accolades for innovation: ‘Mr Osbert Sitwell and his brother and sister must have the credit of the discovery of a new poetic territory.’\textsuperscript{75} They are usually perceived as an alternative Bloomsbury although they overlapped socially with the Bloomsbury artists and novelists and other literary groups. They were particularly popular with the Oxford-educated socially-ambitious post-war generation because in ‘their rejection

\textsuperscript{71} ibid.
\textsuperscript{72} Review of \textit{Gold Coast Customs}, by Edith Sitwell. \textit{TLS} 21 Feb. 1929: 137.
\textsuperscript{74} Edith Sitwell, Letter to David Horner, 18 May 1939. Pearson 332.
of Cambridge-orientated Bloomsbury intellectualism, their contempt for the plodding homespun virtues of squirearchy, and their attacks upon the conventional paternal wisdom of the old, they represented free thought and glamorous lifestyles. John Pearson firmly positions the Sitwell group as luminaries of avant-garde poetry and his description of the moderns’ fight against ‘Victorian tradition’ and ‘tired convention’ is imaginatively appealing:

There was an extended line up for the battle. On one side, under the banner of tradition, stood a host of disparate but more or less united allies—the popular press, the middle classes, provincial little Englanders, admirers of academic art and Georgian poetry, puritans in general and the old in heart. Against them stood the forces of what Herbert Read still optimistically termed “the future”. They were less numerous but more vocal than their enemy. They included left-wing politicians, “intellectuals”, “dandy-aesthetes” with Wilde’s green carnation still in the button-hole, admirers of experimental poetry and the latest painting from the school of Paris and the whole of Bloomsbury.

The groupings were, of course, amorphous, and could change: so could the line of battle, with groups and individuals switching sides or even fighting on both sides at once. But the Sitwells never wavered.

Looking back on ‘modern poetry’ in 1938 Gwendolen Murphy believed that Edith’s poetry was the most significant of the three Sitwells for its ‘free association’, and skill in ‘texture, new images and symbols, in synthaesthesia (strange to her readers yet itself old), in liveliness of metre, which suggested that a certain richness might again be possible in English poetry . . . a world of bright surfaces.

Wheels

For Gwendolen Murphy, Wheels (1916-1921) was also the reason for the Sitwells’ importance to the period. According to David Perkins in The History of Modern Poetry,

[Wheels was] the first manifestation in England of a reaction against the Georgian hegemony, the first at least that originated with English poets and caught the attention of the literary public. In fact it was, so far as Miss Sitwell’s intentions are concerned, the first attempt of an English poet to create a distinctively Modern movement. (Imagism might be called the first Modernist movement in English poetry

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76 Pearl 190.
77 Pearl 145.
but although English poets participated in it, it was essentially the creation of Pound.)

A reviewer in the *Morning Post* had ‘no doubt whatever that fifty years hence, the publication of *Wheels* will be remembered as a notable event in the inner history of English literature’. Eighty years on, some of the poetry in *Wheels* seems undeveloped and its radical edge is less keen out of its original context:

*Wheels* makes rather tame reading, but sixty years ago some reviewers found it radically modern or avant-garde. The reasons they mentioned were chiefly that the *Wheels* poets did not write about country things and were often despairing. The major reason was probably the reputation for rebellious modernity that Edith and her two brothers, Osbert and Sacheverell, were already beginning to acquire.

At the time, *Wheels* did not appear tame. The volumes had startling covers and the poems were arranged by poet. One example of the association between the Sitwells, *Wheels* and ‘rebellious modernity’ is a review of *Wheels* in the *TLS* which referred to ‘the school of poets of whom Miss Sitwell is the leader’ and pronounced that ‘everybody in Miss Sitwell’s company is clever, bright and independent’. The perceived despair in some poems was their departure from pre-war jingoistic optimism and the consolations of the weakest Georgian verses. The *Wheels* anthologies provided a collective opposition to the stereotyped complacency of the country gentleman associated with the Georgians.

The six annual cycles of *Wheels* were an important outlet for experiments in conventional forms, free verse, verse drama and prose poems, not only by the Sitwells but also Aldous Huxley, Sherard Vines, Iris Tree, Nancy Cunard and Helen Rootham. These core contributors were more or less consistent throughout the cycles with some additions. *Wheels* published Wilfred Owen’s war poetry and *Wheels. A Fourth cycle* (1919) was dedicated to his memory. Edith Sitwell’s correspondence with his mother, Susan Owen, records her enthusiasm for publishing a volume of Owen’s poetry and her disappointment when Sassoon took over the project. She declared that to have arranged ‘the greatest poetry of the generation for publication’ would have been the greatest pride of her life. Of great importance, however, *Wheels* provoked critical debate about the nature and directions of modern poetry:

81 Perkins 427.
Wheels was intended to be an act of defiance, a deliberate rebellion against the stuffy canons of respectable, conservative society. It mocked explicitly or implicitly the standards of poetic decorum and middle-class romanticism associated with Marsh and his Georgians; it undermined the dignified postures of academic men of letters; its tone was anti-militaristic, sophisticated and cynical. Not surprisingly, it evoked abusive hostility and delighted applause.\textsuperscript{84}

The hostile reviews, such as the sensational article titled ‘Asylum School of Poetry’ in the \textit{Daily Express}, were still useful publicity.\textsuperscript{85} Osbert wrote a carefully reasoned response, which was printed as ‘Poet’s Defence of “Asylum School”. Are they or their critics mad?’ He explained that the principles behind the poetry were to create beauty out of life which is not intrinsically beautiful, that \textit{vers libre} could have aesthetic value, and that they were not ignoring ‘tradition’ but were drawing upon Elizabethan concepts of wit in their poems.\textsuperscript{86} Several reports in both the popular and literary papers were more seriously engaged with what \textit{Wheels} was about.\textsuperscript{87} Even T. S. Eliot, under the pseudonym ‘Apteryx’ in \textit{The Egoist}, acknowledged the initiatives of \textit{Wheels}:

\textit{Wheels} is a more serious book [than \textit{Georgian Poetry 1916-17}]. . . . These are not the good boys of the Sixth Form. The book as a whole has a dilettante effect, refreshing after the schoolroom. The authors are certainly conscious of the fact that literature exists in other languages than their own. . . . they have extracted the juice from Verlaine and Laforgue.\textsuperscript{88}

They were ‘not the good boys of the sixth form’ in their freedom from British literary conventions but also in not being exclusively male.

In \textit{Wheels}, men and women appeared to be equally responsible for pioneering a new kind of poetry. If it is mentioned at all, \textit{Wheels} is usually attributed to Edith Sitwell, although her biographers suggest that it was as much the initiative of Nancy Cunard, whose eponymous poem was the first in the first volume. Certainly, Sitwell was not the named editor until the third volume, but it was she who secured its publication with Basil Blackwell. Interestingly, there was nothing woman-centred about the poems and, unusually, reviewers rarely mentioned gender. The review of \textit{Wheels. A Third Cycle}, in \textit{The Athenaeum} headed ‘The Post-Georgians’ made no distinction between the men and women contributors and identified ways in which \textit{Wheels} marked a change in fashion: ‘\textit{Vers libre}}
and Cubism already existed, but Wheels at least acknowledged the fact; it showed a
willingness to experiment, a tolerance of various emotions, and a complete indifference to
simplicity.89 These writers would agree, however, that in terms of their individual
development, the poems published in Wheels are not their best work; few are included in
Edith Sitwell's Collected Poems, Iris Tree's Poems (1920) or Nancy Cunard's books of
poetry. In a letter to Robert Nichols, Edith confessed that the edition of Wheels was 'very
bad this year [1919], for the reason that a most of us have had books, all our better work
was exhausted.'90

Wheels succeeded as a foil to the Georgian anthologies and it reinforced the
conceptual opposition between traditional forms and radical free verse. A reviewer in The
Observer stated, 'The second cycle of Wheels is a challenge like the first. Every page shouts
defiance of poetic conventions.'91 In fact, the poems in Wheels experiment with a range of
forms as well as free verse. The association of the avant-garde with anarchism is, however,
significant because it meant that there was less appetite for radical poetics after the war.
Sitwell, however, was bold in her continuing promotion of innovation. In drawing upon
surrealist and abstract art, the anti-representational aspects of many poems transcended the
femininity which obstructed the progress of a woman poet.

Nancy Cunard, Iris Tree, Helen Rootham

The women in Wheels, a group of independent daughters of the upper classes, mark the
progress of twentieth-century women from self-effacing poetesses to self-dramatising poets.
They presented a compelling and formidable front which contradicted the stereotypes of the
feminine writer. Although rarely mentioned in literary histories, they feature in literary
reviews and the memoirs and correspondence of their contemporaries. According to William
Carlos Williams, Nancy Cunard and Iris Tree stood out in a group of 'young and arresting
young women' in Paris:

I couldn't make them out. I'm sure I didn't look at them as women. . . . they were . . . young, detached from reality, without passion. They, young as they were, had had bitter early experiences without emotional response. There was nothing left in either of them. They were completely empty, and yet they were young, appealing and unassailable.92

91 The Observer. 'Press notices', Wheels 1918: 100.
Here, Williams detected the damaging effects of their privileged but stifling backgrounds which had caused them to move away from their family homes. Taken collectively, their poems record their attempts to deal with their guilt-ridden privileges through aestheticising their memories and exposing social differences. Their experiments with the textures of poems register the influence of Edith Sitwell and also of the European artists and writers whom they encountered in Paris.

Iris Tree had more poems than anyone else in *Wheels*. Her poems were also printed in other anthologies and magazines like *Vanity Fair* although *Poems* (1920) was her only collection. Helen Rootham’s contributions were fewer but included some unusual war poems and translations of prose poems by Rimbaud. The six poems in *Wheels* 1916, were Nancy Cunard’s first to be published and she was in most of the anthologies. Her poems were also printed in journals like *The English Review* and *New Age* and she published *Outlaws* (1921), *Sublunary* (1923), *Parallax* (1925) and *Poems (Two)* 1925 (1930). She was meticulous as a translator and could work in several languages; she wrote poems in English, French and Spanish.

The collection of tributes and writings to Nancy Cunard in Samuel Putnam’s *Nancy Cunard: Brave Poet, Indomitable Rebel 1896-1965*, (1968) is the main source of information concerning Cunard and her cultural milieu. Iris Tree’s entry, “‘We shall never forget’: for Nancy Cunard’, reminisces about their rebellion against the aspirations of their parents. Born in Leicestershire, Nancy Cunard was the daughter of Maude Alice Burke, a Californian socialite, and Sir Bach Cunard, son of Samuel Cunard, the founder of the shipping company. She was often alone in her childhood and looked after by a governess. Her mother expected her to make a high society marriage, but she rejected the extravagance and elitism of the British upper class which she had experienced at home and in exclusive schools in London and abroad. She had a short unhappy marriage and moved to Paris in 1920 where she became a familiar figure in Montparnasse. Iris Tree was the daughter of Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree. (The writer Sir Max Beerbohm was her uncle’s half-brother.) She was educated by a governess and then at Miss Woolf’s school where she became close friends with Nancy Cunard. Iris Tree’s mother wanted her to be feminine but her father treated her as the son he would have liked. Both parents enjoyed poetry and acting, and Iris had happy memories of her childhood spent around artistic people and theatres. She married an American, Curtis Moffatt, against her parents’ better judgement, was separated from him by 1924 and divorced in 1933. During the nineteen twenties she took an apartment in Paris where she met up again with Nancy Cunard and other intellectuals of the Left Bank. She later married Friedrich Ledebur and lived with him nomadically between the United States and London.

Retrospectively, Iris Tree perceived the ‘forbidden artifice’, such as white face powder, lip rouge and cigarette smoking, as costuming devices for assuming a different identity from their parents. Nancy Cunard also adopted fictional roles through mimicry and singing. At the beginning of the First World War, before the young men were taken away,
they congregated secretly in studio attics, hotels, pubs, river barges and cab shelters. Iris Tree recorded the excited atmosphere of independence in a changing cultural climate:

It was an epoch of romantic discovery which had outgrown the strictures and sentimentalities of Victorian-Edwardian England, yet kept its manners and classical scholarship articulate, satirical, poetical. Transition and danger were in the air. We responded like chameleons to every changing colour, turning from Meredith to Proust, to Dostoevsky, slightly tinged by the *Yellow Book*, and occasional Absinthe left by Baudelaire and Wilde, flushed by Liberalism, sombered by nihilistic pessimism, challenged by Shaw, inspired by young Rupert Brooke, T. S. Eliot, Yeats, D. H. Lawrence; jolted by Wyndham Lewis's *Blast* into cubism and the Modern French Masters, "Significant Form," Epstein's sculptures, Stravinsky's music (booed and cheered); the first Russian ballets and American jazz; nightlong dancing, dawnlong walks; exultant, longing, laughing, loves unspotted by respectable sin.93

Iris Tree's reference to the new art and music forms is particularly significant because these provided sources for their poetry. The correspondences between avant-garde poetry and contemporary art was recognised in a particularly considered review of *Wheels* in *The Lancet*:

The idea of these young poets is that the role of poetry is rather to crystallise fleeting views and aspects, to catch and fix vague and half-formed ideas, than to do any of the brave things associated in popular literature with the title of poet—to lead, to uplift, to amaze. The inspiration of these nine different writers—different in style, technique and standard of accomplishment—has been a common one. They strive to show that any impression received by one person should be communicable to others by the medium of symbolic word-pictures. We recommend the book to lovers of verse.94

Their canvases of fantastical figures are psychological evasions typical of post-war writing like Edith Sitwell's. In 'Iris of Memories', a tribute to Iris Tree and published in *Sublunary* (1923), Nancy Cunard self-consciously fabricated an idealised version of the past:

Do you remember in those summer days
When we were young how often we'd devise
Together of the future?

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93 Iris Tree, Putnam 18.
And there were wandering journeys to the sea
In dusty trains; there thrilling on the sands
Your scarlet dress grew vivid, and your hands
Evoked with witty gesture, palms of glee,
Things we had laughed at lovingly—for then,
Ah even then we loved our memories—
Till later under pale quiescent skies
We travelled homeward tired of towns and men,
Telling our dreams more slowly.95

The poem also refers to their early efforts with writing poetry: 'And had, how often, many a verse essayed,/ Truant unfinished poems—as they played'. At times in this poem, the attention to iambic pentameters and rhyming seem to drive the sense. However, she achieved an easy and confident first person voice which was unusual for a woman at the time. Iris Tree remembers Cunard as 'devoutly studious' and others testify that she wrote continuously.

Like 'Iris of Memories', many of Cunard's poems in Sublunary address the intersection of the past and present in the operation of consciousness, but they do not retreat into nostalgia. The evocation of the pre-war long summer in 'Iris of Memories' is an interesting contrast to Cunard's assertion that she 'never grieves for things gone by' in 'To the Eiffel Tower Restaurant'. The poem considers, rather than participates in, the post-war 'culture of tranquillity':

Espéranto...
The seal on your letter sets me thinking
Of other days and places,
And now I have the past to kneel before my present;
Those old nights of drinking,
Furtive adventures, solitary thinking
At the corner table, sheltered from the faces,
Inopportune invasion of the street.
I feel
Sharp tugs at my memory's sleeve:
The sound of the clock going wrong,
The fleet
Procession of your waiters with their platters—
Drinks held long

In one hand, while the other unwinds a discussion.
I do not grieve,
I never grieve
For things gone by.  

In addition to its treatment of memory, the poem is interesting for its experiments with a colloquial voice and free verse. It is also a record of the so-called ‘Eiffel Tower group’ who were located in ‘Fitzrovia’, between Bloomsbury and Soho, during the nineteen twenties and thirties. The Eiffel Tower restaurant in Percy Street became the centre of this ‘Higher Bohemia’.

I think the Tower shall go up to heaven
One night in a flame of fire, about eleven.
I always saw our carnal-spiritual home.
Blazing upon the sky symbolically . . .
If ever we go to heaven in a troop
The Tower must be our ladder,
Vertically
Climbing the ether with its swaying group.
God will delight to greet this embassy
Wherein is found no lack
Of wits and glamour, strong wines, new foods, fine looks,
strange-sounding languages of diverse men—

As John Pearson records, ‘in 1915 the Eiffel Tower had just been discovered by a number of the more intelligent and adventurous “artistic” children of the rich . . . These included Beerbohm Tree’s rebellious daughter Iris—already a distinctly outré student at the Slade—Lady Diana Manners and Lady Cunard’s nineteen year-old daughter Nancy, for whom the Eiffel Tower became “our carnal-spiritual home”.’  

These independent upper class women redefined the image of the woman artist. Nancy Cunard, Lady Diana Manners and Iris Tree were allegedly ‘an inseparable trio of beauties’ and were frequently painted. Iris Tree had attended the Slade School of Art and became a close friend of Dora Carrington who painted her portrait. Her portrait was also painted by Vanessa Bell, Duncan Grant, Roger Fry and Augustus John. Nancy Cunard was frequently painted, sculptured and photographed by artists like Alvaro Guevara, Constantin Brancusi and Cecil Beaton. Apparently, she ‘knew everybody, was known by everybody’

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97 Nancy Cunard, ‘To the Eiffel Tower Restaurant’.
98 Pearson 99–100.
in the post-war London literary generation\textsuperscript{100} and according to William Carlos Williams, Nancy Cunard was 'one of the major phenomena of that world'.\textsuperscript{101} In addition to William Carlos Williams she met Edith Sitwell, Anna Wickham, Virginia and Leonard Woolf, Wyndham Lewis, Aldous Huxley, T. S. Eliot, and Ezra Pound—who helped her to become a poet. Some of her poems written in the nineteen twenties, such as 'By the Dordogne', 'Toulonnaise' and 'A Vis a Vis', record places which she visited in France.\textsuperscript{102} In her own memoir, 'Glimpses of the Twenties', Cunard remembers moving around several apartments in Paris, where she attended and held parties.

Kay Boyle, the American ex-patriate writer who met Cunard in the nineteen twenties, recalls the two faces of this group of 'rich kids' who had renounced their backgrounds—the self-indulgent hedonism and the passionate social conscience: 'Nobody marvelled at the sight of a piano set out in the public street, because that was the twenties and anything was possible.... But... through her poetry, her letters, and her expanding legend, she [Cunard] became a far-reaching constant light to steer a course by when injustices, prejudices, wars, or merely the petty outrages of daily life, cast one adrift.'\textsuperscript{103} Harold Acton believed that Nancy Cunard 'inspired half the poets and novelists of the 'twenties'. He also believed that she was transfigured from a 'popular society girl' to a 'militant propagandist', taking the cause of negroes, Spanish republicans, down and outs and refugees.\textsuperscript{104} The suggestion that she underwent a sudden change from hedonism to socialism is debatable although she clearly became more politically active towards the end of the nineteen twenties and during the nineteen thirties when she produced her compilation of black writing \textit{Negro} (1934) and worked for the Spanish Republicans during the Civil War.\textsuperscript{105} Her anti-racist activities were no doubt stimulated by her friendship with Paul Robeson in Paris during the 1920s.

In 1928, Nancy Cunard founded The Hours Press in order to help young poets and to promote contemporary poetry. The press was started at Réanville in Normandy, six miles from Paris, and moved to Paris at the end of the nineteen twenties. According to Wyn Henderson, the former editor of Aquila Press who had worked there when his own press collapsed, The Hours Press in Rue Guengaud, was an important daily meeting place for writers at around five o'clock.\textsuperscript{106} Her aim was to publish 'mainly poetry of an experimental

\textsuperscript{100} Janet Flanner, Putnam 87.
\textsuperscript{101} William Carlos Williams, Putnam 56.
\textsuperscript{102} Nancy Cunard, Putnam 64–6.
\textsuperscript{103} Kay Boyle, Putnam 78. Kay Boyle (b. 1902) spent thirty years in Europe before returning to America where she became a correspondent for the \textit{New Yorker}. She is known primarily for her fiction but wished to be considered as a poet.
\textsuperscript{104} Harold Acton, Putnam 73.
\textsuperscript{105} For more discussion of Cunard's poetry in the 1930s, see \textit{Women's Poetry of the 1930s: a critical anthology}, ed. Jane Dowson (London: Routledge, 1996).
\textsuperscript{106} Wyn Henderson, Putnam 158.
kind', especially if it was not published anywhere else. The Hours Press published, among others, George Moore, Norman Douglas, Richard Aldington, Robert Graves and Laura Riding, Samuel Beckett’s ‘Whoroscope’ and a draft of Ezra Pound’s Cantos X.X.X. It also printed six numbers of Les Poètes du Mondes Défendent le Peuple Espagnol, which included poems by Neruda, Albertis and Tzara. Nancy Cunard wanted to distribute the new writing in London, New York, Paris and Florence and The Hours Press was an important instrument of the international network of modernist writing. When visiting England, she found promotional reports of The Hours Press in journals like the Observer and the Nation.

Although Raymond Mortimer, perhaps with the romanticism of nostalgia, remembers, ‘in those blissful days, her ruling passion was for poetry, not politics,’ Nancy Cunard did not seem to make an opposition between poetry and politics. In a letter to Pound, dated 1946, she challenged Pound’s change of politics: ‘It is inconceivable to me that an “intellectual” should collaborate with fascism.’ She recalled his influence on her in 1915 when he was ‘an intellectual revolutionary’ who taught her to aim for artistic toughness—‘as hard as the side of an engine’. All through her writing, she connects ideological with aesthetic principles. In her last intelligible letter to Hugh Ford she related the state of her mind which dwelt upon Spain and writing poetry: ‘To work, and to work and work and work and work over. And my metres must be perfect, each—every one.’

In spite of her meticulous reworking, Nancy Cunard’s poetry suggests an aesthetic freedom from the conventions of the British literary tradition. She was preoccupied with the possibilities of both metrical form and free verse. She drew upon newly available art forms to explore post-war nostalgia and social injustice. Her poems are difficult to get hold of and many remain uncollected. Putnam’s anthology contains poems selected from all her published books and from Wheels which are not her best. John Press picked out ‘Wheels’ as an example of the dominance of ‘the world of the opulent nursery’ in the Wheels anthologies. Press’s comment misrepresents the diversity of the anthologies, but it is true that ‘Wheels’ and some other poems by Cunard consist of a series of toyland or circus impressions:

I sometimes think that all our thoughts are wheels
Rolling forever through the painted world,
Moved by the cunning of a thousand clowns

108 Nancy Cunard, These Were the Hours 15.
111 Letter from Nancy Cunard to Hugh Ford, Putnam 176.
Dressed paper-wise, with blatant rounded masks.\textsuperscript{112}

Typically, she bridges personal and public discourses by moving between first person singular and plural. These carnival and nursery images, like the pierrots in Edith Sitwell’s poems, can be read as psychological retreats into the world of artistic fancy. They are also, therefore, symbols of a sensed chaos underlying the respectable surface of modern life. ‘The Carnivals of Peace’ investigates the artist’s dilemma of recording but aestheticising tragedy: ‘I’d write a song to conquer all our tears, lasting for ever through all the folding years.’\textsuperscript{113} ‘Uneasiness’, on the same theme of a troubling modernity, was picked out for praise in the review of \textit{Wheels} in Harriet Monroe’s Chicago-based \textit{Poetry: A Magazine of Verse}.\textsuperscript{114}

Nancy Cunard’s dominant form is the sonnet, but her work after 1920 was more adventurous with free verse and more allusive, although she was still attentive to rhythm and often worked in iambics. ‘Ballad of 5, Rue de L’Etoile’, set in Paris, uses internal monologue to explore the interaction between the environment and consciousness: ‘I’ll tell you how the women come and go/Seemly and neat—for love will have it so.’\textsuperscript{115} Several of the poems in \textit{Outlaws} (1921), like ‘Voyages North’ which is set in the streets of London, similarly, echo T.S. Eliot’s ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’ in representing psychical detachment from Society:

\begin{quote}
The strange effects of afternoons!
Hours interminable, melting like honey drops
In an assemblage of friends . . .
Or jagged, stretching hard unpleasant fingers
As we go by, hurrying through the crowds—\textsuperscript{116}
\end{quote}

In France, Cunard was influenced by the dadaists and surrealists whose distortion of images and depictions of the unconscious emerge in some of her poetry. The two poems ‘Simultaneous’ and ‘In Provins’ which made up \textit{Poems (Two)} 1925, originally published in 1930, connect with the new art forms in the free play of associated images:

\begin{quote}
At one time
The bottle hyacinths under Orvieto—
At one time
A letter a letter and a letter—
\end{quote}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{112} Nancy Cunard, ‘Wheels’, \textit{Wheels} 1916. vii.
\textsuperscript{113} Nancy Cunard, ‘The Carnivals of Peace’, \textit{Wheels} 1916. 29.
\textsuperscript{115} Nancy Cunard, ‘Rue de L’Etoile’, \textit{Sublunary} 17–19.
\textsuperscript{116} Nancy Cunard, ‘Voyages North’. \textit{Outlaws} (London: Elkin Mathews, 1921) 47–8.
\end{flushright}
At one time, sleepless,
Through rain the nightingale sang from the river island—

At one time, Montparnasse,
And all night’s gloss
Splendour of shadow on shadow
With the exact flower
Of the liqueur in its glass.

Time runs,
but thought (or what?) comes
Seated between these damaged table-tops,
Sense of what zones, what simultaneous-time sense?\textsuperscript{117}

The repetition, particularly ‘A letter a letter and a letter’, the syntactical defamiliarisation and the displacement of common images can be compared with Gertrude Stein’s anti-poetical devices. The frontispiece to Parallax (Hogarth Press, 1925) indicates Cunard’s interest in perspective: ‘“Many things are known as some are seen, that is by parallax, or at some distance from their true and proper being.” (Sir Thomas Browne)’. She also explained that ‘Parallax’, ‘Simultaneous’ and ‘In Provins’ were influenced by Louis Aragon’s technique of allusiveness, ‘a kind of consequence’. (Aragon was one of the poets she promoted through the Hours Press.) In other poems like ‘The Night’,\textsuperscript{118} set in Avignon, and ‘From the Train’, set in the Midlands and North of England, she seems to be experimenting with the verbal equivalent of French impressionist painting:

Smoke-stacks, coal-stacks, hay-stacks, slack,
Colourless, scentless, pointless, dull;
Railways, highways, roadways, black,
Grantham, Birmingham, Leeds and Hull.

Steamers, passengers, convoys, trains,
Merchandise travelling over the sea;
Smut-filled streets and factory lanes,
What can these ever mean to me?\textsuperscript{119}

Although structuring a pictorial canvas, there is also an investigation of the distance of the intellectuals and artists from the urban half of Britain associated with the ‘mass’ population.

\textsuperscript{117} Nancy Cunard, ‘Simultaneous’, Putnam 83-4.
\textsuperscript{118} Nancy Cunard, ‘The Night’, Sublunary 56-7.
\textsuperscript{119} Nancy Cunard, ‘From the Train’, Wheels 1916. 34.
Apart from a reference in *The Trend of Modern Poetry* (Bullough 1941), Iris Tree’s poems have been ignored by literary historians. Raymond Mortimer considered her a ‘gifted poet’ and she came out well in some reviews. ‘The days come up as beggars in the street’, impressed Edward Marsh who had it read at the Georgian Poetry Society. Geoffrey Bullough referred to the ‘macabre’ poems of Iris Tree as ‘symptoms of an intellectual disease which was to afflict poetry for the next ten years’. Although urgent about moving poetry away from its traditions, however, she often used regular forms, particularly in her war poems.

Most of Iris Tree’s published poems were written between 1913 and 1918 and register her anti-war scepticism. The vehemence of her opposition to the First World War is likely to have been partly caused by its interruption to the liberated world described in “We shall never forget”. The loss of several friends put a stop to her carefree artistic pleasures. She also rebelled against the imperial principles which were propagated to justify the War:

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While we still cry to God for strength to kill,
Reminding Him that Britain rules the waves,
And grind young bones for the commercial mill,
And build munition works among the graves.

Still crying “Honour,” “Country” and “The Flag,”
“The last heroic fight in Freedom’s name!”
Though Kings make mouths at Kings, and Prelates brag—
They boast of murder and they reek of shame!...
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Several poems similarly interrogate national pride and the ingloriousness of war.

The rebellious tone provoked the judgement that Iris Tree was one of ‘a school of revoltés at the present time who agree with her in making the world’s perversity the first article in their creed, but from whom she differs in her communicativeness of candour’. Tree’s revolt was against the ‘crumbling roads of worn-out creeds’. The speakers in her poems represented a new generation who challenged an exhausted art, warmongering statesman, hypocritical church leaders and the self-satisfied rich of the older generation. The first poem in *Poems*, dated 1914, confronts the rhetoricians of Victorian morality by irreverently appropriating the regular form of nineteenth-century hymns: ‘You preach to me

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120 Iris Tree’s long narrative poem *The Marsh Picnic* (Cambridge: Rampant Lions Press, 1966) caused a small stir and she was congratulated by many readers.
121 Raymond Mortimer, Putnam 49.
122 Daphne Fielding, *The Rainbow Picnic—a portrait of Iris Tree* (London: Methuen, 1974) 64–5. See chapter 3 of this thesis for other reference to Tree’s war poems.
123 Bullough 198.
of laws, you tie my limbs/With rights and wrongs and arguments of good'.\textsuperscript{127} She connected the disabling anchor of the past with attachment to the excessive lamentation of traditional poetry. In 'My poems cannot laugh' she is 'Most tired of tunes that only learn to weep',\textsuperscript{128} and the sonnet 'Shall we be christened poets' ends, 'How shall the world learn how to laugh again/When all its songs have only learnt to weep?'\textsuperscript{129}

One aspect of modernity was the psychological dislocation caused by disillusion with the idealised pastoral but alienation from the urban environment. Several of Tree's poems, like 'Myself in the City', explore this 'in between' mental condition. 'Streets' is a lengthy free verse monologue which depicts the contradictory thrills and disorientations of city life:

\begin{quote}
I know her well, 
The moaning highways,  
And whispering alleys,  
The chimney-dishevelled roofs  
Where the moon walks delicately  
As a stray spectral cat;  
The little forlorn squares  
Where one tree stands  
Drooping bedraggled fingers  
Over the benches where the people sit  
And stir not from their sullen postures.\textsuperscript{130}
\end{quote}

Here she seems versatile with the differing line lengths and cadences of free verse and she also experimented with polyphonic prose. Iris Tree's voice of protest, however, often inhabited familiar verse forms, including sonnets, quatrains and ballads. In these regular forms, the rhythmic changes accorded with Edith Sitwell's principles by arbitrating between strangeness and reality. In an untitled poem, dated 1917, the insistent rhythm and rhyme associated with poplar ballad mitigate the direct polemic. She took up the cause of the socially excluded who were caught in a cycle of poverty and crime:

\begin{quote}
What will happen to the beggar, and the sinner, and the sad,  
And the drunk that drinks for sorrow, and the maimed, and mad;  
What will happen to the starving, and the rebel run from drilling,  
Cowardly afraid of fighting, and the child who stole a shilling?  
They shall go to prison black
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{126} Iris Tree, 'Holy Russia'.  
\textsuperscript{127} Iris Tree, untitled poem, Poems 11.  
\textsuperscript{128} Iris Tree, untitled poem, Poems 79.  
\textsuperscript{129} Iris Tree, untitled poem, Poems 46.  
\textsuperscript{130} Iris Tree, 'Streets', Poems 109–111.
With a striped shirt on the back,
Feast on bread and water there
In a cell, without care.
They shall learn at least their duty,
Never tempted more of beauty—
They shall walk in rows and praise the Lord,
And one or two shall hang upon a cord—
And two or three shall die of grief alone—
(And this is well for sinners should atone,)
And five or six shall curse the God that made them,
(And this is wicked, for the priests forbade them.)
And those that grew from dust shall go to dust
Downtrodden. Saith the preacher:—"God is just."\(^{131}\)

The combination of conversational and formal diction is characteristic. Another poem, ‘Pity the slain that laid away their lives,’ dated 1918, is on the same theme of the disadvantaged being more sinned against than sinning. Like the previous poem it experiments with the effects of rhythm and rhyme in calling for attention to social differences and war. The final verses are reminiscent of Edith Sitwell’s satire of London High Society which ignores the poor in \textit{Gold Coast Customs}:

Drowning our flutes, till the cries of the city
Flurry us, flutter us, force us to pity,
Force us to sigh and arrange a committee,
Tea-party charity danced to a ditty...\(^{132}\)

The ending of the poem is weak and there are some unsatisfactory phrases, but Tree was shaking off archaic idioms and aiming for an effective speaking voice. Her passionate response to oppression links her to Nancy Cunard and to Winifred Holtby with whom she also developed a friendship.\(^{133}\) Iris Tree’s dominant themes were a sense of futility, war and city life. She also wrote some love lyrics, although the speakers were gender neutral. In exploring identity, she drew on the terminology of psychoanalysis with words like ‘egoism’ and ‘introspection’.

Helen Rootham did not have as many poems in \textit{Wheels} as Edith Sitwell, Nancy Cunard or Iris Tree. She was, however, considered by the \textit{Morning Post} to be the ‘most profound and accomplished’ of the contributors. She is distinguished by her translations of Rimbaud which were commended as ‘excellent’ by Ezra Pound in \textit{Poetry: A Magazine of}

\(^{131}\) Iris Tree, untitled poem, \textit{Poems} 63.

\(^{132}\) Iris Tree, untitled poem, \textit{Poems} 70-1.
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Verse. Her poems also indicate the influence of the French symbolists, Baudelaire and Verlaine, whom she translated and whom she had introduced to Edith Sitwell, along with some contemporary poets, when she became her governess. She wrote a fine war poem, 'The Great Adventure', dedicated to the memory of E. Wyndham Tennant who was killed in action in 1917. As a monologue in which a young soldier's anticipation of personal glory turns into tragedy, it is similar to other anti-heroic poems. 'Envious Youth' investigates the generation war which much of the Wheels cycle seemed to be about:

I am not old enough to claim the privilege of years,
To sit apart and say to youth—
"Now watch my nodding wisdom." 135

Edith Sitwell, Nancy Cunard, Iris Tree and Helen Rootham were influential models of women poets who succeeded in avoiding the 'feminine' in their public image and poetry. They proved that women could win respect in the intellectual atmosphere surrounding London and Paris. Their poetry represents a new aesthetic freedom and confident individual voice in women. They manipulated the traditions of mainstream British poetry and their resources were contemporary art, music and psychology. They demonstrate that the avant-garde was not the exclusive property of men, nor of American poets. Like their American counterparts, they took part in the battles for the progress of modern poetry against the reactionary popular and literary papers.

133 For a discussion and examples of Winifred Holtby's poetry, see Dowson 62–8.

In the progress of twentieth-century women, the avant-garde poets demonstrate a new boldness in flouting or subverting literary conventions. They investigate the operations of consciousness, eschew or displace traditional literary effects and transgress the boundaries of genre. They qualify for the language-centred model of modernism and are distinguished from the ‘female modernists’ in the next chapter whose poetry is specifically woman-centred, or explicitly engaged with social and gender politics, but is stylistically less adventurous. In separating ‘avant-garde’ and ‘female’ modernisms, however, it would be as wrong to suggest that the former group did not present a female consciousness as it would be to imply that the political commitment of the female modernists overwhelmed stylistic concerns. Although the avant-garde writers espoused the ‘impersonality’ of high modernist poetics, their motivation for overriding literary conventions was often associated with breaking the sequence of a male-dominated tradition. Their obvious, sometimes ostentatious, intellectuality was fuelled by opposition to the ‘feminine’ rather than by cultural elitism. Suzanne Clark identifies women as both losers and drivers in a literary climate which valued objectivity, impersonality and ‘intellection’.¹

The modernist revolution turned away from ordinary language and everyday life. This disconnection from social consequence, from history, has everything to do with the gendering of intellectuality. . . . Modernism developed its anti-sentimentality into a contemptuous treatment of women, who had to struggle both internally and externally with that contempt . . . [and] these women seized the moment to escape from categories of gender.²

It is particularly important to situate women within the avant-garde because of its association with intellectuality and because their importance has been understated. Although these poets were perceived as groundbreaking at the time, their cutting edge has been blunted in subsequent records. They are classified as ‘Anglo-American’ in recognition of the

¹ ‘Intellection’ was a favourite term of approval in T. S. Eliot’s Criterion.
cultural interchanges effected by the magazines, which were often started or steered by women, and by the movement of writers between London, Paris and New York. ‘Anglo-American’ also accommodates the ex-patriation of H.D. and Laura Riding, from America to England, and Mina Loy from England to New York.

Within feminist criticism there are competing views over whether modernist subversions of orthodox language structures suppressed or liberated women: one view is that writers like H.D. or Marianne Moore were impelled by Ezra Pound’s dictum to ‘make it new’ and ‘broke form for the boys’.3 The opposing perspective is that since the common aesthetic of modernist texts, understood as consisting of anti-narrative structures, mythmaking and elliptical syntax, are features associated with feminine writing, modernist experimentation was driven by women. The conjunction of modernist and feminist aesthetics, however, is in danger of producing the converse equation between non-experimental and patriarchal writing, without considering its subject matter or context. The poets in this chapter are stylistically experimental but also unsettle binary oppositions between ‘personality’ and ‘impersonality’ or ‘expressive’ and ‘self-reflexive’. The social and psychological independence, the critical writing and literary activities of these women indicate their interest in new systems of representation and signification.

Since high modernism has been gendered as male in British history, experimental poetics have become associated with men, yet contemporaneously women were significant participants in the avant-garde. There is some evidence that these women have been incorporated into the canons of twentieth-century American poetry but their status in Britain is still uncertain, largely because they do not fit orthodox classifications. There are chapters on H.D. and Marianne Moore in American Poetry: The Modernist Ideal (1995),4 but Laura Riding and Amy Lowell are rarely included in critical works on literary modernism, although Lowell was one of the most active practitioners and promoters of imagism and free verse. H.D. and Gertrude Stein have had attention within American lesbian and feminist criticism but this has tended to dehistoricise their significance. One excuse for exclusion might be the difficulty of getting hold of their books, but there is no formula. Much of Stein’s work was not published in her lifetime and Mina Loy’s poems were almost unobtainable until 1982, but Laura Riding and Marianne Moore have had healthy publishing histories, with several reprints and new editions. New biographies, the recent publication of Marianne Moore’s letters (1998) and Rational Meaning by Laura Riding and Schuyler Jackson (1997) keep their reputations alive, but do not necessarily integrate them into modernist canons. In this chapter, it is not possible or appropriate to fully assess each poet’s work, but to register their significance to the avant-garde.

In surveying the American avant-garde, Alicia Ostriker separates a set of women, [who] with the advent of modernism, strove to escape the ghetto of feminine poetry by the leaps and bounds of undisguised intelligence. Amy Lowell (1874-1924) and Gertrude Stein (1875-1946) are the shock troops here, followed by Mina Loy (1882-1966), H.D. (1886-1961) and Marianne Moore (1887-1972). In an age when it was widely believed that “women are the cause of modernism, whatever that is”—as one journalist put it—these writers were at the provocative edge of the avant-garde.5

Ostriker’s grouping is retained here with the addition of Laura Riding.6 As indicated, what is common to all poets is their avoidance of femininity by strategies of masking, what Ostriker calls, ‘evasive self-representation’: ‘the avant-garde women modernists veil their critique of culture behind a dazzle of stylistics, a film of distance—Lowell’s jocularity, Stein’s wordplay, Loy’s jagged form, H.D.’s Greece, Moore’s enamelled objects and embroidered quotations.’7 ‘Masking’ was a motif of male modernism—T. S. Eliot’s ‘objective correlative’, Yeats’ masks and Pound’s *Personae*8—and although much women’s poetry seems genderless in its conscious substitution of objectified emotion for the personal subject of traditional—that is early nineteenth-century Romantic—lyric poetry, there is often a gendered awareness in their work. They may avoid associations of femininity through various impersonations, including animals, but they do more than unconsciously imitate male modernists. Through the revolution of the word, women could ‘challenge standard conventions of language, including the way gendering appears to be natural rather than an effect of discursive practices.’9 There is frequently a gender politics in their dismantling of traditional systems of representation, and even the most abstract verse of Marianne Moore and Laura Riding shows an interest in changing gender relations. The lesbian love poetry by Stein, Lowell and H.D. can be situated as a modernism from the margins. However, the single status of Marianne Moore, Laura Riding and Edith Sitwell was also radical in a social context which only recognised heterosexual marriage as a valid arrangement.10

These avant-garde women were not a literary group but there were important social networks, and connections can be made between their writing. Through their travels, correspondence and the little magazines, they were instrumental in the international character

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6 Ostriker 49.
7 Ostriker 53.
9 Clark 6.
10 Laura Riding had divorced her first husband and lived in Europe as a single woman, albeit in a *ménage à trois* with the Graves in Mallorca.
of modernism, particularly during the nineteen twenties. The label ‘Anglo-American’ was used contemporaneously; it also proposes a co-operative and inclusive model of criticism in place of the more common rhetoric of competition. For example, Laura Riding was dismissed by Valentine Cunningham for being ‘anyway, an American’ although she did not think it appropriate to be involved in an American number of Twentieth-Century Verse. H.D. is often included in histories of modern American poetry although she settled in England for most of her writing career, yet Mina Loy is also identified as American when she crossed the Atlantic the other way. It is important to recognise the origins of these writers in order to read the sense of displacement in their work, often encoded through symbols drawn from their childhoods and native locations. Their nationality does not, however, provide the prime reading position; rather, it illustrates the intersection of national and gendered identities. H.D. and Amy Lowell, for example, were more united by Ezra Pound’s betrayal of the imagists than by their American births.

The notable predominance of American poets in avant-garde modernism has been attributed to the caution of British post-war sensibilities which associated radical writing with violence or anarchism. Morton Dauwen, assistant editor of Poetry: A Magazine of Verse from 1929 to 1936, however, perceived that the First World War also hampered the optimistic mood and openness to experiment in the United States: ‘The new poets were writing out of the havoc and agony of a troubled and disrupted world; they were no longer engrossed by the high excitements and novelties of the earlier decade.’ In the Editorial of Poetry, June 1914, Harriet Monroe claimed that ‘in the United States we have naturally that direct break with the past which is artificial in European artists and poets’, but in the same year, W. B. Yeats observed that all Anglo-American poetry was traditionalist and that innovation came from France. In a speech in Chicago, cited in Poetry, April 1914, he commented, ‘When I open the ordinary American magazine, I find that all we rebelled against in those early days—the sentimentality, the rhetoric, the “moral uplift” —still exists here. Not because you are too far from England, but because you are too far from Paris’. The extent of the mutual influence of developments in America and England is difficult to gauge but there is some evidence to support David Perkins’ observation that, ‘the main single influence on both sides of the Atlantic over the last fifty years has, in each case, been

the writing of the other country" (1976).\textsuperscript{17} The American edition of the \textit{Bookman} saw its role as mediating literary news between America and England, for "Today as never before England and America are alive to a deepening intellectual sympathy and it is fitting that each knows the thought of the other as expressed in the best books on both sides of the Atlantic."\textsuperscript{18}

Although writers were open to transatlantic exchanges, the British literary papers fuelled prejudice against America, and its association with 'mass' culture was aggravated in the 1920s when ninety five per cent of films shown in Britain were American.\textsuperscript{19} An article entitled, 'Some American Poets' in the \textit{TLS}, 1929, took a superior stance: 'Many American critics are so lavish with their obstinately loyal praise of their friends' work that a disillusioned Europe looks with quizzical eyes at America's work in literature.'\textsuperscript{20} Conrad Aiken's \textit{Modern American Poets} (1922), provoked a lengthy review, which referred to the 'friendly rivalry between England and the United States', and other publications like J. C. Squire's anthology, \textit{American Poems and Others} (1923), Thomas Moult's \textit{Best Poems} anthology in 1923, which set British and American writers side by side, \textit{Our Best Poets: English and American} (1923), the \textit{Anthology of Magazine Verse} and the \textit{Yearbook of American Poetry} sustained the cross-cultural debates.\textsuperscript{21} In 1920, a Poetry Bookshop \textit{Chapbook} 'gave English readers who regarded transatlantic poetry with patronising complacency, a much needed interpretation of ten writers', including Amy Lowell.\textsuperscript{22} In 1938, a special edition of \textit{Twentieth-Century Verse} admitted that American poets, including Marianne Moore, had been underrated in Britain:

In England we owe a great deal to these Americans, and especially to the American-Europeans; they have given us a lesson in austerity, and without them the poetry being written in England now could hardly be so various or so unsentimental as it is.

If some of the American poets best thought-of during the 'twenties have a shabby look to-day, certainly in England at that time there were no writers at all comparable with them in vigour and ingenuity. The members and satellites of the Squirearchy look uncommonly slim if they are puffed up ever so hard; put by the

\begin{itemize}
  \item Advertisement for the American edition of the \textit{Bookman} in the London edition.
  \item 'Some American Poets'. Review of \textit{Anthology of Recent American Poetry. TLS} 19 Sept. 1929: 718.
\end{itemize}
side of Aiken, John Peale Bishop, Crane, Eliot, Miss Moore, Pound, Ransom, Miss Riding, and Wallace Stevens they vanish altogether, dying away in a series of small grunts like squeaky balloons. Mr Conrad Aiken, in a letter saying he preferred to side-step the enquiry, said also: “The melancholy truth is that in the past quarter century the best English poetry—perhaps the only important English poetry—has been American.” That is just about True.\textsuperscript{23}

These articles record the significance of the mutual Anglo-American influences and also that women were recognised as poets in the journals. In the above article, Julian Symons professed to not being able to understand Moore or Williams although he could ‘appreciate in Miss Moore a certain ironic fineness’.

Women in America, particularly Harriet Monroe, were instrumental in mobilising the international network which effected the perceived literary renaissance before the First World War. After the War the growth of literary criticism through the magazines enabled the continuation of experiment by providing an outlet and critical audience. As Sylvia Beach recorded, ‘The best way of following the literary movement in the twenties is through the little reviews.’\textsuperscript{24} In her tribute to Harriet Monroe, Ellen Williams claims that Poetry: A Magazine of Verse was largely responsible for the poetry revival in 1912. In 1910, Monroe aimed to rescue American poetry from the literary wastelands by promoting new poets and new criticism. Some commentaries have invented a meeting between Harriet Monroe and Ezra Pound in 1910 to exaggerate Pound’s role in the renaissance associated with Poetry,\textsuperscript{25} and as early as 1938, Harriet Monroe recorded that her part was in danger of being forgotten:

The battle which Poetry, from its first issue, fought for was a “new movement” in the art—for freer technique, for stripped modern diction, for a more vital relation with the poet’s own time and place, and especially for recognition of new talent—is in danger of being obscured by the mists of time and by propaganda for later literary interests. Babette Deutsch, for example, manages, with singular skill, to write a whole volume on Modern Poetry without a single mention of Poetry and its editor.\textsuperscript{26}

She was aware of the discrimination against women by The National Institute of Arts and Letters when she set up Poetry in 1912 and which continued when she was writing her

\textsuperscript{23} Julian Symons, ‘How wide is the Atlantic?’ 83–84.
\textsuperscript{24} Sylvia Beach, Shakespeare and Company (London: Faber and Faber, 1960) 144.
\textsuperscript{25} Ellen Williams, Harriet Monroe & the Poetry Renaissance: The first 10 years of Poetry 1912–1922 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977) 3.
\textsuperscript{26} Monroe 362.
The international correspondence which *Poetry* stimulated appeared to operate as ‘a vortex whose lines of force converged from many places’. *Poetry* carried the *vers libre* debate during its first six years and printed Pound’s defence of imagism in Issue 1, October 1912, and the ‘creed’ in March 1913. Harriet Monroe gave prominence to Amy Lowell, T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound—Pound was hardly known when the magazine started—and her priority was ‘to encourage the art’ in America by working up a public for new poets. In the *Egoist*, J. G. Fletcher described Harriet Monroe as ‘the editor who discovered imagism’. *Poetry* was advertised in the *Egoist* and made poets like Amy Lowell and William Carlos Williams more well known in Britain. Harriet Monroe travelled to Europe and made the acquaintance of many poets, including Edith Sitwell and Anna Wickham. In Paris she met Pound for the first time, in addition to other artists and writers on the Left Bank, and visited Sylvia Beach’s bookshop *Shakespeare and Company* which had distributed *Poetry* in Paris. *Poetry* was initially run wholly by women—Alice Corbin Anderson became Harriet Monroe’s editorial assistant—but was replaced by men, and it published more women than other journals, notably Sarah Teasdale and Agnes Lee. *Poetry* won respect for the high standard of editing and debate; its success is believed to have been in Monroe’s encouragement of international poetry, in her selection of the best contemporary American poets and in paying her contributors.

There is a view that *Poetry* was eclipsed by *The Dial* when Marianne Moore took over as editor from Scofield Thayer in 1925 and continued until 1929. Although there was always a jealous relationship between *Poetry* and *The Dial*, Harriet Monroe recognised Moore’s achievement in changing *The Dial* from a weekly to a monthly, and ‘from a conservative worshiper of the elder gods it changed overnight to a leader of radical opinion in the arts; and retained its prestige until, after a brilliant career of nine and half years, its history ended in silence’. *The Little Review* was also an important instrument of the Anglo-American avant-garde. It was established in New York in 1917 and Margaret Anderson and Jane Heap took it to Paris in 1922-3 where they met writers like Gertrude Stein and Djuna Barnes who became important contributors. They also met Sylvia Beach, Mina Loy, Winifred Bryher and H.D. It encouraged imagism and promoted new poets like D. H. Lawrence, Amy Lowell and Ezra Pound—when he became its foreign editor. It was

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27 Monroe 326–8. She is referring to *This Modern Poetry* by Babette Deutsch (London: Faber, 1936).
28 Williams ix.
32 Some women published in the magazines do seem to belong to the earlier tradition, but others like Sara Teasdale, Frances Gregg, Helen Hoyt, Agnes Lee—who was not well-known before Harriet Monroe promoted her work in *Poetry*—and Margaret Widner, whose work was frequently published in *Poetry*, are worthy of attention. For discussion of Teasdale, Hoyt and Lee, see Monroe 322–4. For discussion of Teasdale, see Williams 77–280.
33 Monroe 294.
34 Monroe 35.
inclusive of women and foreigners, particularly European artists and writers. Its landmark was the serialisation of James Joyce’s *Ulysses* which had been censored in Britain and for which the editors went on trial for obscenity. It published the poetry and fiction of British women like May Sinclair. Articles on the Monros’ The Poetry Bookshop in London were published in *The Little Review* and *Poetry.*

These initiatives are evidence that women were at the centre of ‘the constant communication and interchange between the poets in England and America.’ In Britain, *The Egoist* was initially edited by Harriet Shaw Weaver, Dora Marsden and Richard Aldington; H.D. became assistant editor in 1916, when Aldington served in the army during the First World War, although she was succeeded by T. S. Eliot in 1917. Significantly, its subtitle, ‘Our War is with Words’ indicates that women like Dora Marsden associated modernism’s revolution of the word with feminist politics. It stimulated debate about new poetry in Europe and America and published poems by women including Charlotte Mew, Anna Wickham, Frances Gregg, H.D., Amy Lowell, Marianne Moore and May Sinclair. It printed articles and correspondence with Harriet Monroe, ‘the distinguished editress of *Poetry,*’ and reported on the obscenity trial of *The Little Review.* It also promoted *Poetry* and *The Little Review* through advertisements. The liberal feminist British journal *Time and Tide,* which started in 1920, was a women’s initiative and published poetry and criticism by women, along with articles on the arts, politics and news. The reviewers of American and European literature were disposed to be favourable and it reported at length on America’s progress towards equalities in law.

Several British poets such as Edith Sitwell, Vita Sackville-West, Iris Tree and Anna Wickham spent some time in Paris where they connected with Gertrude Stein, Djuna Barnes and other writers on the Left Bank. Through Nancy Cunard’s The Hours Press and Sylvia Beach’s *Shakespeare and Company* bookshop and lending library they came into contact with American and European avant-garde ideas and art.

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H.D., Amy Lowell and imagism

Labelled as imagists, H.D. and Amy Lowell have been tied to a movement of debatable significance, yet even their roles as imagists have been unevenly registered in British literary histories. The instability of their status is also explained by the difficulty in classifying them because they blur distinctions between personal and impersonal discourses. As Susan Friedman observes: ‘[H.D.] forged an impersonal lyric discourse that deeply encoded gender issues but did not directly address them. Her hard crisp lines with no excess word or sentiment defied the stereotype of the feminine “poetess”’. As an American who spent most of her life in London, H.D. also crosses national delineations. She rarely features in records of modernism in Britain, although she has been canonised by the lesbian academic communities in Europe and the United States. Revisionary criticism has attempted to rescue her from the imagist label by looking at her early work in the context of her literary development rather than of an imagist movement. Viewing imagism as a precursor to modernism both elevates and diminishes its status but there is no simple conclusion to the debate over its achievement. Writing imagist poems was important to the stylistic development of writers like H.D., Amy Lowell and Richard Aldington, and the imagist credo and anthologies provoked debates which influenced contemporary practice. A case can be made that H.D. and Amy Lowell were mobilisers of imagism, without confining them to it, and that imagist principles of concrete observation, clarity and specificity were a ‘kick-start’ to the eschewal of personal lyrics and high rhetoric which has come to characterise modernist principles.

Peter Faulkner (1986), like John Press (1969) and John Williams (1987), places imagism in the centre of modernism: ‘imagism fell apart as a group, but it had administered a sharp critique of prevailing poetic practices which, in complex association with the grim effects of the great war on the English sensibility, was to help to change English poetry in undeniable ways’. Even in the TLS, the imagist anthologies stimulated an optimism about a new poetry which did not totally abandon tradition. The imagists also contributed significantly to establishing connections between poets in London and New York. The Egoist produced a special number ‘devoted to the works of the young Anglo-American group of poets known as “The Imagists”’, whose names included Amy Lowell, H.D., Marianne Moore and May Sinclair. Frank Mott endorses imagism’s significance and presents it as an Anglo-American movement: ‘The group of English-American imagists

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43 The second annual imagist anthology, 1916, got two reviews in the TLS, 4 and 11 Jan. 1917: 11, 19. The second was long and considered, stating it ‘fills us with hope’ because it pointed the way for good new poetry.
44 Advert in *Egoist III*. 1 April 1915: 63.
broke up after publishing a few anthologies, and a reaction set in during the late twenties; but a certain liberating effect continued.\textsuperscript{45}

According to Andrew Thacker, imagism is widely acknowledged as 'the first significant Anglo-American movement in modernist poetry' but the tendency to view imagism through Poundian eyes has neglected the centrality of H.D. and Amy Lowell:

It would be more appropriate to view H.D. as the stylistic innovator of the group, rather than as the poet whose work was labelled and cultivated by Pound as "H.D. imagiste". Lowell, attacked by Pound for hijacking the very term "imagisme" and for blurring its aesthetic of "hard, light, clear edges", arranged for three imagist anthologies to be published with far more commercial success than Pound's first anthology. Lowell conceded that Pound invented the name "imagism" but argued that "changing the whole public attitude from derision to consideration came from my work." Lowell also produced the first critical book on American and modern verse—Tendencies in Modern American Poetry (1917)—which introduced Bryher to the poetry of her future partner H.D., and exhaustively promoted the new poetry across America by public readings (including perhaps the first reading of modernist poetry on American radio) and journal articles.\textsuperscript{46}

Although Ezra Pound's naming of H.D. as 'imagiste' in the British Museum tea-room is a literary legend, the damaging effect of his desertion of imagism is less publicised. In her letters to Amy Lowell, H.D. expressed her gratitude for being rescued from Pound's manipulation:

R[Richard Aldington] asks me to say that \textit{in no event can we now appear under the direct title of "imagiste"}—It is obviously E[Ezra]'s plan to prevent our publication and he believes that Macmillan is printing the book. Our dropping the title gives him the satisfaction of feeling that he has secured a victory and gives us the exquisite relief of being free of him.\textsuperscript{47}

Since she dropped the 'imagiste' title in 1914 and was later critical of the prescriptiveness of the imagist movement, it is an historical irony that H.D. was persistently connected with imagism and consequently underestimated during her life. Additionally, the desertion by Pound has been perceived as a deliberate feminisation of the 'movement' when it is likely


that H.D. and Amy Lowell espoused the anti-sentimental principles of imagism partly to avoid feminine identification.

In Britain, H.D. and Amy Lowell were battling with post-war prejudices against Americans, free verse and women's poetry in the conservative literary papers; for example, a lukewarm review of H.D.'s *Hymen* in the *TLS* caricatured the short lines as merely 'sentences cut up'. In *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* (1927) Laura Riding and Robert Graves recorded the rise and fall of H.D.: 'Of the imagists H.D. (Hilda Doolittle) was the most publicly applauded; all we have left of her now is the blushing memory of a short-lived popularity in the more adventurous reviews, and a few false metaphors.' They perpetuated her demise by linking her to the 'dead movement' of imagism:

It had the look of a movement of pure experimentalism and reformation in poetry. But the issuing of a public manifesto of imagism, its massed organisation as a literary party with a defined political programme, the war it carried on with reviewers, the annual appearance of an imagist anthology—all this revealed it a stunt of commercial advertisers of poetry to whom poetic result meant a popular demand for their work, not the discovery of new values in poetry with an indifference to the recognition they received. . . . they wanted to be *new* rather than to be poets.

In 1936, Michael Roberts contradicted Riding's and Graves' dismissal of imagism: 'The poetry of Wallace Stevens and Miss Sitwell still shows the imagist concentration upon the sensuous surface of things'. He believed that the critical terminology, not the poetry, was limited: 'The existence of cadenced verse blurs the distinction between prose and poetry; but the critical vocabulary must be revised to fit the facts.' In 'The Imagists and their Bequest' (1936), Babette Deutsch gave H.D. several pages of good press, claiming, 'H.D. [is] generally accepted as the purest imagist of them all. . . . Scholars delight in the scrupulous precision of her renderings. Poets, more alive to the temptations she has resisted, admire the chastity of her work'. In *The Egoist*, although T. S. Eliot denounced Amy Lowell for being 'remorselessly intimate', he proposed that some works of H.D. and Fletcher 'entitled them to international standing'.

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50 Riding and Graves 116–7.
52 Roberts 30–1.
H.D. was involved in the making of avant-garde poetics through her promotion of Marianne Moore and Amy Lowell and through the influence of her poems on them, particularly Lowell. She also helped to free women from the poe tess stigma by the respect which she won from her male contemporaries, famously Ezra Pound, Richard Aldington and D. H. Lawrence. It is difficult to measure her explicit influence on women in Britain, but she enjoyed the mutual regard of May Sinclair, Dorothy Richardson and Edith Sitwell. H.D. initially became known in Britain and America through the imagist and other anthologies and through the progressive journals. Her poems were published in The Nation, The Bookman, The Little Review, Poetry, Transatlantic Review and Double Dealer. In 1912, Harriet Monroe professed that she did not know H.D. but admired her poems and published them periodically in Poetry to represent the 'essence' of imagism.\(^5^5\) Hanscombe and Smyers view the publication of 'Priapus' and 'Epigram' in Poetry, January 1913, as a key event: 'More than any other single publication, the appearance of these poems announced the birth of the imagist movement.'\(^5^6\) She was widely reviewed and anthologised as the perfect imagist after Sea Garden (1916).\(^5^7\) In 1915, she was awarded Poetry's Guarantor's Prize and in 1917 won the Vers Libre contest in The Little Review. In 1917, D. H. Lawrence sent Edward Marsh a copy of the Imagist anthology and wrote, 'I think H.D. is good: none of the others are worth anything', and a week later reiterated, 'Don't you think H.D.—Mrs Aldington—writes some good poetry? I do—really very good.'\(^5^8\) He sent 'The God' and 'Adonis' to Marsh and to The Egoist and her poems were printed in about half the editions of The Egoist.

The simultaneous recognition of H.D.'s work in Britain and the United States indicates how the international network constructed the reputations of new writers. Richard Aldington published a promotional article, 'A Young American Poet', in The Little Review, in which he argued that H.D. had been neglected because her output was small, the originality made her poems seem obscure, the use of her initials was off-putting and she had no friends among the professional critics. He appealed to the Americans to have a more open attitude than the British traditionalists: 'You must remember that there are very, very few people in England who have the faintest idea what is meant by vers libre.'\(^5^9\)

When he sent H.D.'s poems to Harriet Monroe for Poetry magazine, Ezra Pound decreed them to be 'modern' in the terms of imagist principles:

\(^{5^6}\) Hanscombe and Smyers 24.
\(^{5^7}\) H.D.'s 'The Last Gift' ('The Gift' in CP), 'The God', 'Adonis', 'Pygmalion' and 'Eurydice' were printed in The Egoist 1916–7 and these last four were included in Some Imagist Poets, ed. Amy Lowell, 1917.
\(^{5^9}\) Richard Aldington, 'A Young American Poet'. Little Review March 1915: 22.
I say modern, for it is the laconic speech of the imagistes even if the subject is classic. At least H.D. had lived with these things since childhood, and knew them before she had any book-knowledge of them.

This is the sort of American stuff that I can show here and in Paris without it being ridiculed. Objective—no slither; direct—no excessive use of adjectives, no metaphors that won't permit examination. It's straight talk, straight as the Greek! And it was only by persistence that I got to see it at all.60

As Pound suggested, H.D.'s poetry exemplifies the objectivity which was a central tenet of literary modernism, but it is not, as he suggested, 'straight talk'. She was not rejecting poetic conventions of form and symbolism for a common language of communication but for a new system of signification. She defamiliarised the reader by displacing traditional symbols like the red rose:

Rose, harsh rose,
marred and with stint of petals,
meagre flower, thin,
sparse of leaf,

more precious
than a wet rose,
single on a stem—
you are caught in the drift.

Stunted, with small leaf,
you are flung on the sand,
you are lifted
in the crisp sand
that drives in the wind.

Can the spice-rose
drip such acrid fragrance
hardened in a leaf?61

'Sea Rose' was anthologised in influential anthologies like Harold Monro's *Twentieth-century Poetry* (1929) and *The Faber Book of Modern Verse* (1936). It illustrates that for women imagists, at least, the principles were not an end in themselves but techniques for

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bypassing literary conventions and awakening new perceptions. H.D. typically interrogates literary representations of women through distorting conventional symbols of femininity and romance—‘nouns are delicately beautiful things which the verbs violate; cultural clichés and the treatment of women as delicate flowers are under attack’.62

‘Hermes of the Waves’, another of her most frequently printed and analysed poems, was used by Richard Aldington to exemplify imagism in ‘Modern Poetry and the Imagists’, published in The Egoist, 1914.63 He applauded the paradigmatic mixture of personality and objectivity: ‘hard, direct treatment, absolutely personal rhythm, few and expressive adjectives, no inversions, and a keen emotion presented objectively.’ The untranslatable metaphors drew attention to the unrepresentable aspects of personal, as well as national, consciousness:

\begin{verbatim}
I
The hard sand breaks,
And the grains of it
Are clear as wine.

Far off over the leagues of it,
The wind,
Playing on the wide shore,
Piles little ridges,
And the great waves
Break over it.

But more than the many-foamed ways
Of the sea,
I know him
Of the triple path-ways,
Hermes,
Who awaiteth.

Dubious,
Facing three ways,
Welcoming wayfarers,
He whom the sea-orchard
Shelters from the west,
\end{verbatim}

From the east
Weathers sea-wind;
Fronts the great dunes.

Wind rushes
Over the dunes,
And the coarse, salt-crushed grass
Answers.

Heu,
It whips round my ankles!  

In responding to Harold Monro’s non-committal assessment of imagism in *The Egoist*, May Sinclair called ‘Hermes of the Ways’ the perfect poem. In defending imagist innovation, she singled out H.D.: ‘The poetry of H.D. *proves* the power of the clean, naked, sensuous image to carry the emotion without rhyme—*not*, I think, without rhythm; the best imagist poems have a very subtle and beautiful rhythm—and always without decoration.’ In a lengthy and discerning review of *The Poems of H.D.* in *The Egoist*, F. S. Flint praised her excellent combination of precision and evocation in ‘Hermes of the Ways’, ‘Sitalkas’, and ‘Pines’: ‘Is it not evident that we have a woman who is creating a body of poetry that is original in its form, spirit and imagery?’ He identified H.D.’s reconstruction of personality through symbol. In *The Little Review*, Richard Aldington cited ‘Hermes of the Ways’ to illustrate H.D.’s paradoxical ‘accurate mystery’, achieved by her combination of the local and the remote, the sea coast of New England and ancient Hellenic myths. One of the most convincing recent discussions of ‘Hermes of the Ways’ as a modernist text is by Hanscombe and Smyers. Like Flint and Aldington, they identify her reconstruction of consciousness where the immediacies of experience intersect with ‘timeless moments’:

This imaging of an imagination in the act of perception—takes its place among those others—the “epiphany” shown by Joyce in his *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* to be his instant of self-discovery as an artist; and the “moment in the rose garden” celebrated by Eliot as the instant of spiritual insight in his *Four Quartets*, being two of the most famous instances. The development of the image in H.D.’s poem follows the lyric of association rather than the logic of discourse: it is not necessary to know—but it is wonderful to know—that the wind and the grass rush and whip.  

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68 Hanscombe and Smyers 173-4.
Rachel Blau DuPlessis believes that for H.D., imagism was always a tactic for entering the realms of the mystical and suggestive, 'possibly under her influence, male poets like Lawrence, Eliot, even Pound realised that mystical vision was the true heart of modernist poetic practice'. H.D. certainly investigated the interplay between various states of consciousness. Her 'Notes on Thought and Vision' never had the chance to be an influential articulation of modernist poetics in its time, but it explains her theory of 'over-mind'—or 'super-mind'—and 'sub-conscious mind'. She believed that the job of an artist was to represent the condition of 'over-conscious mind' which is 'the world of waking dreams and the world great lovers enter, spiritual lovers, but only the greatest'.

So far, H.D.'s importance has been argued in terms of the publication of her poems and their reception in Britain and the American magazines which were read by British intellectuals. She was considered by men and women to exemplify imagist principles and she was also implicitly termed a modernist in her representations of the changing conditions of consciousness. She defamiliarised readers' expectations through her textual mystifications. Her refiguring of literary forms and symbols were also appropriations of male cultural authority. It is well-documented that she studied the representation of women in the major genres of classical literature. Between 1918 and 1920 she wrote many notes on Greek authors and reviewed classical works for Adelphi. Imagist principles of economy and observation contradicted the epic's attention to the heroics of war which excluded or idealised women. Her refabrications of ancient myths subverted traditional inscriptions of gender and her reworking of Sappho and classical poetics was particularly important to the transference of cultural power, because they were starting points of literary tradition.

In 'Eurydice', printed in The Egoist, May 1917, H.D. literally reverses the male gaze through the monologue of Eurydice's complaint against Orpheus' looking back which condemned her to the underworld for ever:

So you have swept me back,
I who could have walked with the live souls
above the earth,
I who could have slept among the live flowers
at last;

so for your arrogance
and your ruthlessness

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70 H.D. 'Notes on Thought and Vision.' Scott, Gender of Modernism 93–109.
71 DuPlessis 4 and 133, n.9.
I am swept back.

Eurydice's fate represents the relegation of women to an eternal subculture. The poem does not finally contradict this fate because it reinvents her capitulation to male mastery at the end.

Gilbert and Gubar consider that H.D.'s early explorations of female immobilisation, as in 'Eurydice', both accepted and rebelled against the literary tropes of feminism, but that she progressed from her initial dependence on the male tradition to autonomous creativity:

Thus H.D. evolved beyond submission to a paternal literary lineage, which Freud defined as the normative father-daughter paradigm; she suffered the renunciation of (aesthetic) desire that Freud saw as the source of female "frigidity"; and she eventually recuperated what Freud called "the original mother-attachment" through the recovery of a female muse of her own. H.D.'s efforts to achieve literary potency therefore can serve to summarize the various stages of development that we have used to define the twentieth-century woman writer's affiliation complex. At the same time, her poetic progress implies a critique of Freud's theory of female maturation.

H.D.'s career can be traced in terms of development from male love objects—Ezra Pound and Richard Aldington—to a female love object, Winifred Bryher. However, even in these early poems, she was not just seeking approval in male terms of avant-garde innovation; as Celeste Schenck argues, 'For Woolf and H.D. the notion of breaking sentence and sequence was a way of rupturing political assumptions of great pertinacity and of making a radical criticism of power and status'. H.D.'s eschewal of high literary form and her concern with the textual politics of gender and race blur the binary divide between 'high' and 'female' modernisms.

Amy Lowell was an important mediator of poetry and criticism between the United States and Britain. She was 'a vigorous, outspoken and indefatigable supporter of the new poets, a generous and warm friend to other writers, an important benefactor of the little magazines.' Her critical writing and poetry drew attention to the possibilities of imagism, free verse and polyphonic prose. She published twelve poetry books, starting with a *Dome of Many Coloured Glass* (1912), and her poetry was printed in American and British magazines such as *The Bookman* and the *North American Review*, not just *Poetry* and *The Egoist* with which she had personal connections. She reviewed British poetry for American

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74 Schenck 246, n. 6.
75 Hanscombe and Smyers 63.
and Tendencies in Modern American Poetry, which discussed paired poets including H.D. and J. G. Fletcher, was a groundbreaking survey of contemporary practice which was debated in both Britain and the United States. In his preface to the Complete Works of Amy Lowell (1955), Louis Untermeyer anticipated that her place in the history of American literature would be secured by future generations:

In any case, the importance of her influence remains unquestioned. Underneath her preoccupation with the need for novelty, the disruption of traditional patterns and other theoretical departures, she was a dynamic force. She was not only a disturber but an awakener. Her exhilarating differences invigorated the old forms while affecting the new techniques. Her pioneering energy cleared the field of flabby accumulation and helped establish the fresh and free searching poetry of her day.

Her contribution to opening up readers’ minds to new poetry is more recognised in America than in Britain, although she is not featured in Gendered Modernisms or The Gender of Modernism.

Amy Lowell’s promotion of imagism through the imagist anthologies and lectures meant that she took over as the emblematic imagist: ‘thanks mainly to Miss Lowell, free verse and imagism made up the notion of modern poetry in the public mind.’ On reading H.D.’s poems, she famously declared, ‘I too am an imagist’ and went to England in 1914 to meet the imagists, research her book on Keats and publish her poems. When she financed and took over the annual anthologies (1915-1917), Ezra Pound shook the dust of the imagists off his feet, but she was clearly respected by other contemporaries who were sympathetic to imagist principles. The Egoist published several of her poems and two long articles about them. In ‘The Poetry of Amy Lowell’, J. G. Fletcher explained her work to British readers and predicted for her a ‘permanent place in English Literature’, picking out her irony, clear and concrete visualisations, her sense of narrative and exceptional range. He believed ‘Bombardment’ to be one of the best war poems, appearing to be ‘male-authored’ whereas others like ‘See! I give myself to you, Beloved!’ were give-away feminine poems, implying that expressiveness was the give-away trait of feminine authorship.

In connection with her promotion of imagism, Amy Lowell was an influential champion and writer of free verse. In her Preface to Sword Blades and Poppy Seed she

77 Perkins 314.
addressed myths about *vers libre*, particularly the false opposition between ‘traditional’ and ‘free’ verse forms. She preferred the label ‘unrhymed cadence’ since free verse had ‘not entirely abandoned the more classic metres’ but was built upon ‘the rhythm of the speaking voice with its necessity for breathing, rather than upon a strict metrical system’.80 ‘August: Late Afternoon’, printed in *The Egoist*, 1916, is faithful to imagist principles of brevity and precision:

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Smoke-colour, rose, saffron,
With a hard edge chipping the blue sky,
A great cloud hung over the village,
And the white-painted meeting-house,
And the steeple with the gilded weather-cock
Heading and flashing to the wind.81
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Richard Aldington’s review of *Sword Blades and Poppy Seed* in *The Egoist* judged some of the short *vers libre* poems ‘extremely good’ and promoted her precision in the manner of the Greek tradition and her experiments with rhythm and images. He recommended ‘Miscast I’ and ‘Miscast II’, ‘Music in a Garden’, ‘The Taxi’, ‘The Tree of Scarlet’ and ‘The Epitaph of a Young Poet’.82 The literary papers tended to give her lengthy consideration but were sceptical about free verse. A long review of *What’s O’Clock*, headed ‘The Poetry of Miss Amy Lowell’, is an interesting register of her reputation and the free verse controversy which her poems fanned. The reviewer debated the state of modern poetry, acknowledged that she had ‘a famous name’ but called her enthusiasm ‘schoolgirlish’.83 *Can Grande’s Castle* (1920) had long reviews in the *TLS* which referred to her fame in the United States where she cultivated ‘polyphonic prose’.84 Richard Aldington cited ‘In a Castle’, ‘The Forsaken’ and ‘The Basket’ as models of polyphonic prose for all young poets, declaring ‘for I am not a bit ashamed to confess that I have myself imitated Miss Lowell, in this, and produced a couple of works in the same style’.85 She defined polyphonic prose as ‘prose only in its typographical arrangement’, and explained that it employed poetic strategies such as metre, rhyme and alliteration but the aim was to produce an orchestral effect. It allowed for the articulation of plurality and broke down binary oppositions. Louis Untermeyer reckoned that Amy Lowell was the first to experiment with polyphonic prose, although it

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derived from the French poet Paul Fort, whom she included in *Six French Poets* (1915), a study of contemporary literature.

Although best known for her crusade for *vers libre*, Amy Lowell was also part of the vogue for a return to more orthodox forms, such as ballads, and for Japanese and Chinese poetry. Her first volume, *A Dome of Many Coloured Glass*, consisted mainly of lyrical forms but she was more adventurous in the next volume, *Sword Blades and Poppy Seed* (1914), and *Pictures of a Floating World* (1919) which was in its fourth edition by 1921 and which best demonstrates her stylistic range. ‘Ely Cathedral’ is a humorous satire on British culture, which is unusual in its rhyming but typical in its associational progression of images: ‘Anaemic women, stupidly dressed and shod/In squeaky shoes, thump down the nave to laud an expurgated God.’

The development of an ironic voice registered a new confidence in women. Her satirical mode is acerbic in the free verse narrative ‘Astigmatism: to Ezra Pound with much friendship and Admiration and some Difference of Opinion’. She depicts ‘The Poet’ stalking through the countryside, scything daisies with his walking stick which he considers to be an *objet d’art*:

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The Poet came to a meadow.
Sifted through the grass were daisies,
Open-mouthed, wondering, they gazed at the sun.
The Poet struck them with his cane.
The little heads flew off, and they lay
Dying, open-mouthed and wondering,
On the hard ground.
“They are useless. They are not roses,” said the Poet.

Peace be with you, Brother. Go your ways.
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Her jibe at Pound was obviously tied up with his splintering of the imagist group and his self-appointed artistic superiority. As Andrew Thacker comments, Lowell’s representation of Pound’s walking stick as a phallic emblem ‘poke[d] fun at Pound’s notion of poetry as a pen-craft fit only for men’.

‘The Sisters’ and ‘A Critical Fable’ which are discussed in the Introduction of this thesis, investigate the common aesthetic bind for women. Lowell could not find inspiration in women poets of the past and found herself undermined by men. Furthermore, her lesbian orientation exacerbated the difficulty of self-definition. In ‘Middle Age’, one of many of her haikus, subjectivity is represented through impersonal concrete images:

87 Amy Lowell, *Complete Poetical Works* 34.
88 Thacker 54.
Like black ice
Scrolled over with the unintelligible patterns
by an ignorant skater
Is the dulled surface of my heart. 89

Harriet Monroe believed ‘[Amy Lowell is a] good workman, even though at times the mere workmanship is a bit too apparent’. 90 D. H. Lawrence, who thought her a ‘very good friend’ but was always rather reticent about her achievement, 91 similarly identified a ‘posturing’ in her writing: ‘Why do you deny the bitterness in your nature, when you write poetry? Why do you take a pose? It causes you always to shirk your issues and find a banal resolution at the end.’ 92 He was writing about her early work in Sword Blades and Poppy Seed, and did not seem to recognise her application of the imagist credo which promoted objectivity. Nevertheless, he was identifying a self-masking which seemed to both restrain and liberate her creativity.

Lowell particularly needed to mask her lesbian desires. As Hanscombe and Smyers point out, ‘the intimacy of lesbian life could hardly have been openly depicted in the poetry of the time, not only for the obvious reasons that social opprobrium would result, but more seriously because the masculine tradition of lyric writing had not been questioned’. 93 In the love lyrics to Ada Russell, such as ‘In Excelsis’ or ‘Opal’, concrete images encode female sexuality but ‘visual fidelity is only a pathway to sensual pleasures’: 94

You are ice and fire,
The touch of you burns my hands like snow.
You are cold and flame.
You are the crimson of amaryllis.
The silver of moon-touched magnolias.
When I am with you,
My heart is a frozen pond
Gleaming with agitated torches. 95

89 Amy Lowell, Complete Poetical Works 226.
93 Hanscombe and Smyers 69.
94 Thacker 56.
95 Amy Lowell, Complete Poetical Works 214.
Through her famous flower metaphors, Lowell often harnessed traditional symbols of femininity to lesbian desire. In ‘A Decade’ the food imagery is eroticised:

When you came, you were like red wine and honey,
And the taste of you burnt my mouth with its sweetness.
Now you are like morning bread,
Smooth and pleasant.
I hardly taste you at all for I know your savour,
But I am completely nourished.96

Andrew Thacker illustrates that Lowell and H.D. use the condensed discourse of orthodox imagist precepts but their images are more sensual and relational. The imagist principle of directness was problematic for the representations of lesbian or bi-sexuality which had to be coded or voiced indirectly. In other words, versions of modernism have to take into account ‘the articulation of very different desires and vocabularies than those expressed in Pound’s version of imagism’.97

Marianne Moore

Marianne Moore influenced poetry in the United States and Europe through The Dial and through the publication of her poetry, articles and reviews in other papers, notably The Egoist and The Criterion in Britain, and through her vigorous correspondence.98 In the United States, she is often numbered with male modernists although the final panel of a two-day centenary symposium in Chicago (1987) were hesitant about her place in literary history.99 Like H.D. and Amy Lowell, her status as a poet is uncertain in Britain, partly due to the lack of consensus about her identity as a poet. Reputed for her knowledge and intellectuality, she earned respect within the literary establishment which showered her with prizes. She also became a popular figure ‘who threw the first pitch of the baseball season, went to prize fights with George Plumpton, dined with Cassius Clay, as he then was, and was hired, unavailingly, to give a name to a new Ford car.’100 The continuing debate about whether her verbal tactics were aimed to unsettle the reader, to conceal her gender or as a

97 Thacker 56.
cultural critique, is testimony to her skilful textual mystifications. Although the poems rarely seem gendered, there is an implicit feminist politics in her transgressions of genre.

The studied inscrutability of Marianne Moore’s texts sends readers to biography where interpretative clues are sought in her lifelong closeness with her mother and in her determined celibacy. She is sometimes mythologised into a sanitised spinster but she and her mother were members of the Women’s Suffrage Party of Pennsylvania in 1915. Her poetry does not specifically explore a feminist consciousness, but her disguising of the feminine voice and the respect which she earned for her ‘craftsmanship’ helped the credibility of the woman poet. In identifying the two-pronged critical reception to women like Moore, Alicia Ostriker presents the case for the radical poet:

As to Moore, the connection between the personal and sexual self-effacement which was one source of the respect she received in elite poetic and critical circles, and the limitations which readers have complained of in her work, can scarcely be doubted. To advocates and critics alike she had been the pre-eminent poet of the filigreed and polished surface, who is “unassuming” and “unpretentious” and whose “humility is vast.” That her anger and her ambition were equally as vast has not been noticed. She has been all too thoroughly accepted, represented in anthologies by her most maidenly and least threatening work, and her subversiveness has been virtually invisible.101

In both America and Britain, Marianne Moore was renowned for her professionalism and prosody, particularly in the syllabic cause, which influenced W. H. Auden, although she moved on to free verse. As she explained in ‘The Accented Syllable’, published in The Egoist, 1916, her interest in developing syllabic verse was for the purpose of creating definite but naturalistic intonation.102 James Southworth concludes, ‘I think future critics will look back upon the breaking of the dominance of the iambic as one of the greatest contributions to prosody of the early twentieth century. Miss Moore has had a part in this.”103 Marianne Moore’s achievement should be measured in terms of her criticism as well as her poetry.

During the 1920s, Marianne Moore’s poetry was published and reviewed in most of the literary and progressive papers in America and Britain. Her poems were included in the imagist anthologies and she published Poems in Britain (Egoist Press, 1921) and Observations in America (Dial Press, 1924). Her Selected and Collected Poems (1935, 1951) were severely pruned and do not include several poems which appeared in the two collections or in journals. Of all the poems published in The Egoist only ‘The Fish’ and ‘He Wrote the History Book’ are in her Collected Poems. She corresponded with Harriet Shaw

101 Ostriker 53-4.
Weaver at *The Egoist* which is where she mainly found an outlet in Britain. She became a central figure in the New York literary scene from 1915 and won the approval of her male colleagues. John Crowe Ransom contrasted ‘Miss Marianne Moore’ favourably with Edna St. Vincent Millay because she was not ‘deficient in masculinity’ which he equated with ‘intellectual interest’. Moore admired Wallace Stevens and knew William Carlos Williams and Alfred Kreymburg, among other modernist intellectuals. In a letter to Ezra Pound, 1919, she related that although her work had initially been noticed in *The Egoist, Poetry and The Little Review*, she was dissatisfied with the way it ‘jerks and rears’. Her proclaimed dissatisfaction could have been a strategy of self-defence, since she was well-received by her contemporaries and her poetry was reviewed at length in the *TLS*, albeit with reservations.

In Britain, Marianne Moore’s debut in *The Egoist* was her review of *Prufrock and Other Observations* and she brought T. S. Eliot’s criticism to the attention of America with her review of *The Sacred Wood* in *The Dial*. She also wrote discerning reviews of H.D.’s *Heliodora and Other Poems* and Edith Sitwell’s *The Sleeping Beauty* in *The Dial*. She carried on a long and formal correspondence with T. S. Eliot who encouraged her to produce her *Selected Poems* which he introduced and he had her work reviewed in *The Criterion*. In April 1921 he wrote, ‘How much I admire your verse. It interests me, I think, more than that of anyone now writing in America. I wish that you would make a book of it, and I should like to try to get it published here.’ In his review of the *Others* anthology in *The Egoist*, May 1918, T. S. Eliot placed Marianne Moore with the ‘living writers’, ‘Mr Pound, Mr Joyce and Mr Lewis’:

> Miss Moore is utterly intellectual, but not abstract; the word never parts from the feeling; her ideas, imageless, remain quite personal . . . She has an admirable sense of form . . . being an American has perhaps aided her to avoid the diet of nineteenth-century English poetry.

He much admired ‘The Steeple Jack’ for her method of running a prose sentence across stanzas, and he placed it at the beginning of her *Selected Poems*. In his Preface to *Selected Poems*, T. S. Eliot, suggested that the minute detail of her observations, which could

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provoke either irritation or admiration, was best seen in terms of her investigations of language rather than of recording experience. He explored her combinations of internal rhyme and rhymed and unrhymed endings: ‘Miss Moore’s use of rhyme is in itself a definite innovation in metric . . . of the light rhyme Miss Moore is the greatest living master; and indeed she is the first, so far as I know, who has investigated its possibilities.’ As well as ‘master’, he called her ‘modernist’ and placed the poems in ‘part of the small body of durable poetry written in our time’. It is not necessary to use T. S. Eliot’s compliments to add to her credentials, but they do register how she was perceived as an innovator and honorary male modernist in London and New York.

Although Marianne Moore was identified as a modernist early on in Britain, she was initially associated with the imagists through the imagist anthologies and the promotion of her reputation in The Egoist. ‘Evocations’, printed in The Egoist, 1 April 1915, suggests the influence of H.D. but Moore rejected the ‘imagist’ along with every other label. Michael Roberts identified the influence of the later imagist developments, such as Amy Lowell’s, on her, but Laura Riding and Robert Graves singled her out as an exemplar of modernist, as opposed to showy imagist, poetry because she was ‘wholly concerned’ with the technical discipline of poetry rather than with novelty for novelty’s sake. Their analysis of her ‘Steam-Roller’ and ‘Poetry’ in A Survey of Modernist Poetry (1927) was one of the first critical responses which recognised her ironic parody of the ‘plain reader’s’ expectations: ‘Miss Moore, who turns her poetry into matter-of-fact prose demonstrations in order to avoid mystery, thus expresses the plain reader’s antagonism to poetry that perplexes rather than entertains.’

If she were aiming for highbrow status and male approval, Marianne Moore was clearly successful and would have been delighted by Richard Aldington’s praise in The Criterion in 1925: ‘Miss Moore is indeed the most highbrow poet in the world. . . . Miss Moore’s poetry is entirely intellectual’. Aldington’s review of Observations is a useful record of a reception to Moore’s poems among the British intellectuals and for an attentive analysis. He confessed to having read the book three times, to his difficulty in finding an appropriate language of appraisal, and to a sense of her ‘most menacing superiority’—‘one is conscious of a clear piercing gaze and an unfavourable judgement of oneself somehow emanating from the pages. Instinctively one straightens one’s tie.’ He believed that the superiority stemmed from her ‘whimsical and sophisticated irony’ and array of references. Moore’s range of reference can be construed as a highbrow fortification

12 Roberts 15.
13 Riding and Graves 1927. 111.
14 Riding and Graves 1927. 113.
against the masses, but her levelling of classical or sacred with mundane texts anticipates postmodernist confluences of high- and low-brow discourses. The conflation of literary and ordinary discourses represent her attempts to dismantle the conventional structures of poetry.

Rather than aiming to be highbrow, Marianne Moore exposed the pretensions and elitism of highbrow poets. Her similarities with T. S. Eliot—the literary references and explanatory notes—can thus be read as parodic. 'Why I buy Pictures’ \(^{116}\) is characteristically ironic about the misplaced reverence for authors—'Yes the authors are wonderful people/Particularly those who write the most'—and ‘Picking and Choosing’ mocks the esoteric rhetoric of literary criticism:

> Literature is a phase of life. If
> one is afraid of it, the situation is irremediable; if
> one approaches it familiarly
> what one says of it is worthless. Words are constructive
> when they are true; the opaque allusion—the simulated flight
>
> upward—accomplishes nothing. Why cloud the fact
> that Shaw is self-conscious in the field of sentiment but is otherwise
> rewarding; that James is all that has been
> said of him if feeling is profound? It is not Hardy
> the distinguished novelist and Hardy the poet, but one man
>
> ‘interpreting life through the medium of the
> emotions’. If he must give an opinion, it is permissible that the
> critic should know what he likes.\(^{117}\)

Typically, the poem sets up and distorts rhythmic norms. Marianne Moore eschewed rhyme because it impeded a ‘naturalistic’ voice and she preferred the scope of free verse for varying intonation.\(^ {118}\) Her well anthologised ‘Poetry’ (1921) similarly deflates poetry’s mystique and its mixture of formal and informal diction investigates the line between literary and non-literary discourses. The combination may represent an internal contradiction in her relationship with high and low cultures.

Moore’s defamiliarisations involved a redefinition of genre and were fuelled by her preoccupation with the nature and status of literary tradition, particularly the conflict between

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\(^{117}\) Marianne Moore, *CP* 1951. 51-3.

its hierarchical structures and democratic ideals. H.D.'s review of Marianne Moore in The Egoist recognised the despairing bafflement of her readers and addressed the big question, 'does it mean something?'\(^{119}\). She chose 'Feed me, also, river God' and 'He made the screen and Talisman' as examples of Moore's 'perfect craft'. H.D. argued that the meaning was found in the disdain of the artist who playfully engages then eludes the reader: '[Miss Moore] is fighting in her country a battle against squalor and commercialism' in the cause of the 'beautiful English language.' As H.D. indicated, there is a vehemence in Moore's depictions of 'The vast indestructible necropolis'\(^{120}\) but her disdain was for elitist culture. In 1936 Marianne Moore declared her support for the Spanish Republicans 'against Franco, against Fascism; against any suppression of freedom by tyranny masked as civilisation.'\(^{121}\) Lisa Steinman argues that Moore's commitment to interrogating the unequal distribution of cultural capital was partly a response to T. S. Eliot's 'Tradition and The Individual Talent', published in 1920.\(^{122}\) In common with Eliot, however, she was concerned with extending the scope of poetry which encouraged stock responses and with increasing consciousness.

The detachment or distance of Moore's speakers can give the impression that she assumes the high moral ground. Her revising and cutting, however, support the view that she was primarily testing the limits of genre. She refused the labels 'poet' or 'poetry', explained her syllabic verse as 'an arrangement of stanzas, each stanza being an exact duplicate of every other stanza' and referred to her poetry as 'my observations, experiments in rhythm, or exercises in composition'.\(^{123}\) She continually reworked her poems. 'Poetry', begun in 1912, and published in Poems, was originally thirty lines but was reduced to thirteen lines in Observations (1921); it was thirty eight lines long in Selected Poems, and four lines in Collected Poems. The indeterminacy of the texts mitigates the impression of a fixed moral purpose. The poems are best approached as a series of impressions and investigations into the processes of representation. 'England', for example, seems to be primarily descriptive, but it is also about stereotyping and the hindrance of clichés to fresh awareness: 'To have misapprehended the matter is to have confessed/that one has not looked far enough.'\(^{124}\) Her poems interrogate the binary opposition between poetry and prose, personal and impersonal discourses or expressive or self-reflexive modes. She explained, 'One writes because one has a burning desire to objectify what is indispensable to one's happiness to express.'\(^{125}\) This impersonal expression of the personal is typical and by littering quotation and adopting different subject positions she remains concealed.

\(^{120}\) Marianne Moore, 'People's Surroundings', CP 1951. 61.
Moore's 'impersonality' avoids the voice of female experience but she sometimes investigates gender relations. The overkill of 'Poetry' and 'The Steeple Jack' in anthologies has eclipsed longer poems like 'Marriage', a nine page exploration of the psychological effects of legalised partnership. It begins:

This institution
perhaps one should say enterprise
out of respect for which
one says one need not change one's mind
about a thing one has believed in,
requiring public promises
of one's intention
to fulfil a private obligation:
I wonder what Adam and Eve
think of it by this time
this fire-gilt steel
alive with goldeness;
how bright it shows—
"of circular traditions and impostures,
committing many spoils",
requiring all one's criminal ingenuity
to avoid!
Psychology which explains everything
explains nothing,
and we are still in doubt.

Below the incandescent fruit,
the strange experience of beauty;
its existence is too much;
it tears one to pieces
and each fresh wave of consciousness
is poison. 126

Through an unidentified persona Moore questioned the validity of marriage, cultural prescriptions of gender and sexual relations. Alicia Ostriker cites 'Marriage' as an example of how Moore's elliptical surfaces can hide 'a rather absolute critique of patriarchy and its

126 Marianne Moore, 'Marriage', CP 1951. 69-78.
central institution'. Marianne Moore’s review of H.D.’s *Hymen* is a rare polemic against the mythologies of women as either feminine or frigid:

Talk of weapons and the tendency to match one’s intellectual and emotional vigor with the violence of nature, give a martial, an apparently masculine tone, to such writing as H.D.’s, the more so that women are regarded as belonging necessarily to either of two classes—that of the intellectual freelance or that of the eternally sleeping beauty, effortless yet effective in that indestructible limestone keep of domesticity. Woman tends unconsciously to be the aesthetic norm of intellectual home life and pre-eminently in the case of H.D., we have the intellectual, social woman, non-public and “feminine”.

It is likely that Moore’s ostentatious intellectuality was a strategic distancing from ‘feminine’ sentimentality. Similarly, her device of animal voices, as in ‘The Fish’, ‘The Frigate Pelican’ and ‘The Buffalo’, enabled her to transcend gendered identification by avoiding human figurations altogether. She did not, however, hide under cover of male-associated conventions but consciously distanced herself from all literary categories and transgressed the traditional boundaries of genre. Although avoiding gendered affiliation in her poetry, Marianne Moore did not display symptoms of the female affiliation complex in her relations with other literary women. She and H.D. were university colleagues at Bryn Mawr and although H.D. came to London before the First World War, she and Moore remained mutual supporters and reviewed each other’s work. Like H.D., she received guidance, wanted and unwanted, from Ezra Pound, but she withstood his ‘text-bashing’ and interferences concerning funding, contributing to and working for *The Dial*. In addition to her friendship with H.D. she knew Mina Loy, Amy Lowell, Djuna Barnes and Margaret Anderson, and met Sylvia Beach when she went to Europe in 1911.

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127 Ostriker 51.
Laura Riding

Laura Riding left the United States in 1926 but did not find a home with the ex-patriates on The Left Bank in Paris and spent her time in Mallorca and London. She published ten books of poems during the nineteen twenties and thirties, including her *Collected Poems* in 1938. She influenced some younger poets whom she took as protégés and published through her Seizin Press in Mallorca and London (1927-1939). In spite of her publishing success, her promotion of new poets and her involvement in developing awareness about modernist poetry, criticism in Britain has been sparse and evasive about her status as a writer, partly because of her antagonism to anthologies and towards critics who did not share her puritanical view of language, and partly because of the mythologies concerning her relationship with Robert Graves and her notorious suicide attempt in 1929. The disdain with which she was treated by some male poets and critics has also overshadowed the respect of others. Michael Roberts consulted her extensively during the formation of *The Faber Book of Modern Verse* (1936) and nine of her poems were included in it.

In the debate about whether she has been over- or under-estimated, John Lucas states, ‘That Laura Riding’s poetry should be so little discussed or known is pretty disgraceful. . . . No account of the poetry of the 1920s can afford to ignore this collection [*Poems: A Joking Word*, 1930].’ As Jeanne Heuving observes, ‘[although her] work has been highly acclaimed by many prominent twentieth-century poets and intellectuals, she has not received the concerted critical attention she deserves’. 130 One reason for the neglect is that she is difficult to position: ‘Within existing periodizing concepts, (Riding) Jackson’s poetry can only be seen as a strange kind of amalgam of modernist, New Critical, and postmodernist poetics.’ 131 She did not align herself with literary groups, although in England she met Virginia Woolf, T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Edith Sitwell, Gertrude Stein and other writers. She has been largely ignored by feminist histories, probably because, like Edith Sitwell, and to some extent Marianne Moore, her poems are difficult to read in terms of gender. A female affiliation complex is projected in her hostility towards women-only anthologies, to avoid what she saw as their ‘declassing’ of woman poets. 132 However, in *These were the Hours* (1969), Nancy Cunard records that during the 1920s, Riding was an esteemed poet and considered difficult. Cunard also described her as feminist and believed that Riding’s rhythms and repetitive syntax were influenced by Gertrude Stein.

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131 Heuving 207.
As a woman and an American in Britain, Riding was doubly displaced. She did not identify herself as American and was aware of the 'The most foolish instance[s] of critical segregation' because of her sex. In a letter to The Criterion in 1927, Robert Graves took issue with John Gould Fletcher's review of Laura Riding's The Close Chaplet, particularly its implication that she was derivative of Graves himself, Gertrude Stein, Marianne Moore and John Crowe Ransom. Graves explained why, in each case, Laura Riding could not have copied them and made the general objection to the self-publicising of reviewers:

What happens is that this sort of reviewer makes a point of knowing the “names” in fashion at the moment as the leaders of the advanced movements in poetry, and of discovering exactly at what price the stock of, say, Gertrude Stein (rising), Edith Sitwell (steady), Marianne Moore (not very steady), Ezra Pound (sinking), and John Masefield (sunk), is being quoted in Bloomsbury, Paris and Greenwich Village. Graves' complaints register that Laura Riding's poetry was likened to other avant-garde writers, that poets objected to the 'false writing that passes as criticism' and that the reputations of Moore, Stein and Sitwell were debated in London, Paris and New York. Additionally, Graves referred to 'Mr Fletcher's well-known anti-feministic bias [which] is only relaxed in the case of “names”.' Although the extent of the mutual influence of Laura Riding and Robert Graves is debatable, he became more avant-garde when working with her—'Clearly her avant-gardism exposed Graves to what we should to-day, with hindsight, describe as high modernism: it challenged him to clarify his own artistic procedures in relation to the new practice.'

As with Edith Sitwell, Gertrude Stein, Amy Lowell and Marianne Moore, Laura Riding's criticism was an important instrument and record of modernism. As Stan Smith states in The Origins of Modernism (1994), the term “Modernist” was first used by Riding and Graves in A Survey of Modernist Poetry (1927) which ‘offered a shrewd diagnosis of the duplicity at the heart of modernism’s sense of cultural time.’ The duplicity was that modernism’s insistence on innovation paradoxically became an orthodoxy: ‘In this sense modernism becomes a critical tyranny, increasing contemporary mannerisms in poetry instead of freeing the poet of obligation to conform to any particular set of literary theories.’ A Survey of Modernist Poetry was a ‘word by word collaboration’ between Riding and Graves so it is difficult to ascertain its significance as a woman’s text, although it

133 ibid.
was inclusive through integrating British and American men and women. It was taken for granted that Marianne Moore, H.D., Gertrude Stein, Edith Sitwell and Nancy Cunard were as well-known to the readers as T. S. Eliot, William Carlos Williams, Ezra Pound and W. B. Yeats. *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* also registers Riding’s commitment to modernist poetry as the way forward from the ‘dead movements’ of Georgianism and imagism which were supposedly driven by the interests of the ‘plain reader’. They acknowledged that the difficulty of modernist poems seemed to be part of the game of ‘highbrow baiting lowbrow’ but defended the difficulty as the unfamiliarity of innovation.

Like Marianne Moore’s, Laura Riding’s poems appear to elude gender distinctness through their impersonality. Like Moore, she wished to free readers from stock responses by confronting them with unfamiliar linguistic arrangements and, like Moore’s, her poems often read as philosophy in verse; she was proud of W.H. Auden’s description of her as ‘the only living philosophical poet’. Poems like ‘The Talking World’ and ‘Come, Words, Away’ illustrate her interest in extending her readers’ consciousness by moving them away from familiar verbalisation, ‘on and on, as far as poems could take’.

Come, words, away from mouths,
Away from tongues in mouths
And reckless hearts in tongues
And mouths in cautious heads—
Come, words, away to where
The meaning is not thickened
With the voice’s fretting substance,
Nor look of words is curious
As letters in books staring out
All that man ever thought strange
And laid to sleep on white
Like the archaic manuscript
Of dreams at morning blackened on wonder.

Riding’s poetry is illuminated by her Preface to *Collected Poems* (1938) where she explains that her experiments with shedding ‘literary conventionalities of poetic idiom’—rhyme, image, symbol or form—were aimed at achieving the diction of uncontaminated thought. She believed in absolute ‘meaning’ and that words should point the way to moral and spiritual development in the individual: ‘where language is converted into the mere
instrument of an art, it loses its virtue as the expressive instrument of humanity'.\textsuperscript{143} Riding's ideal of cultural sanctification through linguistic purity is also illustrated in the publication of \textit{A Pamphlet against anthologies} in 1928. Since she believed that modern poetry must make demands on the reader in order to be 'new', she saw the growth of popular anthologies as impeding progress.

Laura Riding aimed for a new universal language which would enlighten human consciousness; she also realised that in the past, 'universalality' had meant male experience and 'crucial to (Riding) Jackson's utopian vision of a new human universality is her gender critique'.\textsuperscript{144} 'Postponement of Self' is ostensibly autobiographical and investigates the relationship between language and identity:

I grow to six.
At six little girls in love with fathers.
He lifts me up.
See. Is this Me?
It is Me I think
In all the different ways till twenty.
At twenty I say She.\textsuperscript{145}

The alternation of first and third person is common in modernist women's writing; it indicates the interplay between subjective and objective identities and between semiotic and symbolic discourses. The poem also registers Freud's theory of the development of femininity from identification with the father to identification with the mother.

'Memories of Mortalities', an examination of childhood, contradicts Romantic notions of universal essentialised human nature in representing the socio-linguistic construction of gendered identity:

But the world pressed a mirror on my shyness.
"Not shy" to the no one in that mirror
I not self-recognised protested . . . \textsuperscript{146}

Drawing upon Lacanian theory of the infant's mirror phase, this process of self-definition corresponds to the initiation of the female child into the prison-house of the Symbolic, that is, patriarchal language systems:

\textsuperscript{144} Heuving 192.
\textsuperscript{145} Laura Riding, 'Postponement of Self', \textit{Poems} 1980. 59.
\textsuperscript{146} Laura Riding, 'Memories of Mortalities', \textit{Poems} 1980. 261.
I had learnt to be silent
And yet to be.
I had learnt how the world speaks.\textsuperscript{147}

The interpretation that the childhood repression represented here is specifically female is reinforced by earlier poems like ‘I Am’ where she states, ‘I am an indicated other’ and by her reference to the ‘patriarchal leer’ in ‘Divestment of Beauty’.\textsuperscript{148} \textit{The Word “Woman”}, written in 1933 but not published until 1993, registers her thinking in terms of tradition and gender. It was intended to ‘strip literature of its mythologies of ludicrous pieties’ and looks at the alienation of women in language.\textsuperscript{149} She believed that ‘Woman’, like ‘God’, was a concept by which Man enlarged his nature and defined himself: “‘Woman’ is the more co-operative kind of ‘otherness,” which assists him practically (he does not know or care why) in his attempts to create identity between his own meanings and all the “other” meanings which may be.”\textsuperscript{150}

Jeffrey Walsh identifies Laura Riding’s exploration of the psychological conflict between men and women, particularly in her early poems where she often parodies literary representations of romantic love and the sexual stereotyping of women.\textsuperscript{151} In ‘Helen’s Faces’, a monologue by Helen of Troy, she states that ‘the original woman is mythical’ and refigures the feminine paragon as cold and hard in her mockery of men’s fantasies:

\begin{verbatim}
Bitterly have I been contested for,
Though never have I counted numbers—
They were too many, less than all.
And kindly have I warded off
Contest and bitterness,
Given each a replica of love,
Beguiled them with images.

To their hearts they held them.
Her dear face, its explicitness!\textsuperscript{152}
\end{verbatim}

\textsuperscript{147} ‘Memories of Mortalities’ 263.
\textsuperscript{150} Laura Riding, \textit{The Word “Woman”} 19.
\textsuperscript{151} Walsh 135–7.
In ‘The Tiger’ she similarly subverts the idealisation of women as ‘queens and shepherdesses’ in fairy tale:

Long since, when like a tiger I was pursued
And the first pursuer, at such and such a date,
Found how the tiger takes the lady
Far away where she is gentle.
In the high forest she is gentle.
She is patient in a high house.
Ah me, Ah me, says every lady in the end,
Putting the tiger in its cage
Inside her lofty head.
And weeps ending her own story.
And scarcely knows she weeps.\textsuperscript{153}

Laura Riding was acutely conscious of gender distinctions but like other avant-garde women, she defies Freud’s negative theories of female development. She believed that women had a distinctive spiritual sensitivity and envisaged a condition of pre-lapsarian sex equality: ‘The Lady of the Apple, she will eat,/ She will reclaim Eden of gloom and sun.’\textsuperscript{154}

Gertrude Stein

During her lifetime, Gertrude Stein believed that the American public were more interested in her personal life than her work, and although feminist histories have attended to her salon as a centre for the lesbian community on the Left Bank, she is still not consistently recognised within American or British modernisms. Like H.D., Gertrude Stein can be discussed in the context of female, and more specifically lesbian, modernism, but in her historical context, she was influential upon European and American writers who came into contact with her revolutionary principles and writing. She most clearly influenced Mina Loy and to some extent Laura Riding and Edith Sitwell. However, she can only be mentioned briefly since, apart from \textit{Tender Buttons} (1914), her poetry was barely published in the period.

When Gertrude Stein came to Britain in 1902, she connected with Bloomsbury and frequented the British Library Reading Room. She was invited to lecture to the Oxford and Cambridge societies in 1926 and 1936 and the former lecture, ‘Composition as Explanation’

was printed in *The Dial* and published by the Hogarth Press.\footnote{Gertrude Stein, ‘Composition as Explanation’, *Stanzas in Meditation and Other Poems* 1929–1933 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967) 21–30.} Her poem ‘A Description of the Fifteenth of November: A Portrait of T. S. Eliot’, was printed in *The Criterion* in October, 1929.\footnote{Gertrude Stein, ‘A Description of the Fifteenth of November: A Portrait of T. S. Eliot’, Reprinted in Scott, *Gender of Modernism* 525–8.} Stein was stylistically close to Edith Sitwell who had written constructive reviews of her pioneering work in 1923 and 1924, before they met in 1926. She had promoted Stein in Great Britain and arranged the invitations from Oxford and Cambridge universities. After they met, Sitwell wrote an enthusiastic review of Stein’s *The Making of Americans* in *The Criterion*.\footnote{Edith Sitwell, Review of *The Making of Americans*, by Gertrude Stein. *Criterion* 2 April 1926:391.} She visited Gertrude Stein and Alice Toklas when she lived in Paris, until the famous soirée at Sylvia Beach’s Bookshop in 1931 when she snubbed Stein by reading from Shakespeare, the Elizabethan poets and her own work, but not from Stein’s.

Gertrude Stein’s ‘Sitwell Edith Sitwell’ is a verbal portrait of Edith in relation to her brothers:

> In a minute when they sit around her.
> Mixed it with two who. One two two one two two. Mixed it with two who.
> Weeks and weeks able and weeks.
> No one sees the connections between Lily and Louise, but I do.
> After each has had after each has had, after each has had had had had it.
> Change in time.
> A change in times is this, if a change in time, If a change in time is this.
> If a change in time.\footnote{Gertrude Stein, ‘Sitwell Edith Sitwell’, Scott, *Gender of Modernism* 528–530.}

It was first read by Stein in a packed lecture hall to the Oxford Poetry Society. It operates both as a parody of and a tribute to Sitwell’s experiments since Stein combines Sitwell’s style with her own and connects them through their common purpose of cultural change. Equally, Stein’s poetry brought rare praise from Edith who described it in terms of her own experiments: ‘[Gertrude Stein] is bringing back life to our language by what appears, at first, to be an anarchic process. First she breaks down predestined groups of words . . . then she examines their texture and rebuilds them into new and vital shapes.’\footnote{Edith Sitwell, *Poetry and Criticism* (London: Hogarth, 1925) 23.} Sitwell reinforced the equation between anti-realist or anti-representational writing and anarchism and Gertrude Stein’s reputation in Britain as an anarchist was endorsed in the ‘Conclusion’ of *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* (1927) where she was briefly discussed as representing
the ‘new barbarism’. Although not politically anarchist, Stein is arguably the most radical of all modernists because her writing lacks the yearning for a mythical past or for entry into received traditions which encumbers other texts.

Both Gertrude Stein and Edith Sitwell were radical in their textual subversions, but whereas Sitwell used rhythm and rhyme for aural impact and plundered a range of traditional verse forms, Stein rejected recognisable literary effects. Like Sitwell, her sources were contemporary art and music. Laura Riding and Robert Graves recognised that Stein’s ‘rhythms have a peculiar hypnotic power not met with before. It has kinship with the saxophone’. In her useful essay on Stein, published in *Transatlantic Review*, 1924, Mina Loy observed, ‘It has become the custom to say of her that she has done in words what Picasso has done with form. There is certainly in her work an interpenetration of dimensions analogous to Cubism.’ The other significant aspect, according to Loy, was her success in making the reader a participant: ‘In reading Gertrude Stein one is assaulted by a dual army of associated ideas, her associations and your own.’ Stein also broke new ground with an Anglo-American lexical duality and in ‘The Work of Gertrude Stein’, published in *The Little Review*, 1916, Sherwood Anderson praised her ability to recast life in the city from American and British words.

Gertrude Stein’s critical writings illuminate the principles behind her revolutionary syntax and form. In order to eliminate received systems of meaning she rejected the boundaries of genre and freed up concepts of syntactical correctness through the creation of the prolonged present and removal of punctuation. She famously explained to a student that the line ‘Rose is a rose is a rose’ was a catalogue of literary symbols which had become dead through overuse. ‘A Valentine to Sherwood Anderson’ (1922) extends the principles of ‘Rose is a rose is a rose’ and demonstrates her favoured strategies of repetition, parody and displacement:

Very fine is my valentine.
Very fine and very mine.
Very mine is my valentine very mine and very fine.
Very fine is my valentine and mine, very fine very mine and mine is my valentine.

She typically breaks down conventional literary structures by mixing poetry and prose but coherence is constructed through visual and rhythmic patterning. Typically too, as in ‘A Rose’, the mimicry undermines the ideal of romantic love.

In eschewing recognisable literary devices, Stein refused to use symbols to represent the abstract. *Stanzas in Meditation*, which was written parallel to *The Autobiography of*  

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Alice B. Toklas (1933), was intended to achieve the ‘exactitude of abstract thought’ yet she believed that it was ‘her real achievement of the commonplace.’ Stanzas in Meditation was completed in 1938 but not published until 1956. It is orthodoxly modernist in exploring thought processes although it goes further by investigating the contingency of thought and speech. The cohering principle, the voice, which represents socially constructed identity, is also the subject of the poem.

Stein’s radically innovative aesthetics, which aim to unstitch rather than make meaning, provide little place for the construction of female experience. She was not active in socialist or feminist movements but was committed to fracturing the cultural authority of male-dominated literary traditions:

[Gertrude Stein] went a great deal further than anyone else in the modernist period in reinventing literary language in a way that undoes conventional, hierarchical, patriarchal modes of signification, in diverse stylistic modes, a rich complex open-ended syntactical and semantic polysemy . . . she was well aware of what she was doing.

‘Patriarchal Poetry’ 1927, indicates her association between traditional poetry and patriarchy and her formulation of a post-patriarchal aesthetic. In this polyphonic poem, she constructs a kind of supra- or sub-standard English so that it appears like the effort of a foreigner or baby to master English grammar. It approximates to the concept of women’s semiotic speech in its absence of linearity or syntactical organisation:

Fairly letting it see that the change is as to be did Nelly and Lily love to be did Nelly and Lily want to see and to see which is if could it be that so little is known was known if so little was known shone stone come bestow bestown so little as was known could which that for them recognisably.

Wishing for Patriarchal Poetry.

It is paradoxical that these compositions which confront the indeterminacy of interpretation invite intense debates about their meanings. Feminist criticism variously considers Stein’s tactics as intended to free language from the repressions of patriarchal traditions or for articulating lesbian desire, particularly in Lifting Belly and Tender Buttons. Tender Buttons, written during the pre-war years, 1911-14, is a group of prose poems which Stein called ‘verbal still lifes’. Like ‘Patriarchal Poetry’, they seem

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164 Marianne De Koven, Scott, Gender of Modernism 479.
preoccupied with avoiding signification and at the same time invite the reader to participate in
the construction of meaning. Her poems represent the ways in which the modernist
challenges to representation were driven by women since they destroyed the assumptions
that gender was natural rather than constructed.

Mina Loy

Mina Loy (Mina Gertrude Lowy) is placed at the end of this chapter because she most
apalpably bridges avant-garde and female modernisms. Contemporary records indicate that
she was a significant modernist who has since been overlooked.167 Her radical departure
from syntactical orthodoxy means that it is hard to edit her unpublished writing, and much
of it was unattainable before 1985. Ellen Stauder likens Mina Loy to Constantin Brancusi in
that her originality poses 'a dilemma of placement on the cultural map', although unlike
Brancusi, Loy 'was associated with nearly all of the significant art or literary movements of
the modernist period'; whereas Brancusi has become surrounded by a body of scholarship,
'Loy's visibility on the cultural horizon has been eclipsed... Loy's poetry has been out of
print for a number of years, she is almost never anthologised and is rarely mentioned in
histories of modernism.168

Mina Loy can justly be claimed as 'a pioneer of international modernism.'169 Her
influence on her contemporaries can be gauged by the number of memoirs in which she
features. In addition to critical essays, stories and plays, she published two books of poems
in her lifetime, Lunar Baedeker (1923) and Lunar Baedeker and Time-Tables (1958), but her
poems were printed in The Dial, The Little Review and other experimental journals.170 Her
work initially appeared in Camera Work and Trend in 1914 and she was instrumental in the
Others promoted her 'Love Songs to Joannes' which 'were much talked about in New York
avant-garde circles.'171 The promotional reviews of Others by Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot
helped draw attention to her poetry in Britain. Her involvement in the development of
experimental poetry will have indirectly influenced poets in Britain, particularly those who
met her in Paris or New York. Her writing was available in Sylvia Beach's bookshop in

166 Margaret Dickie, 'Recovering the Repression in Stein's erotic poetry.' Dickie and Trvisano 3–25.
167 Virginia M. Kouidis, Mina Loy: American Modernist Poet (Louisiana State University Press and
published work and notes that many poems, plays and prose remain unpublished in the Collection of
American Literature at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.
168 Ellen Keck Stauder, 'On Mina Loy.' Modernism/modernity 4. 3 (The John Hopkins University Press,
1997): 141.
171 Hanscombe and Smyers 114.
Paris which was visited by Anna Wickham and Edith Sitwell. Her verse portrait 'Nancy Cunard' registers a degree of acquaintance and admiration, on Loy's part, at least.172

Mina Loy is fittingly described here as 'Anglo-American'. She was born in London but was never published in England. Alex Goody claims her as 'exceptionally, an English modernist poet and as one of the very few inhabitants of this empty edifice, she should be championed in the country of her birth'.173 Goody acknowledges, however, that the alienation suggested in Loy's long poem 'Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose' needs to be understood in the context of the cultural duality experienced by emigrants; it also stemmed from being the daughter of a Jewish immigrant father and a bourgeois English mother. According to Roger Conover, Loy was not adopted by America,174 yet she took American citizenship and was called a 'young American' in *Poetry*.175 In her article 'Modern Poetry' (1925), Mina Loy identified herself as American because she was self-consciously avant-garde in her manipulation of language and poetic conventions:

> The new poetry of the English language has proceeded out of America. . . . It was inevitable that the renaissance of poetry should proceed out of America, where latterly a thousand languages have been born, and each one, for the purposes of communication at least, English—English enriched and variegated with the grammatical structure and voice-inflection of many races, in novel alloy with the fundamental time-is-money idiom of the United States, discovered by the newspaper cartoonists.

> . . . The composite language is a very living language, it grows as you speak. For the true American appears to be ashamed to say anything in the way it has been said before.176

Virginia M. Kouidis gives three justifications for labelling Mina Loy an 'American Modernist Poet' in the subtitle of her critical biography: first, Loy's experiments drew upon French influences and implicitly rejected the subjects and structures of English poetry in the mode of her American contemporaries; secondly, her *logopoeia*, Pound's term for Loy's verbal play in his review of her poems when they first appeared in *Others*, connected her with other American experimentalists, Marianne Moore, T. S. Eliot, William Carlos Williams, Gertrude Stein and Wallace Stevens. Thirdly, Kouidis observes that like other

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American writers, she translated the techniques and structures of modern European visual art, especially Futurism and Cubism, into poetry. However, British women—Edith Sitwell and Nancy Cunard—also experimented with the effects of contemporary art. While classifying Mina Loy as an Anglo-American here, the three aspects of Loy’s work identified by Virginia Kouidis are useful avenues for situating her in the avant-garde: the anti-traditional versification, her ‘logopoeia’ and the influence of visual art.

Mina Loy wanted to revolutionise the versification of the English tradition. In July 1915, she remarked, “I don’t believe the men in England have got any of the new consciousness about things that is beginning to formulate in some of us—they cannot evaluate a reaction to any stimulus except through juggling with standard poetical phrases—if only they would realise that art always begins with a man’s being quite simply honest with himself.” Loy would have been brought up on British literature and her first husband was the English painter Stephen Haweis whom she met in Paris in 1903. They shared a common concern to revolutionise art. In Paris they knew writers like Guillaume Apollinaire and Gertrude Stein. They divorced in 1917 and she married an American, Arthur Cravan, in 1918. She was devastated when he disappeared to avoid military service and was later reported dead in a Mexican desert. ‘The Widow’s Jazz’ is an elegy to his memory. As she outlined in ‘Modern Poetry’, Loy equated the new poetry with the new music:

This unexpectedly realized valuation of American jazz and American poetry is endorsed by two publics; the one universal the other infinitesimal in comparison.

And why has the collective spirit of the modern world, of which both are the reflection, recognized itself unanimously in the new music of unparalleled instruments, and so rarely in the new poetry of unprecedented verse? It is because the sound of music capturing our involuntary attention is so easy to get in touch with, while the silent sound of poetry requires our voluntary attention to obliterate the cold barrier of print with the whole “intelligence of our senses.”

In ‘The Widow’s Jazz’, Loy can be seen to use the rhythms of jazz to overcome ‘the cold barrier of print’—‘White man quit his actin’ wise/colored folk hab de moon in dere eyes’. Loy first read the poem at Natalie Barney’s salon on 6 May 1927, but it was not published until 1931, in the New York magazine *Pagany: a native Quarterly*. By revising familiar systems of meaning, Mina Loy believed that the individual would gain a greater grasp of reality which consisted of full self-awareness. The influence of the French philosopher Henri Bergson can be seen most directly in her doctrinaire

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177 Mina Loy, Kouidis 108.
180 Pagany: a native Quarterly, which ran from 1930–1933, was supported by William Carlos Williams. For a lengthy discussion of the magazine and the poem, see Conover’s editorial note in Loy 1997. 203–4.
'Aphorisms of Futurism', fifty one prescriptions for self-liberation. The agenda of the doctrine is to achieve full consciousness by escaping from the psychic restraints of tradition and convention which forge 'the mechanical re-actions of the subconsciousness, that rubbish heap of race-tradition'. The characters in Loy's poems are frequently able to envisage self-fulfilment but rarely achieve it. The three poem sequence 'Italian Pictures' (1914) depict Italians leading difficult lives but their vitality is a foil to the staidness of the British. In the first poem, 'July in Vallombrosa', an elderly invalid Englishwoman and her attentive daughter are perceived as wasting their lives in contrast to the more carefree Italian women:

I cannot imagine anything
less disputably respectable
Than prolonged invalidism in Italy
At the beck
Of a British practitioner

While round the hotel
Wanton Italian matrons
Discuss the better business of bed-linen
To regular puncture of needles

According to Bergson, humans need a moment of self-comprehension to save them from wasting their lives. In Loy's 'Parturition', childbirth is this moment of self-awareness for the female subject. The lines 'For consciousness in crises races/through the subliminal deposits of evolutionary processes' correspond to the urgency of 'Aphorisms of Futurism' where she announced, 'TODAY is the crisis in consciousness'.

Like other modernists, particularly T. S. Eliot and Edith Sitwell, Loy was influenced by Baudelaire in her belief that the artist had a prophetic role. 'Apology of Genius' represents poets as isolated by their vocation: 'Ostracised as we are with God/The watchers of the civilised wastes'. In 'O Hell', she implies that the poet's function is to release the common mind into further enlightenment: 'Our person is a covered entrance to infinity/Choked with the tatters of tradition'. The poem was first published in Contact 1, December 1920, which was edited by Robert McAlmon and William Carlos Williams. Conover notes that this marked the third time that 'Mina Loy's work had appeared in the

inaugural issue of an American magazine dedicated to experimental writing.’ The other two
were *Rogue* and *Others*.  

The second way in which Mina Loy exemplifies the avant-garde is her aim of reflecting the movements of consciousness. This is what Pound termed, ‘*logopoeia* or poetry that is akin to nothing but language, which is a dance of intelligence among words and ideas and modifications of ideas and characters.’ He applied the term to Loy and Moore and asserted that their poetry was a ‘distinctly national product’. Pound’s review was taken up by T. S. Eliot in his review of the same *Others* anthology in *The Egoist*, May 1918. Loy’s tribute, ‘Joyce’s Ulysses’ registers the major publishing event of modernism and exemplifies the ‘dance of intelligence among words’:

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The loquent consciousness
of living things
pours in torrential languages

with Ireland’s wings
flap pandemoniums
of Olympian prose
and satirize
the imperial Rose
of Gaelic perfumes
—England
the sadistic mother
embraces Erin—

Master
of meteoric idiom
present!
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Typically, image and sound tend to replace metre and rhyme as the controlling devices of the poem. She closely followed the events surrounding the censorship of *Ulysses* in Britain and America and its publication by Sylvia Beach’s Bookshop in Paris in 1922. Loy met Joyce in Paris and the poem appeared in *Vanity Fair*, April 1922.

Loy’s critical essay on Gertrude Stein indicates her understanding of the *logopoeia* which she applied to her own poetry: Loy made the case that by involving readers in

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interpretation and by destabilising high cultural norms, modernism worked on democratic principles: 'through cubism the newspaper has assumed an aesthetic quality, through Cézanne a plate has become more than something to put an apple upon, Brancusi has given an evangelistic import to eggs, and Gertrude Stein has given us the Word, in and for itself.'189 Her admiration for Stein is also evident in her pre-publication review of The Making of Americans for Transatlantic Review, 1924,190 and in her verse portrait 'Gertrude Stein':

Curie
of the laboratory
of vocabulary
she crushed
the tonnage
of consciousness
congealed to phrases
to extract
a radium of the word191

Like Gertrude Stein, Loy dismantles familiar signifying processes to involve the reader in new ones. As Virginia Kouidis notes, 'Stein violated traditional syntax and employed repetition to record the subtle alteration, from moment to moment, in the object observed and the consciousness observing it.'192

The third reason for counting Loy among the avant-garde is her experimentation with the textual correspondences to modern European ideas and visual art, namely Futurism and Cubism. In 1899, she studied art in Munich and then moved to Paris where she observed that everyone admired the Impressionists. In 1903 she went to Florence and then to New York. In Florence she met the Futurists, Carlo Carrà, Filippo Marinetti and Giovanni Papini. It is believed that she had affairs with Marinetti and Papini, but she was not in sympathy with the Futurists' promotion of the machine age and the 'hygiene of war', although she was influenced by their aesthetic principles and the freedom of abstract artistic practice.193 Poems like the sequence 'Italian Pictures' explicitly drew upon painterly
techniques and their kinetic dimension appropriates the Futurist goal of representing movement and energy rather than the fixed object of a representational painting. This enabled her to combine the main techniques of Futurism with the philosophy of Bergson who advocated that a poem should be an uninterrupted sequence of images. In this way, the interpretative distance between reader and text is reduced. The uninterrupted series of images is achieved in 'Mexican Desert', first published in The Dial, June 1921:

The belching ghost-wail of the locomotive
trailing her rattling wooden tail
into the jazz-band sunset. . . .

The mountains in a row
set pinnacles of ferocious isolation
under the alien hot heaven

Vegetable cripples of drought
thrust up the parching appeal
cracking open the earth
stump-fingered cacti
and hunch-back palm trees
belaboured the cinders of twilight.194

The equivalent effect to visual portraits is achieved through juxtapositions, compounds, frequent verbs and the associational progression of images. According to Conover, 'Mexican Desert', was a 'collaged recollection of Mina Loy's traverse of the parched Mexican desert in 1918 with her second husband, Arthur Cravan (né Fabian Avenerius Lloyd, 1887—?).'195

Marinetti's literary theories were influential on Loy's experiments with figuring motion. In the 'Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature' (1913) he advocated radical departures from conventional literary form and image, such as 'One must destroy syntax and scatter one's nouns at random', 'abolish the adjective', 'abolish the adverb' and 'Every noun should have its double: that is, the noun should be followed, with no conjunction, by the noun to which it is related by analogy.'196 These techniques can be detected early on,
such as in ‘At the Door of the House’, first published in the second Others anthology. It represents the prevalent imagery of eyes and houses in Loy’s work. Houses are often signs of the female body and they symbolise the ambivalent containment and availability of women’s sexuality.

Loy’s alignment with Gertrude Stein and the woman-centredness of her poems demonstrate that she was clearly interested in the constructions of identity. Oppression is represented in psycho-sexual rather than socio-economic terms; for example, in ‘Magasins du Louvre’ (1915), the third of a three poem sequence, ‘Moments in Paris’, the glass-eyed dolls are symbols of female blindness. Whether the responsibility for blindness is theirs or not is ambiguous. In her polemical ‘Feminist Manifesto’, Mina Loy stated that women had the capacity to change themselves: ‘Leave off looking to men to find out what you are not—seek within yourselves to find out what you are’. Women needed to free themselves from dependence by destroying in themselves the desire to be loved, by overcoming ‘the feeling that it is a personal insult when a man transfers his attentions from her to another woman’ and by defying the superstition that sex is impure. The manifesto makes feminist readings of poems like ‘The Effectual Marriage’ problematic, although the poem endorses Loy’s constant concern for mental freedom through self-awareness rather than through social change. To this end, the disruption of familiar language conventions was crucial.

Ezra Pound picked out ‘The Effectual Marriage’ (1915) as one of the most memorable poems of the period. In his enthusiastic interference, he reduced it to one fifth of its original length and reprinted it as ‘Ineffectual Marriage’ in two anthologies—thereby erasing the title’s irony. The characters Gina and Miovanni are clearly inversions of Mina Loy and Giovanni Papini:

In the evening they looked out of their two windows
Miovanni out of his library window
Gina from the kitchen window
From among his pots and pans
Where he so kindly kept her
Where she so wisely busied herself
Pots and Pans she cooked in them
All sorts of silalogues
Some say that happy women are immaterial

200 Conover, Loy 1997. 185.
So here we might dispense with her
Gina being a female
But she was more than that
Being an incipience a correlative
an instigation of the reaction of man
From the palpable to the transcendent
Mollescent irritant of his fantasy
Gina had her use Being useful

... What had Miovanni made of his ego
In his library
What had Gina wondered among the pots and pans
One never asked the other 201

Like Marianne Moore’s ‘Marriage’, the poem appears to be primarily about the oppression of women within a marriage, but it explores the effect of the social institution on both partners. Loy suffered a mental breakdown between 1914 and 1920, which is likely to have stemmed from the breakdown of her first marriage—her father was opposed to divorce but they did divorce in 1917—and the death of her second husband.

Loy’s thirty four part sequence ‘The Love Songs or Songs of Joannes’ is the most difficult to interpret and to position. ‘Joannes’ represents Giovanni Papini. It can be read as a satire on gender roles, or as a more tragic exploration of the failure of love and the violence and anger of sexual conflict:

We might have coupled
In the bed-ridden monopoly of a moment
Or broken flesh with one another
At the profane communion table
Where wine is swill’d on promiscuous lips

We might have given birth to a butterfly
With the daily news
Printed in blood on its wings

... Let us be very jealous
Very suspicious
Very conservative

Very cruel
Or we might make an end of the jostling of aspirations
Disorb inviolate egos

Where two or three are welded together
They shall become god

Oh that’s right
Keep away from me Please give me a push
Don’t let me understand you Don’t realise me
Or we might tumble together
Depersonalised
Identical
Into the terrific Nirvana
Me you— you— me

The injunctions concerning mutual sexual relations arguably pick up or contradict the principles of ‘Feminist Manifesto’ which urge women not to depend on man, to desire or be jealous of him.

Mina Loy was publicly identified as the emblematic ‘Modern woman’ by the New York Evening Sun, 13 February 1917. According to Conover, she operated in public via various masks which allowed her to try out different identities and roles:

Rather than allowing herself to be fixed by an identity, she interloped, using her various identities to transform the cultures and social milieus she inhabited. Feminist and Futurist, wife and lover, militant and pacifist, actress and model, Christian Scientist and nurse, she was the binarian’s nightmare. She wore femininity as a mask, sometimes to disguise what she often called her “Masculine side,” sometimes to draw the masculine to her side and sometimes to make her feminism less threatening. Loy wore mask upon mask; she was a poet of sophistication, in the word’s true sense. She knew something about constructing myth and she knew something about violating the rules of heterosexual discourse.

In exploring the construction and representation of female identity, Mina Loy connects to Marianne Moore and Djuna Barnes. She and Barnes were reputed beauties and were puzzling figures because they looked like ladies but were frank about sex in their writing and

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203 Kouidis 1.
art. Djuna Barnes’ fiction and poetry reached an international audience through *The Little Review* and other magazines, but received late attention as modernist texts. *The Book of Repulsive Women* (1915) and *Ladies Almanack* (1928) indicate her aversion to the social constructions of femininity.\(^{205}\) Like other avant-garde women, both Barnes and Loy prefigure the self-contained, closed linguistic discourses of postmodernism and draw attention to the violations and inadequacies of representation. They also portray women and social misfits on the margins of society. Loy was sympathetic to the Dada trend in twentieth-century art, ‘but Dada’s nihilist current runs counter to her essentially constructive quest,’\(^{206}\) and she aimed ‘to depict the strivings and disappointments of average or destitute humanity.’\(^{207}\) ‘Der Blind Junge’\(^{208}\) indicates her attempts to redeem ‘the bums’, by finding beauty in the seedy and mundane, and she dealt more with low life in her later poems.\(^{209}\) Although Mina Loy did not identify herself with one group, nor exclusively with women, her preoccupation with social inequality and female subjectivity, particularly in relation to sexuality and language, means that her poetry also contributes to the following category of female modernism.

Edith Sitwell, H.D., Amy Lowell, Marianne Moore, Laura Riding, Gertrude Stein, Mina Loy and Djuna Barnes were involved in establishing modernism as a movement which investigated or rejected conventional systems of signification. They seized the opportunities provided by the tenets of modernism—intellectuality, objectivity and impersonality—to escape gendered identity and it is significant that the ‘poetess’ label was rarely applied to them. They did not, however, merely seek refuge in male-associated forms and metres but were pioneers of defamiliarising experiments such as displacing traditional symbols or distorting conventional syntax. They avoided representation in favour of constructing the operations of consciousness. They are difficult to pin down in terms of party or gender politics, but their avoidance of gendered affiliation is usually the place to look for gendered awareness. They also challenged the idealisations of femininity constructed by literary tradition, myth and fairytale.

It is tempting to make connections and identify some kind of ‘movement’. This has been done to an extent in *Writing for their Lives* and *Women of the Left Bank* which emphasise the social communities of women, the lesbian relationships and personal friendships:

\(^{205}\) For example, *Nightwood* (1936) has been hailed as a representative modernist text. For more discussion of Barnes as a neglected modernist, see Mary Lynn Broe, ‘Djuna Barnes’, in Scott, *Gender of Modernism* 19–29.

\(^{206}\) Koudis 118.

\(^{207}\) Loy 1997, 116.

\(^{208}\) ‘Der Blind Junge’, Loy 1997, 83–4. First published in “1921–2” section of *Lost Lunar Baedeker*. It means ‘The Blind Youth’ in German, and was considered to be one of her best poems by Yvor Winters.

Unquestionably, then, women were present at the advent of modernism on both sides of the Atlantic—though not all interested in the same experimental forms or subjects, they were aware of one another’s projects. They offered formal and informal reviews, letters, and conversations that developed their sense of connections and strategies, turning encounters with the women of modernism into experience. Women’s writing and writing for women, belonged in their scheme of emerging modernism.210

Here, perhaps, Bonnie Kime Scott romanticises the extent of mutual support, although it clearly happened in pockets of the wide network of modernist intellectuals. Their independence make them difficult to manipulate into a movement, but there are stylistic connections between the imagist principles of H.D. and Amy Lowell or the subversions of genre by Marianne Moore, Laura Riding, Gertrude Stein and Amy Lowell. Edith Sitwell and Gertrude Stein experimented with ‘texture’, taking their material from modern art and music, as did Nancy Cunard and Mina Loy. Stein’s principles were influential on Mina Loy’s logopoeia and all poets aimed to awaken their readers to new levels of consciousness.

In preserving the label ‘avant-garde’, the intention has been to demonstrate that women were instrumental in modernism’s revolution of the word. At the same time, by separating women into two groups—‘Avant-garde’ and ‘Female’ Modernists—it emerges that the line between the so-called ‘expressive’ and ‘experimental’ is difficult to draw. The perception that formal experiment is more ideologically radical is altered by the female modernists where the content of their poetry is more radical than the form.

The category of ‘Female Modernist’ is constructed around poetry which is concerned with representation, particularly representation of women’s lives. The case for defining a distinctly female modernism—as one of several strains of modernist practice—is that high modernism has been gendered as male and has been defined by stylistic innovation without recognising the complex relationship between women poets and poetic formalism. Modernism’s anti-realist aesthetic was at odds with women’s attempts to find a public voice and record cultural changes, particularly concerning their new roles and rights. Their poems variously reflect their preoccupation with psychological freedom and free expression as much through a feminist perspective or social conscience as through radical experiment. Female modernists did not, however, hide under the cover of male-associated poetic conventions but challenged their associations of masculinity by identifying themselves as women and by appropriating the tradition to women’s agendas. In displacing literary symbols, reversing gender stereotypes or challenging depictions of idealised femininity, female modernists culminate the progress towards aesthetic freedom of the modern woman poet. Charlotte Mew and May Sinclair tended to juxtapose social conformity with independent will or sublimated desire while Edna St. Vincent Millay, Anna Wickham and Sylvia Townsend Warner voiced the psychological and sexual autonomy of the New Woman. Through interior monologue or dramatisations, all poets reflected contemporary debates about equality in marriage which accompanied the changes in legislation concerning women’s rights. As with other chapters, selection has been based upon evidence of the poets’ recognition in Britain. Consequently, Edna St. Vincent Millay is included but not other Americans, Dorothy Parker (1893-1967), Louise Bogan (1897-1970), Elinor Wylie (1885-1928) or Sara Teasdale (1884-1933).

One reason for the neglect of female modernists is that they defy classification as either ‘experimental’ or ‘traditional’ in the binary terms of modernist histories. Their dramatisations of women’s identities, gender relations and class differences negotiate with the impersonality of modernist principles and blur a clear-cut division between so-called sentimental rhetoric—the register which is expressive—and avant-garde or anti-realist poetry.

Investigation of the binary opposition of ‘conservatism’ versus ‘experimentalism’ is also a continuum in feminist criticism on the fiction between the wars. Jane Eldridge Miller

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1 Elinor Wylie’s books were registered in some literary papers in Britain and her poetry was admired by Edna St. Vincent Millay and Winifred Holtby.
argues that feminist recuperation has paid attention to the 'so-called experimentalists'—Jean Rhys, Virginia Woolf, May Sinclair, Dorothy Richardson—and less to the 'so-called realist writers.' These writers are arguably more political in drawing attention to women's experiences of repression and the possibilities for emancipation. Furthermore, attention to the non-experimental writers 'helps us detect other breaks with tradition, such as the treatment of lesbian sexuality and women's critiques of fascism and war.' As Celeste Schenck observes, 'Wickham's poems of class consciousness are a salutary addition to a modernist canon insufficiently concerned with the differentials of class and ethnicity'.

The anti-realist aesthetic, which was symptomatic of an intellectual loss of belief in an essential knowable self, competed with women's search for identity and struggles for equal representation. As Jane Marcus puts it, 'what is the relation of female modernism to the struggle for the vote?' Female modernists parodied or subverted conventional representations of femininity and gender roles, particularly in marriage. The characterisation in much of the poetry drew upon the vocabulary of psychoanalysis and connects with other modern literary practice and criticism which register the widespread reading of the new psychology among intellectuals. Sigmund Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) was translated into English in 1913 and Carl Jung published *The Theory of Psychoanalysis* in 1912, the *Psychology of the Unconscious* in 1916 and *Psychological Types* in 1923. In reviewing his fellow imagist, Amy Lowell, in *The Egoist*, Richard Aldington declared, 'we are now primarily interested in the poet's personality'. The poets in this category of female modernism create dreamstates, investigate female consciousness and represent the psychology of domestic or sexual conflict.

Unlike the avant-garde poets, female modernists acknowledge their gender and are more direct in exploring its social construction. Through the monologues and dialogues of various personae, usually women, they draw attention to the processes of representation. It is debatable whether they simply depict or subvert systems of oppression. For Gilbert and Gubar, such 'female female impersonation' intimates the necessary disjunction between everywoman's self and the self-presentation Western culture labels "feminine". Referring to the line "what a fine shroud!" from Dorothy Parker's poem 'The Satin Dress' (1926), however, they question whether these self-dramatisations are limiting or liberating for writers:

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3 Celeste Schenck, Scott 615.
4 Jane Marcus, Scott 533.
The dress of the female impersonator may free her into an exhilarating fictionality, yet it may also finally shroud her. For a poet, in particular, the artifice of "the feminine" threatened aesthetic reification even while it fostered creativity.7

Similarly, Luce Irigaray sees 'female female impersonation' as a consequence of women being 'exiled from themselves'.8 It is possible, however, to conclude that by dramatising these disjunctions, women gained control of them and were thus able to develop a specifically female creativity. It is significant that these women did not display symptoms of the female affiliation complex, either in their perception of their nineteenth-century predecessors or in their relationships with contemporary female writers. There is sometimes a restraint in the versification or projection of female desire in Mew’s and Sinclair’s poems, but the metrical versatility and confident play with identities by Millay, Wickham and Warner indicate psychological and artistic freedom.

Charlotte Mew

Charlotte Mew presents a challenge to historians of literary modernism because she was a significant figure in her day but her work is hard to classify. Reviews of the recent fictional biography, His Arms are Full of Broken Things, variously refer to Mew as ‘a largely forgotten Victorian writer’ and ‘an early modernist writer’.9 Claire Harman articulates the contradictory responses which are common when reading Mew’s ‘idiosyncratic oeuvre’: ‘truly out of step with its time. Much about the poetry is unstable; the syntax, the broken jerky rhymes, and nothing about it is genteel’.10 If Charlotte Mew’s poems are not ‘genteel’, how are they also ‘out of step’ with a poetry which was consciously breaking away from the genteel tradition? Gary Day and Gina Wisker identify two twentieth-century trends in her poetry: ‘[Mew’s work] can be read as an attempt to preserve the personal by rendering Georgian concerns with direct experience through modernist techniques’.11 There is, however, nothing Georgian about Mew’s concern with disturbed psychological conditions, particularly alienation. Even the so-called ‘Poems of the English Countryside’ in

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7 Gilbert and Gubar, Letters to the Front 61.
8 Gilbert and Gubar, Letters to the Front 39.
10 Claire Harman, Review of Charlotte Mew and Her Friends, by Penelope Fitzgerald. P.N. Review 44. 11. 6: 60–1.
her *Collected Poems* do not support the idyll of Englishness. 'In the Fields,' for example, is in the form of a hymn to nature but it represents a fragmented psyche. Significantly, Gwendolen Murphy included 'In the Fields' along with 'The Call' in *The Modern Poet* anthology (1938). In considering Charlotte Mew's significance in the context of modernism, however, there seems to be an uncertainty about whether she wrote a handful of good poems or whether a new critical vocabulary is required so that her whole *oeuvre* can be reassessed. As Celeste Schenck points out, the [American] feminist canon of modernist poets, Stein, H.D. and Loy, has tended to 'eclipse Mew's political analyses of femininity, prostitution and war'. It is not stylistically 'avant garde', but her experiments with free verse and the investigations of female psychology distinguish it from Victorian or Georgian writing. Charlotte Mew is a female modernist because she explores female desire and the interworking of social conventions, particularly marriage laws, and women's identity. Her encoded lesbian orientation is also common to female, as well as avant-garde, modernists.

Records of the contemporaneous reception do not help to find a critical vocabulary for Mew's work but they do endorse the fact that she crosses literary groups. Thomas Hardy's good opinion is used to add to her credentials: he called her 'far and away the best living woman poet who will be read when they [the others] are forgotten.' He wrote a favourable review of *The Farmer's Bride* in 1916 and copied out 'Fin de Fête' for himself. Her literary centre was the Poetry Bookshop where she helped Alida Monro. However, the fact that Edward Marsh rejected Harold Monro's suggestion that Mew be the token woman for the third and fourth books of *Georgian Poetry*, 1917 and 1918, in favour of Fredegonde Shove, can be taken as a sign of Mew's stylistic adventurousness. It is rumoured that Walter de la Mare advised Marsh against Mew because of her uneven metres. (De La Mare later revised his original opinion of her.) Her poems were printed in Harold Monro's *New Shilling Magazines* and various periodicals, including *The Egoist*, and anthologies of modern poetry. She appealed to avant-garde writers like Virginia Woolf, who famously called her 'the greatest living poetess', and Edith Sitwell. In *The Criterion*, Sitwell disassociated both herself and Mew from the abhorrent 'wallowing' of the stereotyped poetess, and in *Time and Tide*, she situated Mew in the higher echelons of literary practice.

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14 Sidney Cockerell, literary executor for Thomas Hardy, found 'Fin de Fête' copied out among Hardy's papers after his death in 1928.
15 Fitzgerald 194.
since only the few ‘who care anything for poets are reading her work . . . cheap and vulgar women poets write about “love” affairs and give women a bad name’.  

Charlotte Mew’s reputation was largely established by *The Farmer’s Bride* in 1916. The Poetry Bookshop printed one thousand copies, in spite of the wartime paper shortage and it was reviewed in *The Nation* when it was difficult to get properly reviewed unless you were writing from the trenches at that time. In 1919, *The Farmer’s Bride* was still selling steadily and in 1921, it was reprinted with new poems and simultaneously published with an American edition called *Saturday Market*. In America it caught the eye of Louis Untermeyer and at home it received favourable reviews by Edith Sitwell in *The Daily Herald*, *The Criterion* and *Time and Tide*. In 1924-5 were successful years and the new edition of *The Farmer’s Bride* continued to sell steadily; she met supporters like Robert Bridges, Siegfried Sassoon and Louis Untermeyer, and her reputation spread. After Mew’s suicide in 1928, Sitwell paid tribute to her ‘spiritual integrity’, her hard work and suffering which drove her to her death, but noted, ‘She died and her work is still unrecognised . . . posthumous fame is a cold and grave thing.’ By ‘still unrecognised’ Sitwell presumably meant that her poetry had not been properly appreciated by the major literary papers.

In aiming to ‘pin down’ the nature of Mew’s poetry, the thematic arrangement of *Collected Poems* (1951) makes a largely unclassifiable range seem manageable, but it does not allow consideration of her stylistic evolution. There is a convincing case that she developed a stream-of-consciousness technique after meeting May Sinclair in 1913, although she constructed states of mind in her earlier poems. ‘The Farmer’ Bride’, ‘The Quiet House’, ‘In Nunhead Cemetery’, ‘Ken’, ‘Fame’, ‘Pécheresse’, ‘Beside the Bed’ and ‘The Sunlit House’, were all written about 1912/13, before she met Sinclair. Val Warner’s recent collection (1997) is more usefully chronological and includes prose selections. The disproportionate attention to ‘Madeleine in Church’ and ‘The Farmer’s Bride’, obscures the range of her subjects and her war poems such as ‘The Cenotaph’ and ‘May 1915’ (considered by Sitwell to show Mew ‘at her best’); these, as Celeste Schenck points out, are ‘pacifist hymns’, suitably ‘rhymed, metered, divided conventionally into stanzas’. It has to be remembered that the ambivalent attitude to victory in these war poems was daring at the time because of its refusal to collude with official propaganda which required women to celebrate male militarism.

Mew’s depiction of the dual impulses of restraint and emancipation are typical of women’s writing during the modern period. The tension between social conformity and personal liberty is supported through the combined adherence to, and departure from, conventional form and regular metre. Moreover, as Val Warner observes:

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19  Fitzgerald 160.
Her innovative modernist technique of rhyming free verse, probably derived from Matthew Arnold and others, and was closer to the iambic beat than her later work. Recent feminist or lesbian criticism, sometimes citing her use of repeated rhyme which chimed with her American champion Marianne Moore’s concerns, often places Mew outside “male-dominated” modernism, yet within this movement Mew innovated.22

Most striking is Mew’s experimentation with line lengths; their attendant enjambments allow for an associational progression of images or the representation of identity as a process, as in the opening lines of ‘On the Road to the Sea’:

We passed each other, turned and stopped for half an hour, then went our way,
I who make other women smile did not make you—
But no man can move mountains in a day
So this hard thing is yet to do.

But first I want your life:—before I die I want to see
The world that lies behind the strangeness of your eyes.23

May Sinclair was particularly bothered by Mew’s uneven line lengths and wanted them tidied up although she conceded that they worked when read aloud by Mew.24 Paradoxically, it is likely that Mew’s experiments with representing associational thought were influenced by Sinclair’s, although Val Warner suggests that Mew was more interested in moments of heightened response than the ‘chance detritus of the everyday’.25 One reason for the heightened response is probably the concealment of her love for women which is suggested in the above extract from ‘On the Road to the Sea’.

Charlotte Mew’s work is particularly rewarding for its inscriptions of female, and specifically lesbian, identity. Most readings are informed by Alida Monro’s Introduction to Collected Poems and Penelope Fitzgerald’s critical biography, Charlotte Mew and Her Friends.26 Recourse to biography is provoked by the dominance of the first person, apparently subjective, mode coupled with the elusiveness of the poems’ voices. Mew’s speakers are anonymous but usually identifiable as women. A woman is also the object of love in ostensibly male monologues, but these ‘male impersonations’ enabled Mew to

24 Fitzgerald 127.
26 Penelope Fitzgerald, Charlotte Mew and Her Friends. Speculation about Mew’s secret affair with Thomas Hardy (Parris 1997) remains hypothetical because there is little reliable biographical information on her.
express her repressed love for women. She was clearly successful because W. S. Blunt, missing the coded same-sex desire, questioned the 'sexual sincerity' in Mew's poems and recommended that women should not write from the man's point of view.\textsuperscript{27} Her dramatic monologues explore both female and male psyches, most successfully in poems like 'The Rambling Sailor' and 'The Farmer's Bride'.

Mew's dramatisations of freedom and dominance in human relations engaged with contemporary debates surrounding changing legislation. The Royal Commission on Divorce and Matrimonial Causes was approaching the end of its deliberations when 'The Farmer's Bride' was first published in the \textit{Nation} in 1912.\textsuperscript{28} The poem attracted correspondence over the farmer's lack of condemnation for his runaway bride:

\begin{quote}
"When us was wed she turned afraid
Of love and me and all things human;
Like the shut of a winter's day
Her smile went out, and 'twasn't a woman—
—More like a little frightened fay
One night, in the Fall, she runned away."
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
"Not near, not near!" her eyes beseech
When one of us comes within reach.
The women say that beasts at stall
Look round like children at her call
I've hardly heard her speak at all.
\end{quote}

Although not directly appealing for women's right to divorce, divided sympathies are evoked through the polyphonic narrative of the farmer, the bride and the women in the community. The collective mind of the rural community is constructed through 'the ventriloquistic experience with dialect' which may have been influenced by Thomas Hardy's work.\textsuperscript{29} The silent woman is a recurring image in Mew's work and often provides ambiguity. The common interpretation of the woman's hurried exit from her new husband is marital rape but if the bride is drawn to other women, her terror would be the confrontation of forbidden desire in the context of a binding heterosexual partnership. Characteristically, however, the poem is not a realist text but explores a psychological condition, shifting between perception and fantasy. Reviewing \textit{The Farmer's Bride} in \textit{The Egoist}, H.D.

\textsuperscript{27} William Blunt, Fitzgerald 170.
\textsuperscript{29} Celeste Schenck, Scott 316.
identified Mew's success with characterisation in lyrical form, 'Miss Mew has chosen one of the most difficult forms in the language — the dramatic lyric . . . [she has] succeeded like no others of the present generation, except Hueffer and Frost'.

'The Farmer's Bride' illustrates all that is odd and engaging about Charlotte Mew. The colloquial idiom and trite rhyme scheme have a surface simplicity, but a disturbing undertow of psychic dislocation evokes haunting intensity. The power of evocation was identified by Edith Sitwell—'an elliptical way of leaving out events, or certain explanations'. It is the urge to know what is unspoken by the *dramatis personae* which is haunting. In reassessing Mew, there is a more than usual shuffling between the human interest and the aesthetics of her poems. In 'The Quiet House' the first person voice and specific allusions to Mew's early experiences of early loss invite a reading of the poem in the security of autobiography:

When we were children old Nurse used to say,
   The house was like an auction or a fair
Until the lot of us were safe in bed.
It has been quiet as the countryside
Since Ted and Janey and then Mother died
And Tom crossed Father and was sent away.
After the lawsuit he could not hold up his head.
   Poor father, and he does not care
   For people here, or to go anywhere.

Biography explains the references to the children, their father and their nurse, Elizabeth Goodman. Three out of the seven Mew children died in childhood and Mew's father suffered a debilitating sense of social inferiority to his wife, the daughter of his erstwhile employer. Nurse Goodman was a source of security and companionship, but also of guilt and alienation; apparently, she instructed 'Lotti' to number her sins in confessional prayer based on severe doctrines of retribution. In the poem, unuttered grief and guilt are projected through distorting familiar images and conventional colour symbolism:

Red is the strangest pain to bear;

... A Rose can stab you across the street
   Deeper than any knife:
As the crimson haunts you everywhere—

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I think that my soul is red
Like the soul of a sword or a scarlet flower!
I am burned and stabbed half through,
And the pain is deadly sweet.

The depiction of pain as excruciating but delightful is a mark of Mew. At the end of ‘The Quiet House’, language peters out as the attempt to represent and reconstruct the self ends in failure:

Tonight I hear a bell again—
Outside it was the same mist of fine rain,
The lamps just lighted down the long dim street,
No-one for me—
I think myself I go to meet
I do not care; some day I shall not think; I shall not be

The absence of a full stop at the end is an effective pointer to ‘not being’ as the state to be both wished and feared. ‘The Quiet House’ was written in 1913 and was, in Mew’s words, ‘perhaps the most subjective to me of the lot’.32 On the other hand, Alison Light prefaces Forever England: Literature, Conservatism and Femininity Between the Wars with ‘The Quiet House’ as a representative interwar text which centres on the private life: ‘the place of private life and what it represented became the subject of new kinds of national and public interest and found new literary forms’. Typically, the strangling codes of propriety—‘family ties, respect for elders, the notion of womanly sacrifice, of home sweet home’—violate the individual. For Light, Charlotte Mew’s poem represents the fashioning of ‘a language for the collapse of late-Victorian idealism’ and her strategies, conscious or unconscious, are the ‘shifts between the lyrical and the vernacular, her fierce reversal of romantic imagery ("a Rose can stab you across the street").'33

Like ‘The Quiet House’, ‘Asylum Road’ and other asylum poems such as ‘Ken’34 become more harrowing if read in the context of Mew’s family but they also expose the treatment of the mentally ill. Her older brother Harry developed schizophrenia and her younger sister Freda had a mental breakdown and was sent to an asylum on the Isle of Wight. Charlotte and her sister Anne vowed not to have children for fear of passing on their mother’s hereditary tendency to mental illness which eventually killed her brother and

32 Charlotte Mew, Fitzgerald 88.
sister.35 ‘In Nunhead Cemetery’, which commemorates Harry’s burial, was picked out by Edith Sitwell for illustrating Mew’s success in avoiding sentimentality while producing emotive power since she could ‘hardly read [it] without tears’.36 Although stating that ‘[Charlotte Mew] did not help the progression of poetry in any way’, Sitwell found that she expressed the passions of love, of grief, of personal loss, ‘with such a bare force that we are filled with respect’.37 Interestingly, Sitwell set expression of the passions in opposition to the progression of poetry. The ‘asylum’ poems also explore the psychological condition of the outsider which is a common preoccupation in Mew’s poems, most notably the female prostitute and the female homosexual.

Mew’s female subjects are frequently alienated by social conventions which prescribe them a role which is at odds with their search for a self. The parodied formal intercourse in ‘Afternoon Tea’ depicts the rigidity of Edwardian etiquette and morality which Mew found unendurably stifling but impossible to discard:

“Please you, excuse me, good five o’clock people,
I’ve lost my last hatful of words,
And my heart’s in the wood up above the church steeple,
I’d rather have tea with the birds.”

The deliberate structural ironies of the forced rhyme and metrical regularity intimate the suppressed impulse to escape. Her simultaneous rejection and acceptance of the ‘laws of morality’ recur throughout her writing. In ‘At the Convent Gate’, the first of the ‘Early Poems’ in Collected Poems (1953), the dilemma between the free spirit and religious discipline is supported by the sonnet form. The formal structure aptly depicts the discipline of Holy Orders which is foreign to the individual will, indicated in the young girl’s interior monologue:

Why do you shrink away, and start and stare?
Life frowns to see you leaning at death’s gate—
Not back, but on. Ah! sweet, it is too late:
You cannot cast these kisses from your hair.

Although it is the first poem in the collection, Charlotte Mew did not depart radically from this mixture of the formal and conversational. Also, in mood and tone it is typical of her later poems which evoke a yearning for what is not there, whether God, a lover, or in the absence of these, death.

35 Charlotte’s brother Harry died in Peckham House lunatic asylum in 1901 and is buried in Nunhead Cemetery.
The yearning for an absent one is the subject of many poems. The speaker in ‘Pécheresse’, is one of several women who wait for their men to return from abroad. She has a one night affair then finds that the loveless nights are far more cold and hellish than her sense of guilt. In ‘On the Road to the Sea’, the urgency for the tangible torments the subject: ‘But I want your life before mine bleeds away—/Here—not in heavenly hereafters—soon’.38 In ‘Madeleine in Church’, the speaker identifies more with the flawed and visible ‘plaster saint’ than with the blameless invisible Christ:

For, once, perhaps my little saint
Before he got his niche and crown,
Had one short stroll about the town;
It brings him closer, just that taint—
And anyone can wash the paint
Off our poor faces, his and mine!

‘Madeleine in Church’ was written during the years 1913-16, the period of Mew’s friendship with May Sinclair, when she was developing stream-of-consciousness in verse. For Celeste Schenck, ‘Madeleine in Church’ is ‘Mew’s best’ because it demonstrates her ‘formal variation’ which can shift between dreamlike incantation and conversational rhythms in regular metres.39 Angela Leighton counts ‘Madeleine in Church’ ‘one of the last of the fallen women poems in English’40 and, like ‘The Farmer’s Bride’, it indirectly registers the debates surrounding the new legislation for marriage and divorce:

Is that why I see Monty now? equal to any saint, poor boy, as good as gold,
But still, with just the proper trace
Of earthliness on his shining wedding face;
And then gone suddenly blank and old
The hateful day of the divorce:
Stuart got his, hands down, of course
Crowing like twenty cocks and grinning like a horse.41

The monologue also represents Mew’s fascination with the Magdalene figure which allegedly started when the family’s weekly sewing woman, Miss Bolt, lamented the fate of her niece who became a prostitute. It is likely that Charlotte Mew wrote about fallen women as a projection of her own struggle to marry a transgressive sexuality with an Anglo-

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39 Celeste Schenck, Scott 319.
40 Angela Leighton, Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992) 286.
Catholic church upbringing. Her inability to reconcile them accounts for what Val Warner calls 'a celebration of passion deeply felt, but always denied'.

The references to concealed lesbian desire are always ambiguous, but can be supported by Mew's masculine clothing and alleged fixation with women. At school, she adored her lesbian teacher Lucy Harrison, in whose home she boarded and read English Literature; Mew was devastated when Miss Harrison moved away for a new post and a stable relationship with a woman. Later, Mew became notoriously obsessed with her unrequited love for May Sinclair. In 'The Fête', female sexuality is typically both benign and threatening:

At first you scarcely saw her face,
You knew the maddening feet were there,
What called was that half-hidden, white unrest
To which now and then she pressed
Her finger-tips; but as she slackened pace
And turned and looked at you it grew quite bare:
There was not anything you did not dare:—
Like trumpeters the hours passed until the last day of the Fair.

Significantly, the unutterable acts of a love which did not have a name are registered in the space beyond the elliptical dash.

In 'Saturday Market', the woman's terrible secret is not named but is implicitly an abortion or miscarriage, the child which Mew would not have because of the congenital mental illness in her mother's family or because of her desire for women:

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

The freely associational progression in 'Saturday Market' is 'one of the most successful things Charlotte Mew ever wrote', according to Penelope Fitzgerald. She points to Mew's childhood habit of tossing her head when she had an adult short haircut as a symptom of her agonised preoccupation with what is absent. Similarly, Suzanne Raitt argues the significance of hair as the symbol for lack in several poems such as 'The Farmer's Bride' and 'The

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44 'Lesbian' was recorded as a medical term in German psychoanalysis in 1890. Its first use in literature was 1931. 'Sapphist' was used by Virginia Woolf in 1923. *OED*.
46 Fitzgerald 139.
Forest Road', which was written in 1914 when May Sinclair allegedly rejected Mew’s advances:

Oh! hidden eyes that plead in sleep
Against the lonely dark, if I could touch the fear
And leave it kissed away on quiet lids—
If I could hush these hands that are half-awake,
Groping for me in sleep I could go free

... See, dear, your hair—
I must unloose this hair that sleeps and dreams
About my face, and clings like the brown weed
To drowned delivered things, tossed by the tired sea
Back to the beaches. Oh! your hair!

Mew’s biographers agree that her love for women remained unresolved and is projected on to her representations of mental conflict. The potential for reading lesbian eroticism, in poetry like Mew’s, is one aspect of a distinctive female modernism: ‘Beyond her personal idiosyncratic voice, beyond her only occasional generic daring, is a surprisingly radical politics and an erotic choice unexpectedly rendered in formal voice’. Celeste Schenck aptly points out the unclassifiability of Mew’s oeuvre, but here overdoes the clear-cut opposition between radical content and conventional forms, since Mew’s versification has a range and is often adventurous with free verse rhythms and the displacement of conventional literary symbols. Charlotte Mew’s essay ‘The Poems of Emily Bronte’ indicate what she admired and was hoping to achieve in her own work—the way that ‘scenes and moods and thoughts are flashed upon our consciousness’ and a sense of colour, passion and imagination. She recognised that Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Christina Rossetti were the ‘most prominent women poets of the nineteenth century’, but their writing never surpassed Emily Bronte’s, ‘this lovesong of a woman who never loved’.

49 Celeste Schenck, Scott 317-8.
50 Charlotte Mew wrote an introductory essay to preface a new edition of Emily Bronte’s poems, but she was beaten to it. See ‘The Poems of Emily Bronte’ in Charlotte Mew: Collected Poems & Prose 363-5.
May Sinclair

Both Charlotte Mew and May [Mary Amelia] Sinclair were steeped in the Brontes but their probing of female repression and the shifting states of consciousness registers their twentieth-century context. They can be linked to their Victorian predecessors in their depictions of tragic women who are victims of social proprieties and male-domination, but they are distinctly modernist in their psychoanalytical treatment of repressed desire. May Sinclair was responsible for promoting the term 'stream-of-consciousness' in her review 'The Novels of Dorothy Richardson', and it is reasonable to identify a mutual influence between her and Mew in their experiments with associational narratives in verse. After Mew and Sinclair were introduced to one another by their mutual friend Catherine Amy Dawson Scott in 1913, Sinclair championed Mew's poems. Suzanne Raitt's discussion of the relationship between Charlotte Mew and May Sinclair could place them within Hanscombe's and Smyers' version of modernism in which female friendships were vital to female creativity, but they are not included in Writing for their Lives 1910-1940. Although well-known as a writer during her life, like Mew, Sinclair is not easy to classify and her poetry has not been easily available.

As Bonnie Kime Scott states, May Sinclair 'deserves to be much better known as a maker and connector of modernism. . . . [she] proved adept at practising and detecting in others' work the new formal and psychological aspects of modernism'. She was involved in three intersecting arenas of cultural change: women’s suffrage, the First World War and psychoanalysis. Her biographer, Theophilus Boll (1973), 'could not understand why she had been denied a place in the main procession of English novelists'. He connects May Sinclair with George Eliot in that they were similarly musical, respected by the intellectual leaders at the time and wrote literary criticism of the 'highest merit'. Like George Eliot, her talent as a poet was 'minor' to her gift with innovative prose, although Sinclair's first ambition was to be a poet. Like George Eliot, she did not have children and wrote about the woman's dilemma of being a dutiful daughter and a developing individual. However, Sinclair's novels, short stories and poems draw on twentieth-century psychology to explore the psychic distance between parents and children and between men and women. Boll mentions her poetry but does not seem sure how to evaluate it other than in biographical terms. Her early poems were published in 1880 and 1886 under the pseudonym 'Julian Sinclair' but, unlike George Eliot, she dropped her male disguise and identified with other women writers. She was friends with Alice Meynell, Rose Macaulay and Katherine Tynan.

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51 May Sinclair, 'The Novels of Dorothy Richardson', Egoist V. April 1918: 57–9.
52 A profile of May Sinclair by C.A. Dawson Scott was published in the Bookman Oct. 1920: 7.
According to Frances Gregg: ' [May Sinclair] knew her stuff, and was no sentimentalist. No woman is, of course, though the false, fair, sidling creatures ape that quality.' She belonged to the non militant Women Writers Suffrage League which published her pamphlet ‘Feminism’ in 1912, and supported the Women’s Suffrage Bill. She was one of the few women writers to sign the British authors’ declaration of loyalty to democratic ideals of government in The Dial.

Although associated with women’s suffrage, May Sinclair was respected by her male literary colleagues whom she knew through the Society of Authors. Her correspondents included T. S. Eliot, Thomas Hardy, Ezra Pound, H. G. Wells and Hugh Walpole. She was committed to syntactical innovation and wrote discerning reviews on progressive writing. She enjoyed the company of the imagist poets, Richard Aldington, H.D. and Ezra Pound, although she had some reservations about imagism. Nevertheless, she was interested in its novelties and wrote a studied defence of H.D. and imagism in The Egoist, and an essay, ‘The poems of H.D.’ was published in Fortnightly Review and The Dial. ‘Prufrock: and other observations, a Criticism’, which was published in The Little Review, December 1917, was a defence of Eliot’s ‘stark realism’. She introduced Ezra Pound to her literary acquaintances and helped to promote his writing. ‘The Reputation of Ezra Pound’, published in the English Review, April 1920, and North American Review, May 1920, was an important explanation of Pound’s refusal to be ‘a respecter of respectable persons’ for the sake of progress. The Divine Fire (1904), an imaginative fiction about the identity of a poet was widely read and reviewed. As her novels, stories and criticism were published in the United States and England, she became known as an advocate of modernist developments, particularly in the move towards ‘Reality’ as perception, as explained in her books on philosophy, Defence of Idealism (1917) and The New Idealism (1922). She also contributed to the institutionalisation of psychoanalysis in Britain.

May Sinclair concentrated on prose after 1900, but her poetry should be recognised on the maps of modernism. Some poems were printed in the journals and her free verse narrative The Dark Night was published in 1924. Her engagement with developments in modern poetry is reflected in her published articles, her Introduction to a book of vers libre by Jean de Bosschere (The Closed Door, 1917), and in reviews such as ‘The Poems of F. S. Flint’ and ‘The Poems of Richard Aldington’ in The English Review, 1921. These critical writings, particularly ‘Notes’ on H.D. and ‘On Imagism’ indicate her intentions of avoiding abstractions, imagery and symbolism in order to put nothing between the writer

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Jane Dowson

and the object. She is successful in ‘After the Retreat’, an uncollected poem printed in The Egoist in 1915. It records her experiences in Belgium during the First World War:

If I could only see again
The house we passed on the long Flemish road
That day
When the army went from Antwerp, through Bruges, to the sea;
The house with the slender door,
And the one thin row of shutters, grey as dust on the white wall.
It stood low and alone in the flat Flemish land.
And behind it the high slender trees were small under the sky.

Among Sinclair’s poetry and fiction published in The Little Review was ‘The Child’, a three part poem which depicts the search for identity in the developing child. It was also printed in The Egoist in 1917 and Part 1, ‘Visionary’ was in Thomas Moult’s magazine Voices in 1920. Through the child’s perspective it investigates the Romantic ideal of infant innocence:

I grin
With joy that isn’t utterly pure from sin;
And at last I say:
“Don’t you wish you were me,
To be able to see
God?”

The characteristic interior monologue indicates Sinclair’s interest in psychology, and the process of perception is the centre of interest. Part II, ‘Prison House’, depicts the same girl at seven years old and ‘Fright’ explores her unspoken desolation at her mother’s refusal to speak to her. It is difficult to formulate a critical response to ‘The Child’, because, like Mew’s ‘The Quiet House’, it shifts between realism and dreamstate. Its reconstruction of consciousness, however, is clearly influenced by Freud and Jung, with whose work Sinclair was occupied at the time of the poem’s composition. In August 1916, she started a book on sublimation and published ‘Symbolism and Sublimation’, a review of Jung’s Psychology of the Unconscious, for the Medical Press.

The book-length poem The Dark Night (1924) is a thirty-three part woman’s dramatic monologue and was published the year after May Sinclair gave a paper ‘Primary and Secondary Consciousness’ to her fellow members of the Aristotelian Society for the

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Systematic Study of Philosophy.⁶³ The ability to ‘get closer to reality,’ by which she meant to present the fragmentary consciousness ‘that life imposes on us’ and which she admired in Dorothy Richardson, is what she aimed for. *The Dark Night* drew admiration for its ambitious experiments with combining narrative and free verse. It was written during her period of declining health but brilliant creativity. Nine hundred copies were printed and it was also published in America. It was admired by E. A. Robinson, Harriet Monroe sent a letter of approval and T. S. Eliot wrote, ‘It seems to me a very remarkable thing to have accomplished, and perhaps, too, an important step in the transition of the novel into some other form, which I feel is an inestimable development already foreshadowed in some of your own work as well as in that of Joyce and a few others.’⁶⁴ It also reflects contemporary debates about the changing nature of marriage.

*The Dark Night* explores the fluctuations of desire and repression in a virtuous woman, Elizabeth, who falls in love with a poet, Victor Rendal, through reading his work:

He is Victor Rendal,
The poet,
And I am only Elizabeth.
It is wonderful
That I should have a secret that he knows,
And that I should read it there
In his poems. (iii)

They eventually meet, and he requites her fantasy but breaks off their engagement because he fears that marriage will confine him:

I saw myself caught and shut
In the beautiful cage.
And I know I could never get out.
I am not what you think of me,
A gentle thing, full of kindness and delicate thoughts,
I am a beast untamed that must go alone. (xv)

After a spell abroad he returns to marry Elizabeth. She finds herself left in charge of her cousin’s fifteen year old daughter, Monica, who moves in with them. Upon discovering her adolescent sexuality, Monica falls in love with Victor who succumbs to her flirtations. They

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⁶³ Boll 256.
⁶⁴ T. S. Eliot, Boll 144.
leave, have a baby and become destitute. They are rescued by Elizabeth who gives them her house and pays a servant to look after the child, although she is tortured by the sight of Monica with the child that she could not have:

We sat together,
He with the child in his arms,
And I with my arms empty,
And my heart aching. (xxix)

The tragic plot is likely to have been informed by Sinclair's reading of the three Bronte women. She published *The Life of Charlotte Bronte* in 1908 and *The Three Brontes* in 1912, and had read Elizabeth Gaskell's life of Charlotte Bronte several times. Charlotte Bronte apparently had a recurring dream of holding a child whose cries she could not stop; at the end of *The Dark Night*, Monica leaves Victor who returns to Elizabeth as a blind dependant, a reversal of power similar to Mr Rochester and Jane Eyre. Central to *The Dark Night*, however, is the philosophical investigation of such nineteenth-century narratives of female self-abnegation which are imitated in Elizabeth's unconditional love for Victor, for her difficult niece Monica and in her prayers to God. May Sinclair's interest in the psychological condition of faith may have stemmed from the influence of Miss Dorothea Beale, the Principal at Cheltenham Ladies College who aimed to instil Christian doctrine and a strong sense of duty into her pupils. For example, passages like 'So/Out of my Hell/ I have built up Heaven!' (xxix) are represented as narratives of psychic survival. They raise the question of whether such altruism is freely willed or wrongly schooled and whether renunciation is liberating or repressive. It is possible that the hero was modelled on Richard Aldington who may have been the unnamed person whom she alleged to have 'loved once but could not marry'. Whereas for Charlotte Mew unconsummated love was tormented, May Sinclair was apparently fulfilled by abstinence and intrigued by the psychic operation of sublimation.

The relationship between language, sublimation and the self is explored throughout *The Dark Night*. At the beginning, Elizabeth has no developed identity:

All my life long
I have hidden my real, secret self
In silence;
I was safe in silence,
Nothing could harm me there. (iv)

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66 Boll 120.
When Victor returns her love, however, she models herself according to his version of her:

I look at myself in the glass,
I turn this way and that,
To find out how I appear to him. (xiv)

The fictional ideal of love is presented as a construction of Elizabeth’s fantasy which is fed by reading Victor’s poetry. Idealised romance is also deflated by the distortion of romantic symbolism, such as the red rose. Monica is a sinister dark rose who represents all women who tempt a man:

Her beauty burns darkly like the splendour of a dark rose,
Half-folded, half-open;
She is enchanted with the image in the glass. (xxii)

The recurring symbolism achieves narrative coherence. Sinclair also developed structural coherence through the single consciousness so that the reader had no superior knowledge to the narrative voice; thus there was no other reality than the speaker’s perception. The lyrical passages, such as the hymn to love after the first reconciliation between Elizabeth and Victor, are juxtaposed with realism through dramatic monologue and dialogue. At one point, the relevance of marriage laws are tested:

“and I can’t ask you to love me outside the law?”

“No.
For the law was made for weak women and their children.”

“That is not true.
The law was made for the husband,
To protect them from bastards got by other men.” (xv)

*The Dark Night* should be considered in the chronicles of modernist writing for its dramatisation of contemporary debates about marriage and the nature of women and for its innovative representation of associational thought in free verse. It represents the ability to construct a state of mind which May Sinclair admired in T. S. Eliot: ‘His reality... may be

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Edna St. Vincent Millay

Edna St. Vincent Millay’s relevance to British poetry between the wars has not yet been explored, although it is clear that her name was well-known. Jan Montefiore’s dismissal, because ‘modernism passed her by’, reflects the disinterest of feminist criticism in Britain. In America, the Skidmore centenary conference (1992) registered the range of current approaches to her poetry which oscillate between the formalist and biographical. In ‘Anti-modern, Modern and Post-modern Edna St. Vincent Millay: Contexts of Revaluation’ (1996), Cheryl Walker investigates whether the renewed interest in Millay [in America] involves a refiguring of the literary canon or ‘has less to do with the “quality” of the poetry, that elusive essence, than with complex cultural factors that allow us to situate the poems in familiar and reusable contexts’:

There is no question that Edna St. Vincent Millay was considered the most important woman poet in America for many years... However, the strength of her critical reputation was destined to wane in the late thirties when academic criticism, heavily influenced by T. S. Eliot, came to dominate the literary scene.

Edna St. Vincent Millay does not fit literary modernism because she was conscientious about traditional literary form; she reputedly took a volume of Latin poetry, as well as her typewriter, with her everywhere. She also appealed to a broad constituency of readers who consumed news of her appearance and home. Her parodic impersonations of femininity were partly a reaction against women’s magazines which published features on her personal life; she turned the relentless feminisation to her advantage and adopted the pose of different women in her poems. In identifying her as a female modernist, the following analysis will look at the ways in which her ‘female impersonations’ draw attention to the social construction of female desire and feminine identity. Her subversions of romantic love in her sonnets or the elusiveness of her personae deliberately refute the masculinist idealisations of women.

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72 Walker 173.
The story of the rise and fall of Edna St. Vincent Millay is familiar in histories of women poets: during the 1920s and 1930s she had a brilliant career in terms of publishing, international reputation, awards and prizes, reading tours and radio broadcasts. After the immediate success of Renascence (1917), she published poetry books in 1920, 1921, 1923, 1928, 1931, 1934 and 1939; her Collected Poems came out in 1949 and was reprinted several times. The reception to The Harp Weaver and Other Poems (1923) helped her to become the first woman to receive the Pulitzer Prize. In addition to writing poetry, she translated Baudelaire, wrote verse drama and satirical journalism, sometimes under the pseudonym of 'Nancy Boyd'. She directed a play and acted; she was a correspondent in Europe for Vanity Fair from 1921 until 1923 when she married Eugen Boissevain. They travelled further before moving to New York City in 1925 and by 1926 she was allegedly a 'National Figure' with a wide and enthusiastic following. In 1933 she gave a series of poetry readings on national radio and was awarded honorary D.Litts. by the University of Wisconsin and Russell Sage College. After the 1940s she became remade as a 'poetess' and was dropped from histories of American poetry.74 In the second half of the twentieth century, her reputation has peaked and troughed, and although there are signs of revived interest with new editions of her Collected Poems in 1981, 1984 and 1988 and her Selected Poems in 1992, Edna St. Vincent Millay is virtually unrecognised in British literary canons or academic courses.

Colin Falck claims, 'The occulting of Millay's reputation has been one of the literary scandals of the twentieth century and it is time we found a proper place for this intense, thoughtful and magnificently literary poet.'75 He believes that Millay's skill in both old forms and the 'Whitmanian tradition of cadenced free verse', which have been perceived as her weakness, is her achievement. Millay was buried 'by the generation that needed to get modernism established', and which did not look beyond the appearance of tradition: 'her use of traditional forms is often deceptive; attention should be given to the interplay between the grand manner and the artless conversational'.76 In considering her interplay with traditional form and conversational voice, insufficient attention has been paid to the context in which poets like Millay had to construct a public identity. Millay's adherence to form, particularly the sonnet, and her attention to syllabic metres meant that for a long time she was rarely identified within modernist practices. Richard Eberhart includes Millay in 'very important poets' who have been entirely written out of the tradition—because of their refusal to embrace the central tenets of modernism'.77

73 Gilbert and Gubar, 'Female Female Impersonators: The Fictive Music of Edna St. Vincent Millay and Marianne Moore'. Gilbert and Gubar, Letters to the Front 57–120.
74 For examples of the omission of Millay from critical works, see Gilbert and Gubar, Letters to the Front 63–69.
76 Falck xxiv.
Several of Millay’s books were published simultaneously in New York and London and her poetry was clearly known to British writers and readers. Thomas Hardy said that ‘one of the two great things in America was the poetry of Edna St. Vincent Millay’,78 A. E. Housman, allegedly told an American reviewer, ‘I get more enjoyment from Edna St. Vincent Millay than from either Robinson or Frost’ and wrote to Sidney Cockerill in 1932, ‘some things of Edna St. Vincent Millay which I have seen make me think her the best living American poet.’79 In the literary papers, however, she was misrepresented as a sentimentalist. In *Time and Tide*, Thomas Moult mocked her bohemian image by referring to a ‘young American author who wrote a poem of most brilliant promise, “Renascence”, but since then she has travelled the world and learned in the Latin quarters of all the capitals what it is to be “artistic”’.80 In *The Criterion*, F. S. Flint said she ‘takes refuge in a landscape of convention’81 and the *TLS* review of *Poems*, was headed ‘Emotion and Sentiment’.82 The article did, however, indicate the extent of her reputation by referring to *Renascence* as ‘a volume which has passed through several editions, known itself to numerous English readers, and by report to many more.’

The early inability of reviewers to hold together the two faces of Millay, the lyrical love poet and the political commentator, reduced her to mythologies of the sentimental which clouded subsequent critical response. ‘The author of *Renascence*’ was John Crowe Ransom’s example of the emotionally excessive woman poet in his notorious article ‘Poet as Woman’ published in 1938. It represents the prejudice against women during the 1920s which continued into the 1930s. Ransom, apart from declaring that ‘Miss Millay is rarely and barely very intellectual, and I think everybody knows it,’ accused her of ‘the mechanical determinism of metrical necessity.’83 He distinguished the sonnets in ‘Fatal Interview’, her ‘mature work’, from ‘her little-girl things’ and recognised that he used a conventional symbol, ‘which I hope was not objectionable, when I phrased this lack of hers [intellectuality], deficiency in masculinity.’ His main criticism was directed at her formalism:

She is not a good conventional or formalist poet, and I think I have already suggested why: because she allows the forms to bother her and to push her into absurdities. I imagine there are few women poets of whom this is not so, and it

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83 John Crowe Ransom’s essay, ‘The Poet as Woman’ (1938) was a review of *Edna St. Vincent Millay and Her Times*, by Elizabeth Atkins (University of Chicago Press, 1936). The review was originally printed in *Southern Review* 2. Spring 1937: 784.
would be because they are not strict enough and expert enough to manage forms—in their default of the disciplines under which men are trained.\textsuperscript{84}

The article by Ransom and the reception to Millay's poetry exemplify the pressure upon women to prove their poetic muscles in manipulating metre and form.

Millay was not temperamentally conventional and positioned herself outside of the conservative literary establishment which she believed gave her prizes 'more for moral than aesthetic reasons'. In a long letter to Arthur Davison Ficke, she registered her view that Elinor Wylie had never received the Pulitzer Prize because 'she had left her husband and child and run off to Europe with a married man.' Similarly, she [Millay] had not been awarded it a second time because she had protested against the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti, 'suggesting that President Lowell of Harvard was withholding evidence which might have freed these men . . . with how much affection following this action of mine would an aged professor of Harvard look upon my subsequently published volumes? With how much affection would any aged and conservative governor of a New England state look thence forward upon the published works of a person who had agitated as I had done against the governor of a neighbouring New England state?'\textsuperscript{85} She also recorded her response to the murder trial of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti in 1927 in poetry.\textsuperscript{86} Millay was an active suffragist and her sonnet 'To Inez Milholland'—'Upon this marble bust that is not I'—was read on 18 November 1923, in Washington at the unveiling of a statue of three leaders in the cause of Equal Rights for Women.\textsuperscript{87} She was clearly aware of what Laura Riding called the 'declassing' of women poets; referring to Louise Bogan in a letter to Edmund Wilson, Millay observed, 'Isn't it wonderful how the lady poets are coming along?'\textsuperscript{88} Significantly, Louise Bogan wrote about unashamed female desire. In 1931, Millay wrote, 'I have noticed with considerable fun that many of the English women writers like 'Fatal Interview' and not so many of the men.'\textsuperscript{89} She was acquainted with Anna Wickham's poetry, which acknowledges female sexuality and investigates women's competing impulses for freedom and duty, and saw her when she was in Paris in 1922.\textsuperscript{90} Like Anna Wickham's, the ironic register of much of her poetry is that of the emancipated woman.


\textsuperscript{86} Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti were anarchists convicted of murder on slim evidence. There was a public outcry. They were given posthumous pardon in 1977.

\textsuperscript{87} 'To Inez Milholland', \textit{Collected Poems} (New York and London: Harper and Brothers, 1956) 627. Inez Milholland was the first wife of Millay's husband.


\textsuperscript{89} Millay, Letter to Eugene Saxton, 30 Dec. 1931. Macdougall 244.

\textsuperscript{90} Millay, Letter to Edmund Wilson, 20 July 1922. Macdougall 153–4.
Millay's strong public image and the assertiveness of her poetic voice indicate the progression from nineteenth-century self-denying poetesses to twentieth-century public woman poets. Many of her voices express the sexual assertiveness of the New Woman which her contemporary male critics found difficult to connect with the image of the poetess:

What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why,  
I have forgotten, and what arms have lain  
Under my head till morning.\(^{91}\)

The love lyrics are distinctively twentieth-century in projecting desire and not romance. In the famous epigrammatic 'My candle burns at both ends' or the parodic, 'Oh, oh, you will be sorry for that word', the flippancy is deliberately dissonant with fictionalised idealisations of women in love. In 'I being born a woman', Millay's depiction of female psychology is typically teasing:

I being born a woman and distressed  
By all the needs and notions of my kind,  
Am urged by your propinquity to find  
Your person fair, and feel a certain zest  
To bear your body's weight upon my breast.\(^{92}\)

The absence of a specific context, speaker or addressee make it difficult to identify her own subject position. The TLS review of The Buck in the Snow (1928), headed 'Modernism and Romance', recognised some element of 'impersonation' in its objection that the majority of poems 'display[ed] more emotion than she felt.'\(^{93}\) Reviewers did not have a critical terminology for Millay's exaggeration or reversal of literary stereotypes within conventional forms.

In some of her most assertive sonnets in The Harp Weaver and Other Poems (1923), Edna St. Vincent Millay appropriates the form to substitute women's sexual desires for courtly love:

Pity me not the waning of the moon,  
Nor that the ebbing tide goes out to sea,  
Nor that a man's desire is hushed so soon,  
And you no longer look with love on me.\(^{94}\)

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\(^{91}\) Millay, *SP* 1992. 56.  
Idealised romance is also deflated through mock romantic endings or the ironic treatment of fairytale, such as her upturning of the Bluebeard story:

This door you might not open, and you did;
So enter now, and see for what slight thing
You are betrayed. . . . Here is no treasure hid,
No cauldron, no clear crystal mirroring
The sought-for Truth, no heads of women slain
For greed like yours, no writings of distress.95

The heroism of the mythical king is turned into egocentricity here. Gilbert and Gubar interpret Millay’s preoccupation with the Bluebird story as a symptom of the anti-romantic imperatives which drove her subversions of conventional roles: ‘specifically from A Few Figs from Thistles onwards, Millay masquerades as a femme fatale in order to expose the artifice and absurdity of romance while recreating conventional love scenes as interviews fatal to male rather than female lovers’.96 She set forward the image of a woman having every right to sexual pleasure with no obligation to fidelity.97

Often by dramatic monologue, Millay exposes and rejects the stereotypes of femininity:

Oh, oh, you will be sorry for that word!
Give back my book and take my kiss instead.
Was it my enemy or my friend I heard,
“What a big book for such a little head!”
Come, I will show you now my newest hat,
And you may watch me purse my mouth and prink!
Oh, I shall love you still, and all of that.
I never again shall tell you what I think.
I shall be sweet and crafty, soft and sly;
You will not catch me reading any more;
I shall be called a wife to pattern by;
And some day when you knock and push the door,
Some sane day, not too bright and not too stormy,
I shall be gone, and you may whistle for me.98

96 Gilbert and Gubar, Letters to the Front 77–8.
98 Gilbert and Gubar, Letters to the Front 54.
In the context of debates about gender roles and equal rights in marriage, Millay’s representations of women being proactive in leaving a man were radically opposed to post-war injunctions of womanly duty.

The sonnet form is effective for reconstructing women’s divided impulses between liberation and containment:

Then cautiously she pushed the cellar door
And stepped into the kitchen—saw the track
Of muddy boots across the floor, . . .
The dream broke. Silent, she brought the mop,
And forced the trade-slip on the nail that held his razor strop.99

Here a woman envisions freedom but succumbs to duty. Repeatedly, the isolating condition is rooted in the ‘dull, familiar task’ which was barely endurable. ‘She let them leave their jellies at the door’, ends,

The rasp of a saw, the fussy cluck and bray
Of hens, the wheeze of a pump, she needs must hear;
She inescapably must endure to feel
Across her teeth the grinding of a backing wagon wheel.100

Through a series of characters, the poems explore the construction of identities, and frequently represent the psychological alienation of women in the contexts of domesticity and married love. In the sonnet ‘Tenderly, in those times’ there is a disconcerting disjunction between her situation and capacity to envisage freedom, in the depiction of a woman nursing her sick husband:

Tenderly, in those times, as though she fed
An ailing child—with sturdy propping up
Of its small, feverish body in the bed,
And steadying of its hands about the cup—
She gave her husband of her body’s strength,
Thinking of men, what helpless things they were,
Until he turned and fell asleep at length,
And stealthily stirred the night and spoke to her.
Familiar at such moments, like a friend,
Whistled far off the long, mysterious train,
And she could see in her mind’s vision plain

100 Millay, SP 1992. 63.
The magic World, where cities stood on end.
Remote from where she lay—and yet—between,
Save for something asleep beside her, only the window screen.¹⁰¹

The woman's internal conflict is projected through her differing perceptions of her husband, as a helpless child, a friend or 'something asleep'. Millay modernises the yearnings of Emily Dickinson's or Emily Bronte's women for an elusive liberty or lover through a contemporary idiom. The sympathy evoked for the trapped wife endorses women's goals of freedom. The recurring representation of aloneness is not sentimental but is often contextualised by the inability of the sexes to communicate or by death.

It is possible to read the formalism as either oppressing or as liberating Millay's imagination. Gilbert and Gubar believe that the sonnet operated as 'a kind of archaic costume in which the rebellious poet sometimes seriously, sometimes paradoxically attired herself to call attention to the antiquated garb of femininity'¹⁰² and Debra Fried identifies the suitability of the sonnet for women poets to explore the fictionalising of women through literature: 'For women writing poetry in the years between the wars, the... shaky fiction of new sexual freedom for women made the sonnet an apt form in which to scrutinise the inherited stances of men toward women and poets towards their muses.'¹⁰³ The ease of the colloquial idiom and the range of dramatisations suggest that Edna St. Vincent Millay was liberated in her parodies and contradictions of traditional stereotypes.

The ironic love lyrics in *A Few Figs from Thistles* (1920) are mainly sonnets but from *The Harp Weaver and Other Poems* (1923), Edna St. Vincent Millay was more experimental with form and voices. 'City Trees' has the verbal economy of imagism and she experimented with cadenced free verse, particularly in the 1930s. Others, like, 'Above these cares'¹⁰⁴ or 'Time, that renews the tissues of this frame',¹⁰⁵ a sonnet which reverses the dismal portrayal of ageing, are difficult to link to a modernist canon but would be a loss if cut from literary records simply for that reason. Suzanne Clark concludes her chapter on Millay by reiterating her importance to the literary history of the 1920s and 1930s and that her status will depend on the extent to which she is credited for negotiating well with what is perceived as masculine literary language:

> Edna St. Vincent Millay does not seem a likely candidate to be called a feminist writer. Does she offer any of the elements Teresa de Lauretis lists as essential to feminism: "a critical reading of culture, a political interpretation of the social text and of the social subject, and a rewriting of our culture's 'master narratives'? That may

depend on how we read her, and whether or not we take seriously her real power during the 1920s and 1930s to represent women's writing as a part of literary history. Her struggle provokes our awareness of the contradictory status of the woman author, whose authority, as de Lauretis emphasises, comes from a masculine literary language. Her status, then, depends not on any absolute literary value but on a criticism which extends its interest to the difference that gender makes in literature.\textsuperscript{106}

It is a paradox, as Clark points out, that Millay accrues an authority through her competence with the sonnet which has been associated with male poets. However, in appropriating the form, by writing sonnets \textit{as a woman}, the associations of literary conventions no longer remain exclusively male.

\section*{Anna Wickham}

Celeste Schenck links Charlotte Mew and Anna Wickham for writing the 'overtly feminist poetry that has escaped notice for its failure to adhere to the experimentalist demands of a masculinist modernism'.\textsuperscript{107} They were exact contemporaries, yet in her subversions of masculinist ideals of femininity, Anna Wickham is more similar to Edna St. Vincent Millay who saw 'a great deal' of her in Paris and thought many of her poems unpolished 'but some splendid, and all interesting'.\textsuperscript{108} She exemplifies the female modernist, however, in her investigation of the social construction of gender. Not only was her articulation of women's frustrations and desires, radical—why else would her husband lock her away on hearing that her poems were to be published?\textsuperscript{109}—but her experiments with assonance and half-rhyme were pioneering, and 'probably contributed to the high regard she gained, especially in the USA, in the years after the First World War'.\textsuperscript{110} She is more direct than Mew, Sinclair or Millay in addressing social inequality. Since there are frequent links between the situations of the poems and her own difficulties with combining marriage, motherhood and writing, it is possible that her female 'impersonations' are in fact not disjunctive to her sense of multiple identities. Although female identity is usually projected as unfulfilled, women in

\begin{thebibliography}{11}
  \bibitem{105} Millay, \textit{SP} 1992. 99.
  \bibitem{106} Clark 96.
  \bibitem{107} Schenck, in Scott, \textit{Gender of Modernism} 613.
  \bibitem{109} David Garnett relates the gruesome incident in 1915 when Anna Wickham put her hand through a glass door during a quarrel with her husband when he discovered that her poems were to be published by The Poetry Bookshop: he 'thought anything she wrote worthless and in any case had no intention of allowing his wife to be a poet: she was not to do it again. Anna exploded with rage and found herself certified as insane'. David Garnett, Introduction, \textit{Selected Poems}, by Anna Wickham (London: Chatto & Windus, 1971) 8.
\end{thebibliography}
her poems are oppressed by social laws rather than the essentialised feminine deficiency prescribed by Freud. Her poetry clearly registers the change from reproducing to challenging self-renunciation, which marks the modern from the nineteenth-century woman writer.

The publication of *The Writings of Anna Wickham* in 1984 brought her poetry out from obscurity. In spite of her overt gender politics, Anna Wickham's poetry has seldom figured in feminist studies of literary modernism. Although not included in the studies of modernist women by Benstock or Hanscombe and Smyers, Wickham was well known in Britain, Paris and the United States. British born, she grew up in Australia, returned to Britain in 1904 and married Patrick Hepburn in 1906. She held soirées at their home in London, with music, entertainment and lectures on women's suffrage. Her literary acquaintances included Nancy Cunard, the Poetry Bookshop crowd, such as the Monros and David Garnett, and the bohemian writers in London associated with D. H. Lawrence.111 She spent five months in Paris in 1922, during which she met Ezra Pound as well as Natalie Barney, Sylvia Beach, Robert MacAlmon, Edna St. Vincent Millay, and Djuna Barnes. Temporarily, she became part of the circle of women who lived on the Left Bank and Natalie Barney became her ‘emotional centre’ outside her family. Although there is no evidence of any sexual involvement, they maintained ‘a correspondence of passionate love letters’ which were also passionate discussions about the woman artist.112 Domestically, she felt a failure: she had a still born child and a miscarriage before her first son James was born; he was followed by three more children but her third son died of scarlet fever in 1921. She had a stormy marriage and when her husband died from a climbing accident in 1929, she was freed from the bonds of marriage but not of motherhood.

Anna Wickham's poetry is not formally traditional, but seems distant from the impersonality of modernist doctrines. Surprisingly, some poems were included in *Edwardian Poetry* (1937) and *Neo-Georgian Poetry* (1937) but they have nothing of the formal restraint or agreeableness associated with either of those groupings, but editors and literary critics did not know what to make of her. The reviewer of *The Little Old House* (1921) commented on her ‘lively rhythm and vigorous expression’ but undermined the poems as ‘flung-off stanzas’ and ‘sudden unrevised inspirations, sometimes even despising punctuation in her haste’.113 Yvor Winters’ review in *Poetry* in 1922, titled ‘A Woman with a Hammer’, accused her of generalities about men and women ‘which do not constitute

111 Anna Wickham was a good friend of Nancy Cunard and they were neighbours at Parliament Hill, London, for a while; she was also friends with Freda and D. H. Lawrence. Alida Monro was apparently jealous of her because Harold was in love with her, as was David Garnett. For these and other details I am grateful to George (her son) and Margaret (her daughter-in-law, wife of James) Hepburn whom I visited on 28 July 1997.

112 R. D. Smith, *Writings* 24. The letters are with George and Margaret Hepburn.

poetry’. He did not tune in to her ironies nor observe the rhythmic and metaphorical processes by which she constructed the mental hammering of mental conflict.

The poems from *The Man with a Hammer* (1916) are particularly preoccupied with transgressing literary conventions. ‘Examination’ is a rare but loosely structured sonnet and in ‘Return of Pleasure’ the writer identifies freedom with linguistic adventurousness:

I thought there was no pleasure in the world
Because of my fears.
Then I remembered life and all the words in my language.
And I had courage even to despise form.
I thought, “I have skill to make words dance,
To clap hands and to shake feet,
But I will put myself and everything I see, upon the page.
Why should I reject words because of their genealogy?
Or things because of their association?”

There is an implication that boundaries have been drawn around permissible subjects for art, particularly for a woman:

I will not draw only a house or a tree
I will draw very me;
Everything I think, everything I see!

I am the product of old Laws.

In ‘The Egoist’, first published in *The Contemplative Quarry* (1915), the speaker flaunts an irreverence for metrical regularity while making it clear that she can ‘master’ it in order to shore up her credentials as a poet:

Shall I write pretty poetry
Controlled by ordered sense in me
With an old choice of figure and of word,
So call my soul a nesting bird?

Of the dead poets can I make a synthesis,
And learn poetic form that in them is;

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115 Wickham, ‘Examination’, *Writings* 193.
116 Wickham, ‘Return of Pleasure’, *Writings* 194.
117 Wickham, ‘Resolution’, *Writings* 195.
But I will use the figure that is real
For me, the figure that I feel.

And now this matter of near perfect rhyme,
My clerk can list all language in his leisure time;
A faulty rhyme may be a well placed microtone,
And hold a perfect imperfection of its own.

A poet rediscovers all creation;
His instinct gives him beauty, which is sensed relation.
It was as fit for one man's thoughts to run in
iambics, as it is for me,
Who live not in the horse-age, but in the day of
aeroplanes, to write my rhythms free.118

Wickham's imagings of industry, aeroplanes and trains were obviously drawn from the modern environment. As R. D. Smith observes, 'Another of her characteristics, now so commonplace it needs an act of imagination to realise that she was considered to be pioneering, is her quickness to use images of industrial progress'.119 In addition, the association between free rhythm and the modern day 'of aeroplanes' is symptomatic of her intellectual connection between stylistic and psychological freedom. Her association of old techniques with tired thought recurs throughout her work—'How can I put the liquor of new days/In the old pipes of rhyme?'120 In 'The Egoist', above, she refers to her discovery of the 'imperfect rhyme' for holding together idealised happiness and humdrum quotidian experience. Matt Holland's discerning analysis in Poetry Review (1988) identifies her self-referential use of rhyme to convey predictability and flat routine, the stultifying effects of British conventionality.121 At other times, exaggerated rhyme signals that the socially prescribed calm surface of middle class respectability belies disturbing undercurrents of repressed impulses for freedom.

Anna Wickham's poems deal with women's identities and particularly the nature of the woman artist. These 'female impersonations' also dramatise her own psychological conflicts, frequently through monologue. The desire to be freed from gender when she creates is the subject of 'A Woman in Bed'; at times the poet seems to be overwhelmed by the hindrance of femaleness, but on good days, 'I can forget my skirt,/ I hide my breast

118 Wickham, 'The Egoist', Writings 173.
119 R. D. Smith; Writings 32.
120 Wickham, 'Formalist', Writings 195.
beneath a workman’s shirt./ And hunt the perfect phrase.’

‘The Fresh Start’ collects together her irresolvable tensions concerning the competing roles of wife, mother and artist:

O give me back my rigorous English Sunday
And my well-ordered house, with stockings washed on Monday.
Let the House-Lord, that kindly decorous fellow,
Leave happy for his Law at ten, with a well-furled umbrella.
Let my young ones observe my strict house rules,
Imbibing Tory principles at Tory schools.

Two years now I have sat beneath a curse
And in a fury pour out frenzied verse.

It is not clear whether the feminist sensibility here is mitigated by nostalgia for the old ideologies of clear-cut gender roles or merely impersonating this nostalgia. It follows the pattern of several poems where the female imagination envisages freedom but capitulates to socially prescribed duties:

When this hot blood is cooled by kindly Time
Controlled and schooled, I’ll come again to Rhyme.
Sure of my methods, morals and my gloves,
I’ll write chaste sonnets of imagined Loves.1 2 3

If there is a wish for clear gender roles, it is only because of the inability to reconcile her competing identities: ‘if any ask why there’s no great she-poet,/let him come live with me, and he will know it’. ‘New Eve’, a previously unpublished poem in Writings, articulates the impossibility of reconciling the ‘two sides of me’ — ‘Why was I born beneath two curses,/To bear children and to write verses?’

Anna Wickham never did win her battle over the conflicting priorities of home and writing and took her life believing that she had failed her family. She also believed that she had failed as a poet.

It is clear from poems like ‘Suppression’ — ‘If you deny her right to think,/If you deny her pride of ink’ — and ‘Woman and Artist’ — ‘There’s no excuse for expression from a woman/Unless she be representative human’ — (both undated) that writing was an act of freedom, as she recorded in Fragment of an Autobiography:

1 2 2 Wickham, ‘A Woman in Bed’, Writings 197.
1 2 3 Wickham, ‘The Fresh Start’, Writings 240.
1 2 4 Wickham, ‘New Eve’, Writings 324.
1 2 5 Wickham, ‘Suppression’, Writings 327.
1 2 6 Wickham, ‘Woman and Artist’, Writings 331.
The relief of writing will give me nervous and physical energy to continue with my task. I write also because I am a woman artist and the story of my failure should be known. I have a European reputation: my poetry is mentioned with honour in the Encyclopaedia Britannica: that should give me the right to live. I have very little newspaper reputation. I have always avoided it as a part of my phobia.\(^\text{127}\)

Confronting her supposed failure, Anna Wickham noted the lack of positive role models, ‘there have been few women poets of distinction’, and, significantly, the high suicide rate among her predecessors, which she increased by hanging herself in 1947.

Several of Anna Wickham’s poems have elements of what Jane Eldridge Miller identified in New Woman novels, ‘purpose’, and some are outspoken representations of a feminist consciousness. It is not difficult to realise that ‘freedom is the dominant theme in her work’\(^\text{128}\) but it is a troubled concept. ‘The Scapegoat’, ‘The Dilemma’ and ‘Envoi’, articulate the competing impulses for liberty and restraint. The strict parental régime of her childhood and severe Roman Catholic education instilled the habit of obedience and also provoked the rebellious urge against it. She felt an outsider in Australia and particularly in the convent where it was known that her father was anti-religious. R. D. Smith reads the frequent images of beating and whipping in terms of Anna Wickham’s violent treatment by her mother, which was caused by her father showing more sympathy with his daughter than with his difficult wife. In her Fragment of an Autobiography, she recorded that her mother’s jealous anger ‘was to be the most destructive agent in my life’.\(^\text{129}\) The uneasy relationship with her mother no doubt inhibited a wholehearted acceptance of radical feminism and accounts for Wickham’s ambiguous treatment of the sex war. Gender was also a complicated concept for her because her mother wanted her to be feminine and her father wanted her to be like a boy. In ‘The Angry Woman’ she connects to the other modern women poets who sought to avoid gender imperatives in her writing, ‘There is the sexless part of me that is my mind’.\(^\text{130}\) ‘The Angry Woman’ is a lengthy disclosure on gender differences and equality: ‘In many things are you and I apart/But there are regions where we coincide/Where law for one is a law for both.’ It also questions the value of marriage for women: ‘If sex is a criterion for power, and never strength,/What do we gain by union?’ Similarly, in ‘Definition’, she questions whether a wife’s identity is anything more than a mother and bed partner.\(^\text{131}\)

The complex psychology at work in domestic conflict is dramatised in ‘Marriage’ where civilised fighting is depicted as both love and war, inextricable and inevitable.

\(^{127}\) Wickham, Fragment of an Autobiography, Writings 52.

\(^{128}\) R. D. Smith, Writings 46.

\(^{129}\) Wickham, Fragment, Writings 105.


\(^{131}\) Wickham, ‘Definition’, Writings 201–2.
Fragment of an Autobiography, however, relates the unrelenting oppression in Anna Wickham's own marriage:

For twenty-nine years I have been attempting to order the house. For twenty-five years of my misery, it has been my passionate preoccupation. I began in the first year of my marriage with a sort of amiable unction. Three years after my marriage, my domestic happiness was in ruins... It was during my pregnancy that the shades of the prison house began to close in on me. My husband, Patrick Hepburn, from being my devoted lover seemed to become my enemy and my judge.\textsuperscript{132}

Although it is striking to discover the extent to which the poems operate in conjunction with the autobiography, they are not confessional. The coexistence of sympathy and antipathy, particularly towards men, seems rooted in Anna Wickham's own relationships. She broke off two engagements before marrying Patrick Hepburn. In the autobiography she vacillates between blaming him or blaming herself for their inability to get on. She states that her father ruined her life but also 'My father's love for me was a refuge from the passion of men of my own generation against which I always reacted.'\textsuperscript{133} She was, however, consistent in her resentment at giving up her promising singing career when she got married. 'The Silent Singer'\textsuperscript{134} represents the way in which her absorption in her husband's interests—photographing Romanesque churches and cathedrals—necessitated silencing her own identity: 'But from the wealth of living I have proved/I must be silent if I would be loved.'\textsuperscript{135} 'The Slighted Lady' is a lengthy exploration of the psychological fossilisation which happens to women when they surrender their minds to men. It has none of the buoyancy of other poems where a jaunty rhythm offsets the weight of the message:

There was a man who won a beautiful woman.
Not only was she lovely and shaped like a woman,
But she had a beautiful mind.
She understood everything the man said to her,
She listened and smiled,
And the man possessed her and grew in ecstasy,
And he talked while the woman listened and smiled.

The poem demonstrates Anna Wickham's skill as a storyteller and her predilection for reversing fairytale idealism. The narrator relates that the husband could see no further than his needs—'this woman is no goddess, but my wife;/ And no perfection, but the keeper of my house'—so that she succumbs to the relative ardour of a younger man:

\textsuperscript{132} Wickham, Fragment, Writings 51–2.
\textsuperscript{133} Wickham, Fragment, Writings 124–5
\textsuperscript{134} Wickham, 'The Silent Singer', Writings 285.
“My husband has not looked at me for many days—
He has forgot that flesh is warm,
And that the spirit hungers.
I have waited long within the house,
I freeze with dumbness and I go.”

Then she stept down from her high window
And walked with her young lover, singing to his lute.136

In the context of the emphasis on women’s duty as homemakers during and after the First World War, Wickham’s depictions of female infidelity and independence were bold. ‘Divorce’137 seems to have few if any precedents or contemporaries in its disrespect for marriage laws, although it connects to Charlotte Mew’s ‘The Farmer’s Bride’ and Edna St. Vincent Millay’s portraits of the autonomous woman lover. Even more shocking would have been ‘The Revolt of Wives’ which opposed the idea that childbearing was woman’s greatest gift, goal and pleasure:

Not for my very pleasure will I vex
My whole long life away in things of sex,
As in those good Victorian days
When teeming women lived in stays.

Show us the contract plain, that we may prove
If we are loved for children, or are loved for love.138

The coupled rhymes in tension with the colloquial voice support the investigation of the conflicting demands of individual choice and social propriety. Internal conflict between freedom and duty is similarly constructed in ‘The Wife’:

My brain dies
For want of exercise,
I dare not speak
For I am weak.

’Twere better for my man and me,

137 Wickham, ‘Divorce’, Writings 166.
If I were free,
Not to be done by, but to be.
But I am tied.\textsuperscript{139}

Wickham's hatred of routine and conformity recurs in both her poetry and prose. A prose piece, 'The Deficit', begins with characteristic mimicry, 'I know some dull people. They live in a dull house, in a dull street in Bloomsbury, which has not always been dull.'\textsuperscript{140} Irony is a favourite weapon against the mediocrity and social snobbery of the suburban middle classes, most memorably caricatured in 'Nervous Prostration':

I married a man of the Croydon class
When I was twenty two.
And I vex him, and he bores me
Till we don't know what to do!
It isn't good form in the Croydon class
To say you love your wife,
So I spend my days with the tradesmen's books
And pray for the end of life.\textsuperscript{141}

The jog-trot rhythm mimics the pedestrian routine, but the woman's death-wish is a disconcerting undertow. Wickham encountered the 'Croydon class' in the Hepburns:

While my husband's family, the Hepburns, were filling the great Croydon villa with their pride, their efficiency and their gold, my people were in Wimbledon, at war with all that villas stood for.\textsuperscript{142}

In 'Meditation at Kew', it is likely that she had in mind her husband's sister Ellen who became engaged to someone the Hepburns believed was socially beneath her. She encouraged the match, partly because Ellen was living with her in Paris and trying her patience:

Alas! for all the pretty women who marry dull men,
Go into the suburbs and never come out again,
Who lose their pretty faces and dim their pretty eyes,
Because no one has skill or courage to organise.\textsuperscript{143}

\textsuperscript{139} Wickham, 'The Wife', 'Definition', 'The Angry Woman', \textit{Writings} 199, 201, 202.
\textsuperscript{140} Wickham, 'The Deficit', \textit{Writings} 379.
\textsuperscript{141} Wickham, 'Nervous Prostration', \textit{Writings} 210.
\textsuperscript{142} Wickham, \textit{Fragment}, \textit{Writings} 53.
\textsuperscript{143} Wickham, 'Meditation at Kew', \textit{Writings} 45.
In his review of *The Contemplative Quarry* in *The Egoist*, Richard Aldington picked out this last line as an example of Anna Wickham's tendency to ruin a perfectly good poem with 'doggerel'. Apart from this weak phrase, however, he admired her manipulation of rhyme and conceded the logic of her argument:

[It is] the humorous protest of a sane woman observing the insane things which are excited from her sex by bourgeois rules. She manages to say bitter and satiric and true things with a good deal of humour (she runs the eighteenth-century trick of antithetical rhyme). Her misfortune is to be clear-sighted among the blind, vital among the insipid, natural among the affected, sane among the stupid. . . . You get the impression of a woman (you seldom get the impression of femininity from a woman's book) who is very interested in life and especially in her own life. She wants to know what the devil women are to do with their lives.144

The parenthetical observation, ' (you seldom get the impression of femininity from a woman's book)' supports the central thesis of this 'map' of modern women's poetry that the majority of women were writing in male disguises.

The satire of 'Meditation at Kew' and 'Nervous Prostration' typically has an acerbic edge in the depiction of routine and mediocrity as literally soul-destroying. *Fragment of an Autobiography* explains in detail why Anna Wickham's background fuelled her vehemence towards the oppression of social snobbery and conventional gender roles. The lectures at the back of *Writings* indicate her interest in social welfare and class warfare.145 Her portraits of poor women were motivated by sympathy for their doubly oppressed social position. 'The Town Dirge' is a dramatic lyric which approximates to a tract for the plight of the poor. It centres on the death of a child who was born into poverty:

In the house of our pity
The woman wept for her child.
But we, being wise, whispered apart,
"Seeing that the man is poor, and the woman sick,
It is well that the child is dead."

. . .
O you who are strong in the town,
Mighty to build, mighty to shield the weak,
Join with us that we may say,
Under God's grace, and of our good care,

145 Wickham, 'Notes for a Lecture', *Writings* 374-6.
No child shall die.146

The seven stanza narrative corresponds to an incident in Anna Wickham's lecture 'School for Mothers' (probably written 1909-1910), where she explained her welfare work and argued for greater respect for the families depicted in her poem:

The educated classes, the comfortable classes, are not keeping their ranks filled up: we are getting our population from the cottage and the tenement. It seems to me that God's poor are doing God's work. We have to look through the veil of dirt and ugliness in their houses, the rags and sometimes the unloveliness of neglected children, and see human souls, and do the best with our material. And we really have to decide that the material is not so bad after all.147

Another verse portrait, 'Laura Grey: died June 1914, in Jermyn Street', published in the Daily Herald, 16 June 1914, commemorated the suicide of a pregnant woman and questioned why society blamed her instead of asking, 'where was the man?'148 In the same lecture about the school for mothers she also crusaded for women like Laura Grey and her child who need not have died:

A man is thrown out of work through some change in trade, a fashion is altered, there is another strike, and his living is gone; there is no food for the mother and for the child. Now this is very unfair; and in a great rich town like London, and a town so full of clever people who can contrive, of women who are good housekeepers, it seems a very stupid, thriftless thing that pregnant women should be without food.149

According to Aldington, The Contemplative Quarry 'registers the revolt of the human sort of mind from the exasperating pretensions and limitations of English Middle Class life.'150 Similarly, in 'Tidiness and Order' orderliness is connected to the stifling of love. Wickham's association of love with freedom separates it from the sentimental.

Love is a common emblem in Anna Wickham's poetry, most often as the signifier of God, but never sentimental as in 'religious, patriotic and advertising rhetoric'.151 Wickham had a difficult relationship with religion, not so much Stevie Smith's 'running quarrel', but the over-sensitised conscience of an ex-convent girl. In refiguring God as female, she again seems to be ahead of her time: 'In nameless, shapeless God found I my rest,/ Though for

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146 Wickham, 'The Town Dirge', Writings 167-8.
147 Wickham, Lecture 'School for Mothers', Writings 372-3.
148 Wickham, 'Laura Grey', Writings 335.
149 Wickham, Lecture 'School for Mothers', Writings 372-3.
150 Aldington, 'New Poetry'.
151 Clark 5.
my solace I built God a breast.\textsuperscript{152} In her various depictions of spiritual search, there is a mixture of Christian doctrine and the new Freudian analysis of personality and motivation. 'Two Egotists'\textsuperscript{153} depicts a self-satisfied pedant who accuses the silent companion of not doing anything about the poor, the sick and the unemployed. 'The Individualist'\textsuperscript{154} is a lengthy and intriguing interrogation of a man's self-sufficiency and possessiveness towards his child. It is one of several discourses which recognise the social construction of male as well as female gender.

The dialectical treatment of gender relations and social conventions in Anna Wickham's poems set up mixed responses; the voices may be assertive, but they are rarely polemical. Her knowledge of theatre, ballet and the music hall are reflected in the dramatic qualities and the strong rhythms of her poetry. 'The Cherry Blossom Wand' (1915), for example, was meant to be sung and was very popular. Wickham manipulated the connection between rhyme, metre and the restraints of social conventions to produce a mix of form and formlessness. R. D. Smith makes the useful comparison between Wickham’s epigrammatic dramatisations and Stevie Smith's 'quirky, cheeky way with truthfulness', particularly in a poem like 'The Tigress'.\textsuperscript{155} Like Stevie Smith, Anna Wickham crosses conventional boundaries of genre and having to ask the question, 'is this poetry?' unsettles literary conventions.\textsuperscript{156} They both dramatise the subordination of women and the socially disadvantaged. Stevie Smith could be grouped with 'female modernists' but she did not publish until the end of the nineteen-thirties.\textsuperscript{157}

**Sylvia Townsend Warner (1893-1978)**

Anna Wickham, Charlotte Mew and Edna St. Vincent Millay explored female identity through appropriations of male-associated poetic forms which have usually objectified women and idealised femininity. Sylvia Townsend Warner also operated within the conventional poetic form and syntax with which she had been educated. Her poetry best unhinges the association between formal verse and political conservatism. She was the most formalist yet the most active in socialist and communist movements and rejected heterosexuality, for the lesbian partnership with Valentine Ackland, and therefore the marriage and motherhood expected of women. Jane Marcus endorses Celeste Schenck's case for 'elasticising' stylistic considerations in order to include writers like Warner:

\textsuperscript{152} Wickham, 'Inspiration', \textit{Writings} 169.
\textsuperscript{153} Wickham, 'Two Egotists', \textit{Writings} 299–301.
\textsuperscript{154} Wickham, 'The Individualist', \textit{Writings} 216–7.
\textsuperscript{155} Wickham, 'The Tigress', \textit{Writings} 38.
Revising modernism to include this poem [Opus 7 (1931)] unsettles definitions. . . . If we privilege lyric fragmented voices from this period, what to do with this other tradition, the daughters of Aurora Leigh? Townsend Warner wrote the verse novel as well as Tudor metrical conceits, the dark and dramatic Hardyesque as well as the committed communist ballad. Her multivoicedness and creation of character in dramatic soliloquy calls out for a critical extension of Bakhtin’s work on the novel to poetry. In the age of metropolitan modernism, Warner politicizes the pastoral. . . . she set all the forms at her disposal dancing to the tune of politics.158

Including Sylvia Townsend Warner’s poetry in the chronicles of modernism is not stretching the boundaries unduly. She published The Espalier in 1925 and Time Importuned in 1928; in October 1929, she recorded that she was writing a poem a day. Her poems were printed in literary journals and anthologies, and she contributed articles on contemporary literature to Time and Tide. She engaged with the issues of equality and the gendering of women’s writing raised by Virginia Woolf in A Room of One’s Own (1928). She joined the Communist Party in 1933 and there is evidence of her journey to Marxism during the 1920s.159 Her politics was rarely acknowledged in contemporary reviews which centred on her formalism. Time Importuned (1928) was given a long review in the TLS which complimented her stylistic versatility.160 In The Criterion, it received a favourable verdict from J. G. Fletcher, although he used the ‘poetess’ word: ‘Now that Miss Charlotte Mew is dead, I think Miss Warner should be proclaimed the best poetess in England.’161

‘Wish in Spring’ connects with poems by Anna Wickham and other women which were concerned with the right to write. Unusually, it is in free verse:

To-day I wish I were a tree,
And not myself,
Confronting spring with a new row of poems
Like cups and saucers on a shelf.

But as I am only a woman
And not a tree,
With piteous human care I have made this poem,
And set it now on the shelf with the rest to be.162

Warner self-consciously used homely images to register the competition between the woman's domestic role and her identity as a poet. Her gentle meditation on the barriers to women poets becomes more taut when informed by her diary entry of November, 1927, 'I want to read and write nothing but poetry'. Probably on account of its confident voice or political subject matter, much of her poetry was unpublished or uncollected.

Warner's poems written in the nineteen-twenties tend to be about country people and places, often in ballad or narrative verse form but she 'politicises the pastoral' as she does in her highly imaginative, socialist feminist novel *Lolly Willowes* (1926) and later in the narrative poem *Opus 7* (1931). Warner's interest in constructed gendering is represented through dramatisations, often of country women. An uncollected poem, 'Ornaments of Gold', is a dialogue between a mother and daughter about conventional femininity:

Mother, why do you hang in each hurt ear  
those bobbing rings of gold?  
To tweak men's glances thither from my face to behold.  
...  
And when I am woman grown, shall I dress like you?  
Yes, child, you may depend,  
Woman-kind shall go thus till our world's end.  

'The Rival' is ostensibly a light-hearted monologue by a farmer's wife about her husband's absorption in his work, but it depicts her sense of confinement and neglect which is typical of women's interwar writing:

The farmer's wife looked out of the dairy:  
She saw her husband in the yard;  
She said: "A woman's lot is hard,  
The chimney smokes, the churn's contrary."

She said:  
"I of all women am the most ill-starred.  
Five sons I've borne and seven daughters,  
And the last of them is on my knee.  
Finer children you could not see.  
Twelve times I've put my neck into the halter:  
You'd think

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Jane Dowson

So much might knit my husband's love to me."165

As a reviewer observed in *Time and Tide*, Warner's poems bridge nineteenth-century Romanticism and twentieth-century modernist innovation in their combination of pastoral and stream-of-consciousness: 'There is no doubt that Miss Warner is a poet, but there are epitaphs and ironic tragedies on the roads of Wessex and psychoanalysis'.166 It was similarly noted in the *TLS* that 'her verses present a collection of accidental images'. Like other female modernists, Warner's depiction of freedom refutes the self-renunciation to which nineteenth-century texts usually capitulated. 'The Absence' complements poems about restraint by reversing the romantic myths and depicting carefree independence: 'How happy I can be with my love away!'167 These poems fulfil her aim of evoking frames of mind with few images; instead, she uses conceits and intellectual stresses to construct poetry which was 'formally tight in thought and expression'.168

Sylvia Townsend Warner's lesbian love lyrics with Valentine Ackland fall strictly outside of this chronological framework. They will be briefly mentioned, however, because they can be added to the body of 'Sapphic' modernist poetry which contributes to a canon of lesbian writing. Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland were unusually confident in expressing their mutual desire and their love lyrics link with those by Vita Sackville-West, Amy Lowell, H.D., Gertrude Stein, Djuna Barnes and Charlotte Mew.

Warner and Ackland met in 1930 and lived together from 1932. Most of their poems were published in their combined collection, *Whether a Dove or a Seagull* (1934), in which they concealed the individual authorship of individual poems and the same-sex gendering of the love lyrics. The lesbian coding was missed or ignored by critics:

The poems arise from communings with Nature, with literature, with emotional lights and shades: there are songs and there are monologues, flashes of fancy and studies of circumstance. On the whole, country life, the georgic presence pervades the web finely woven of temperaments and sensibilities.169

This review in the *TLS* exemplifies the misrepresentation of women's poetry as belonging to the spheres of nature and emotion. In fact, Ackland's and Warner's are daring lyrics of lesbian desire. 'Drawing You, Heavy With Sleep' is by Warner: 'Staying your poppy head upon my shoulder,/ It was as though I pulled the glide/Of a full river to my side.' Ackland's poems are more overtly erotic:

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165 Warner, 'The Rival', *CP* 162.
Thus and by these ordered ways
I come at you—Hand deft and delicate
To trace the suavely laid and intricate
Route of your body's maze.¹⁷⁰

Warner's and Ackland's love poetry and political poems, including poems of the Spanish Civil War, have been discussed in the context of the 1930s when most of them were written.¹⁷¹

The 'female modernists' invalidate Freud's essentialised prescription for 'normal' femininity which involves envy for patriarchal traditions. They did not disguise themselves as men nor dissociate themselves from each other. Charlotte Mew and May Sinclair appropriated and recast conventional poetic forms, metres and symbols. Their alienation from the conventional roles for women was implicit in their exploration of the psychological tensions between self-renunciation and self-realisation. Edna St. Vincent Millay tended to write sonnets but speak in the voice of the autonomous woman. Anna Wickham equated stylistic with mental freedom. Sylvia Townsend Warner was the most rigorous in her prosody but the most unorthodox in her politics and sexuality. The new consciousness of women, which was effected by suffragism and the First World War, is represented in these diverse rejections of the social and literary representations of the feminine.

¹⁷⁰ Whether a Dove or a Seagull is out of print and difficult to obtain. 'Drawing You Heavy With Sleep', 'The Eyes of Body' and other poems are printed in Women's Poetry of the 1930s, ed. Dowson 1996.
¹⁷¹ For more discussion of Warner as a modernist, see Jane Marcus in Scott, Gender of Modernism 531-8.
8. Conclusion

As Margaret Dickie and Thomas Travisano point out in *Gendered Modernisms*, neglected women modernists collectively provide 'a compelling argument for the contingency of critical value and the instability of literary history'. In this thesis, the priority has been to restore the importance which women had at the time and to reassess their poetry which has often been overlooked or undermined. The process has involved placing the poets in relation to the literary contexts of modern and modernist movements. It has also involved revising the reductive terms of literary classification, particularly the binary opposition between 'tradition' and 'experiment' which maintains the hegemony of high modernism in literary histories of twentieth-century poetry. As Suzanne Clark puts it, 'modernism is both caught in and stabilised by a system of gendered binaries: male/female, serious/sentimental, critical/popular. Upsetting the system—as women do—introduces an instability and reveals the contradictions.'

In revising literary records, it cannot be claimed that women's war poetry was influential at the time, but it is important as a register of women's responses to war. Frances Cornford and Vita Sackville-West, however, had successful publishing histories and Sackville-West was potentially the first woman poet laureate. In Britain, the avant-garde was associated with the Sitwells, particularly Edith, and imagism was identified with H.D. and Amy Lowell. Laura Riding, with Robert Graves, articulated the debates surrounding 'modernist poetry'. American modernists were influential through the intellectual international network largely maintained by the little magazines. Apart from Edna St. Vincent Millay, the 'female modernists' had little recognition, presumably because of the woman-centred subject matter, the assertive voices and difficulty in classifying their work.

The process of reinstatement requires a refiguring of received histories from the vantage point of contemporary criticism. As Cheryl Walker points out in revaluing Edna St. Vincent Millay, current cultural theories provide the terminology to articulate new reading positions:

But what about the canon? Does the presence or absence of Edna St. Vincent Millay signal major differences in our understanding of who can be a part of the canon? Some years ago, let us say in Lionel Trilling's time, no modern women poets except for Marianne Moore were recognized as among the greats. Now a lot more women are taken seriously. Even more than Edna Millay, Gertrude Stein has come to seem...
an important literary (instead of simply cultural) figure. I would suggest, however, that Stein could not occupy this position were it nor for critical and cultural postmodernism and the popularity of gay and lesbian studies. It is not that we have suddenly come to see what was always valuable about her work. It is rather that, given our present literary values, we can make Stein into a representative figure.3

Contemporary feminist criticism provides ways of investigating the poems as women-centred texts and as indicating a specifically female aesthetic. It is, however, futile to seek for a wholly distinct female language because, as has been illustrated, women wished to be freed from the negative mythologies of the feminine poetess. Instead, they negotiated with male-associated forms, metres and symbols. In retrospect, these negotiations and appropriations also change the male-associated assumptions of literary conventions and groupings. As Kathleen Bell puts it, 'If Mew is accepted as a modernist, perceptions of Mew should change but so should the perception of modernism.'4 Clare Hanson goes further in her estimation of the relationship between women and modernism: 'One might suggest, for example, that the initial impetus from modernism came in fact from women writers, so that to talk of a female version of modernism—implying a secondary position for women—is misleading. One might suggest rather that modernism as we have been taught it is a male parasite on a body of experience and a way of seeing pioneered by women.'5 In orthodox modernist-centred literary histories, however, women’s poetry has been neglected or homogenised as ‘sentimental’ and thus irrelevant.

In order to provide an inclusive map of women’s poetry, it has been necessary to challenge the supremacy of high modernism but at the same time to identify the ways in which women adapted or subverted the literary conventions of the British poetic traditions. Several of them tended to use traditional versification, to prove their literary credentials, but others were stylistically experimental. As has been seen in the early chapters of this thesis, the connection between revolutionary forms and revolutionary ideologies supports a binary model of literary history which sidelines formally conventional work without considering the extent or context of the formalism. In positioning women in relation to modern and modernist movements, therefore, it has been particularly important to indicate the co-existence of traditional and innovative styles and also to blur the boundary between the two. The equation between radical form and potential anarchism originated in the reception to vers libre by a conservative literary establishment whose approval women needed to be taken seriously. As Suzanne Clark states, ‘In the Twenties, the question of whether to “make it

new” by writing in free verse and abandoning traditional forms did not simply involve women writers in a debate about new and old forms. The choice of form, convention, and style had consequences that were ideological and that propelled women writers into professional impasses at all levels of their work. She argues against conflating feminism with the avant-garde because the rhetoric of innovation can ‘camouflage regressive or nostalgic ideologies’—such as Ezra Pound’s for example. Conversely, more formal language can camouflage more radical ideologies.

In feminist criticism, however, there is a lingering tendency to privilege the experimentalists because poets who have not ostensibly fractured poetic forms have appeared chained by patriarchal literary tradition. In Women: a cultural review (1990), Wendy Mulford suggests that formal adventurousness is definable, preferable and the property of America: ‘Why the work produced by women writing in the British Isles should be less formally adventurous [than in America] is the subject of a book waiting to be written’. Although broadening the boundaries of modernism, Gilbert and Gubar explore the restraints of patriarchal literary conventions on female creativity in the work of Edna St. Vincent Millay, Marianne Moore, H.D. and prose writers. Gillian Hanscombe and Virginia Smyers confine modernism to experimentalism in their synthesis of a radical lifestyle and radical writing:

Like the well-known Bloomsbury Group, our more hidden network shared that feature of early twentieth-century Zeitgeist in which the radical chasm between life and art is breached, so that experimentalism and autobiography became inevitably enmeshed and the static drives impelling the transformation of literature also power the need to live anti-conventionally. The manifestation of the Zeitgeist particular to literary creation has become known as “modernism”.

If criticism equates feminist with avant-garde writing, non-experimental texts are assumed to support patriarchal structures; consequently, in the feminist project of recovery, the critic is often inclined to defend the perceived caution or conservatism in women's writing and at the same time to deny it. The emphasis on rupturing literary norms as the only means of breaking the sequence of male-dominated literary tradition is, nevertheless, only one strand of criticism. The other, headed by Bonnie Kime Scott, Celeste Schenck and Suzanne Clark, challenges language-centred interpretations of modernism, ‘favoured in the canonisation process from Ezra Pound to Julia Kristeva’, which ignores other breaks with

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6 Clark 75.
tradition.\textsuperscript{9} Suzanne Clark considers whether a poet like Millay betrays feminine discourse—
'since Millay practises no subversions against the linguistic forms of the fathers, she offers
no challenge against the phallocentrism embodied in these forms except by the small
incongruity of her girlish figure'—but suggests that in writing sonnets, Millay 'subverts
male modernism by appropriating conventional male poetics from a more classic past.'\textsuperscript{10}

In proposing to reclaim poems which cannot be described as technically avant-garde,
it has not been a case of claiming subversiveness where there is no conscious negotiation
with received linguistic codes, but proving that poetic form, \textit{per se}, is not the mark of either
traditionalism or modernism. The 'Female Modernists' in the final chapter particularly
demonstrate that women could write within traditions of poetry without being enslaved by
them. These poets experimented with metrical variation, free verse, irregular line lengths,
half-rhyme, new symbolism and colloquial idioms.

The arrangement of the chapters has been loosely chronological, although some
imagist poetry in chapter six was written earlier that the First World War poetry in chapter
three. The development of women poets has been presented more in terms of their stylistic
and psychological freedom. There is, however, no tidy or obviously discernible
progression. In 1915, Anna Wickham was more overtly feminist and stylistically versatile
than Frances Cornford in 1934. I have suggested that between 1910 and 1929 women
moved beyond the kind of poetry associated with the poetess of previous centuries and of
the verse published in women's magazines and the popular press. I have not, however,
intended to endorse the concept that nineteenth-century writers like Christina Rossetti and
Elizabeth Barrett Browning espoused the feminine ideal. Revisionary criticism of these poets
has unlocked their resistance to the tropes of feminised sentimentality. Instead, I have
suggested that early twentieth-century suffragism, the First World War and new legislation
concerning women's rights changed women's consciousness and provided them with
unprecedented opportunities. Women poets became a public presence for the first time.
Their publishing initiatives and literary criticism were part of their new autonomy which was
often threatening to a patriarchal literary establishment and perplexing to their male
colleagues. Individually, however, they often invited respect.

The stylistic freedom within conventional structures, which marked modernist
women from their Edwardian and nineteenth-century predecessors, can be further identified
during the 1930s. In particular, the work and public image of modernists like Marianne
Moore, H.D., Amy Lowell and Edith Sitwell, diminished the poetess stigma and reviewers
drew less upon the associated prejudices of feminine simplicity, conservatism and
domesticity. After 1928, when all women over twenty one had the vote, they had a new
equality of status but it inevitably met with male resistance. It was possible for women with
money to move in literary circles and they were still involved in the developments of poetry
through publishing and editing, as well as writing, poetry. However, neither conservative

\textsuperscript{9} Scott 86, 5.
critics like F. R. Leavis and T. S. Eliot nor the allegedly left-wing younger generation made it easy for them to gain good press as poets. As Anne Ridler recalled, ‘It was difficult for women poets to achieve publication in the 1930s and still more difficult ‘to be treated as a poet pure and simple, rather than as a woman poet’.\textsuperscript{11} As I have identified in \textit{Women's Poetry of the 1930s} (1996),\textsuperscript{12} many of the women-centred poems written or published in the thirties record women’s sense of change and of no change. Although there was less use of the pejorative label ‘poetess’, there was still an expectation for women to be apart from the mainstreams of poetry. Consequently, they were rarely included in ‘Thirties poetry’ by subsequent literary historians.

Because thirties poetry is understood to be motivated by left-wing politics, the omission of women’s writing from its histories perpetuated the prejudices that women tend to be conservative and politically disinterested. In her review of \textit{Women's Poetry of the 1930s}, the contemporary poet Kate Clanchy, observed that the poems which deal with the private life were better than those which attempted a public register, because women were ‘out in the backfield, singing an entirely different tune’.\textsuperscript{13} However, the directness of Stevie Smith, and the political commitment of Sylvia Townsend Warner, Valentine Ackland, Naomi Mitchison, Winifred Holtby and Nancy Cunard, should challenge the lingering assumptions that women’s concerns are with the private, not public, experience. They were active in communist, socialist and feminist movements and attempted to write poetry of commitment which avoided propaganda. Like the canonised male thirties poets, they rejected both the revolution of the word of high modernism and also polemical doctrinaire poetry. As Barbara Brothers comments,

Whatever social value is accorded to political commitment, such commitment is proclaimed by the academic, critical establishment, worshipers of the idol of Modernism, to be the antithesis of literary value. Like the adjective “woman”, “political” effaces the category “writer” to which the adjectives are applied.\textsuperscript{14}

Sylvia Townsend Warner reconciled the tension between ideology and aesthetics in her ‘discovery that the pen could be used as a sword’.\textsuperscript{15}

The less political poems of Vita Sackville-West, Elizabeth Daryush, Frances Cornford and Ruth Pitter, made them particularly successful in terms of publishing and critical reception throughout the 1930s. These poets and Kathleen Raine, Laura Riding,

\textsuperscript{10} Clark 92, 71.
\textsuperscript{11} Anne Ridler, letter to Jane Dowson, 1 September, 1992.
\textsuperscript{13} Kate Clanchy, ‘Loud hailers and currant rolls’, review of \textit{Women's Poetry of the 1930s}, by Jane Dowson, \textit{The Independent}, 3 Feb. 1996.
Lilian Bowes Lyons, Dorothy Wellesley, Margaret Stuart and Anna Wickham were recurring names in representative anthologies like *Recent Poetry* (1933) and *Poems of Today* (1938). During the decade, form was still an issue, although there was more openness to both free verse and a return to traditional form, particularly popular forms. Retrospectively, however, the pervasive association of conservative forms and conservatism has meant that they have appeared to be out of synch with their time. As one reviewer comments, 'Not even Dowson’s younger writers seem aware of Modernism'.

Throughout the twentieth century, the elevated status of modernism, along with its implicit or explicit gendering as male, have prevented poets from identifying themselves as women, from associating themselves with one another and from establishing a separate tradition. In the introduction to their anthology of Victorian women’s poetry (1995), Angela Leighton and Margaret Reynolds hold modernism responsible for the disappearance of most of the poets in Elizabeth Sharp’s 1887 anthology, *Women’s Voices*: ‘partly because of the experiments of modernism, partly because of a new feminist sensibility, partly because of a critical value placed on the dry, intellectual, the dispassionate, early twentieth-century writers, readers and critics, were embarrassed by their Victorian grandmothers.’ Gilbert and Gubar similarly blame modernism for depriving women of twentieth-century role models:

As the modernist aesthetic was gradually institutionalised during the first half of the century, therefore, the accomplishments of Millay and Moore came to seem increasingly marginal, so much so that younger women who might have turned to them as heartening examples were often surprisingly ambivalent towards these important precursors. Traditional “poetesses” like Millay had been defined as offensively emotional and anachronistic; ostensible innovators like Moore were seen as precious and recherché.

As they argue, modernism’s rhetoric of clear-cut oppositions between realist and anti-realist or experimental and sentimental leave no place for poets like Millay—and to her can be added Mew, Sinclair, Wickham and more. The oppositions also restrict subsequent creativity.

In ‘Contemporary Women’s Poetry: experimentalism and the expressive voice’, the contemporary poet Clair Wills indicates that the pervasive dominance of modernist principles continue to inhibit women from harnessing the expressive mode:

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In modernist or experimental poetry, unlike its counterpart, language is not the means of representation but the object of representation itself.

There is plenty to argue about even in the distinction as I have presented it, [between experimental poetry and formally conservative poetic practices], yet the division of poetry into formally conservative and radical forms becomes more loaded in the context of poetry by women (or the poetry of marginalised groups in society). Can the formal disruption of representational norms act as the ground for a radical gender politics? . . . As many critics have argued, the formal dynamics of modernism were predicated to some extent on a denial of sentimental or sensational “feminine” forms. Indeed, the current resurgence of interest in Gertrude Stein (for example) may be symptomatic of the way that the contemporary debate is modelled on the earlier one. Feminist and experimental writers look to her as representative of the avant-garde attack on representational norms, and as an example of woman’s response to patriarchal language. Standing outside mainstream modernism, she appears to hold together the female and the experimental, as is evidenced by the domesticity of “Tender Buttons”, or the sexuality of “Lifting Belly”.19

As has been indicated, however, this holding together of the female and experimental is the cohering aesthetic of both avant-garde and female modernists. The urgent goals for revisionary critics should be to emphasise the interface between anti-realist and representational writing and to provide strong models of women poets.

In order for women writers and critics to overcome the ‘female affiliation complex’, therefore, modern women poets have been presented as significant writers who defined themselves in opposition to the feminine ideal with which they were confronted in the ideologies of First World War recruiting propaganda and the disparaging vocabulary of literary criticism. Some stylistic links have been made but the main coherence has been identified as their differing strategies for disguising their gender. Although the recognition of the diversity and individuality of poets is a significant outcome of grouping women, the grouping is important in order to recognise the extent of women’s published poetry. The over-riding impression of individuality and diversity also counteracts the myth of essential femininity. As Carol Rumens comments on the recovery of women’s poetry of the 1930s, ‘What matters is to make audible the range of different voices, partly in the interests of historical accuracy, but not least so that female genius, when its next time comes, has a natural order in which to take its place. Minor poets may, of course, turn out to be major in the estimation of another age (and vice versa).’20

20 Rumens 23–4.
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